

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 14

The Bible Challenge 2018 Intro and the reflections and notes for each week may be found at biblechallenge.pendletonchurch.org

Read 4 chapters per day

April 2-8: Acts chapters 10-28; Isaiah chapters 1-9

Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!!

Up to this point in our reading, the Gospel message has been primarily directed to the Jewish people, although Gentiles did hear and respond to it, even as some Gentiles in the Gospels believed in Jesus. Beginning in Acts chapter 10 we see God sharing with Peter how Gentile believers were to be received. Both Peter and Paul understood the importance of telling the Good News to everyone. This was according to the instructions given by Jesus that we read at the end of Luke. What does this tell us as Christians today about our relationship to people of other religions and of no religion? Is it ok not to tell them about Jesus? How do we share the Good News of Jesus Christ in today's world?

In Acts chapter 14 we see Paul and Barnabas continuing on their missionary journeys. At one point there is a crowd of people so affected by the miraculous healing God empowers through them that the people see them as gods. Paul and Barnabas reject this and point the people to the One God who created all things. In addition, they are in the midst of a conflict with the Jews and the Gentiles whose religious systems (and they believe their communities) are threatened by the Gospel message. What is it like to stand for and proclaim your faith in the midst of threats or negative responses from those who oppose you? Are you able to do it, or is it too intimidating? How do the negative things people have heard about the behavior of some Christians in the church's history and today impact what they think about Christians and the church as a whole? How do we help people see Jesus in spite of many human failings among church people? What about sharing the Gospel in the midst of praise? What do you do when people want to give you credit for something when you know you couldn't have done it without God?

In this portion of Acts we see Jews and Gentiles, men and women coming to faith in Jesus Christ. The testimony of the writer clearly indicates that we can tell who has been saved by their testimony of faith and that there is evidence they have received the Holy Spirit. There are many conflicts along the way, even between Paul and some of Jesus' other disciples who are also sharing the Gospel. But Paul continues to speak convincingly throughout the Roman Empire and many among the Gentiles and Greek Jews come to faith in God through Jesus Christ. What is the essence of Paul's message wherever he goes? Where do you see evidence of God's role in the missionary work Paul is doing? What can Christians learn from Paul's example about how to share the Gospel and our need to rely on God while sharing the Gospel message wherever God sends us? What does Paul's example show us about the Christian lifestyle in general? What should our lives look like to the people who see us as we claim to be Christians? How is our salvation evident in the way we live our lives?

Returning to the Hebrew Scriptures in the book of the prophet Isaiah, we recall we saw the prophet Isaiah in 2 Kings as he ministered to King Hezekiah. Isaiah is one of the great prophets of the Hebrew Bible. In the first two chapters we will read of God's case against the kingdom of Judah and why God is not pleased with mere religion. This is a theme of much prophetic writing. We will also see a vision of what is to come. Look for references to Hebrew Bible stories you have already read. Isaiah is often looked to as a source for prophecy about the coming Messiah. In chapter 9 Isaiah offers words intended to remind Israel of the promise God made David about his kingdom. In the state Israel is in, it may appear as though this will never happen because of the people's sin. You may recognize words in this chapter. They are familiar because the church reads them during Advent as we approach Christmas. But remember, the writer of Isaiah did not know about the person Jesus the Christ, whom Christians believe to be the Savior and Lord of all. God's anger with rebellious Israel is still the focus of this portion of the book. What does it mean to think of God being angry?

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WEEK 15

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Read 4 chapters per day

April 9-15: Isaiah chapters 10-37

“Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees.”
(Isaiah 10:1)

Throughout Isaiah we read about the sin of Israel and Judah, and about the ways in which their relationships with other nations impacts on Israel's and Judah's sin, as well as the role of other nations in matters of God's judgment on Israel and Judah. In addition, we find God's judgment on the other nations. Notice the progression of these events.

Remember what we have read so far in the Gospels and notice some familiar passages in Isaiah. The New Testament writers frequently referred back to Hebrew Bible references; to the one whom God promised to send to bring ultimate judgment and blessing. As Christians we connect these passages to Jesus Christ. Jesus was a Jew who saw the injustices of some Jewish religious leaders and tried to correct them. He also tried to turn the hearts and minds of the people to God in ways that would bring justice for oppressed people among the Jewish population. Can you see the relationship between what we think of as salvation and Jesus' intention to free people from injustice and oppression? Where else in our Bible do you recall people being saved in this way? Do you think salvation is only about being set free from our sins, or are there other things in this fallen world people need to be set free from? How does being set free from our sins empower us to live truly just lives that bring justice into the lives of others?

People of other religions, who also look back to Abraham as the one God had chosen to be the father of many nations, and with whom God established the everlasting covenant, do not connect the passages of Isaiah to Jesus Christ as Christians do. But we have, in the Gospels, the disciples of Jesus Christ claiming that He is the One who was prophesied about in the Law and the Prophets. Refer to Luke 24:25-27 and other Gospel Scriptures you may remember. As you read Isaiah notice how brilliantly the Gospel writers later used Isaiah's prophetic writings to connect Hebrew Bible prophecy to Jesus Christ. Notice words and phrases in Isaiah's writings that you recall coming out in Jesus' teachings and parables.

Woven through Isaiah are many prophecies of the restoration of Israel and Judah, as well as the coming kingdom of God. There are references to the restoration of worship, and to a “remnant” of people, who remain faithful to God and who seem to be present throughout all circumstances. This theme of a few righteous people in the midst of many sinful people goes all the way back to the early chapters of Genesis, even before Abraham. What Biblical characters from early in Genesis do you recall being the few righteous among many sinful?

Beginning in chapter 36 we see an historical account of Isaiah's involvement with King Hezekiah. Compare the Scriptures in Isaiah to those in II Kings chapters 18-20. Some of the passages are nearly identical. Why do you think this is so? Why would the same account be repeated in an historical book and a prophetic book?

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WEEK 16

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Read 4 chapters per day

April 16-22: Isaiah chapters 38-65

Beginning in chapter 40 we see Israel in exile and the promise of deliverance. As you read, consider why Israel is in exile, and whether God's people will ever really be able to conduct their lives in a way that will keep them from continuing the cycle of sin which separates from God, and repentance which restores right relationship with God. Do you see a relationship between the way Israel was in exile (separated from the Promised Land) and the way people are separated from God by sin? What do we read in Isaiah that God promises to bring about so that this cycle can be broken? What do we learn from Isaiah's writing about God; who God is and the reasons why God would make a way for people to be redeemed? Has your experience reading Isaiah given you any new insights into your relationship with God? Has the Book of Isaiah strengthened your faith in any way? How do you think you should respond to God in light of what you have gained from this reading?

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the verb redeem in the following ways: to buy back, repurchase, to get or win back, to free from what distresses or harms, to free from captivity by payment of ransom, to extricate from or help to overcome something detrimental, to release from blame or debt, clear, to free from the consequences of sin, to change for the better, reform, repair, restore, to free from a lien by payment of an amount secured thereby, to remove the obligation of by payment, to exchange for something of value, to make good, fulfill, to atone for, expiate, redeem an error, to offset the bad effect of, to make worthwhile, retrieve.

Isaiah's book makes it clear that God intends to send a Redeemer for God's people. Reflect on the range of definitions of the word redeem that are listed above. In what descriptions of the Redeemer that you read in Isaiah's book do you see these definitions fulfilled? What does that mean for God's people? What about them will be redeemed? Be specific; it's easy to say, "Everything." But what does everything mean in your life? Do you think there is reason to consider salvation to be something that happens in the here and now as well as being something that is to come? How does salvation manifest in the present in our own lives as Christians, and as we impact the world around us? How will our redemption manifest in the future?

Reflect on the person, Isaiah. The scope of the book covers everything about the Messiah's manifestations in this world; incarnation, deity, ministry, death, and the future in the new heaven and new earth. What sort of person could have written a book with such complete understanding of the history and condition of God's people, and the relationship of the grace of God to them?

The power of Christ's resurrection makes redemption/salvation possible for all people. How is God calling you, as a Christian, to be like Isaiah in proclaiming human redemption made possible for each of us because of God's redeeming work in Christ?

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WEEK 17

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Read 4 chapters per day

April 23-29: Isaiah chapter 66; Philippians chapters 1-4; Colossians chapters 1-4; 1 Thessalonians chapters 1-5; 2 Thessalonians chapters 1-3; Hosea chapters 1-11

“And I...am about to come and gather all nations and tongues, and they will come and see my glory.” Isa 66:18

A theme in Isaiah has been the coming of Gentile nations to God; either to judgment or salvation. As we complete Isaiah and return to the New Testament we find Paul, a Jewish Pharisee who has come to faith in Jesus as Christ and as the Son of God. He is writing to churches he founded or knew of among Greek people. Remember that there were many Jews among the Greeks because of the exiles. But there were also many Gentiles coming to the faith. So, in the New Testament we find the words of Isaiah coming to pass; Jews and Gentiles with God.

Philippians, Colossians, and I & II Thessalonians are some of Paul's letters to the early churches. They follow one right after the other in the order of our present day Bibles, but they were not written in that sequence. Part of Paul's mission was to be aware of the circumstances of these churches and keep them from veering off track with their faith and doctrine. Imagine you are the church secretary, receiving each of these letters and reading them through before passing them on to the rest of the members. Think about the content of the letters in terms of them having been written to the church you attend. What do you hear in Paul's words that is the primary emphasis of each letter? Where is God speaking through Paul to you? To your church? What passages are familiar to you and what passages did you not know, or had never noticed before? These letters are part of the salvation message that addresses how people of God are to continue to grow and change as they become closer to God and each other; and as they reach out to the world with the salvation message. They speak of how we are built up in Christian faith. This is all part of the salvation process. Our salvation is something that comes in a moment and something that is a life-long process – all by God's grace.

As we read 2 Thessalonians we need to realize the early Christians believed Jesus would return during their lifetime. They believed when that time came they would be with Jesus and there would be terrible troubles for the people who had rejected Jesus and were left behind. But Jesus didn't return right away and these new Christians were enduring persecution while they were waiting for Jesus. Because of this they became uncertain. Some wondered whether they had misunderstood about Jesus' return, others whether they were really saved. Had they missed His return? Had their faith gone wrong somehow? Do you ever wonder about these things yourself? How might the Thessalonian church have been led to doubt their faith? What comforting and encouraging words does Paul write? What words of warning does he send them about their conduct and about who to listen to (or NOT to listen to) in matters of Christian faith? How important is it, then, to continue to grow in our faith and cooperate with God through obedience to God's expectations as part of coming into the fullness of salvation God has provided for us?

This week we also move back into the Hebrew Scriptures in the prophetic book Hosea. Like Isaiah, Hosea was a prophet whose ministry was going on during the time of King Hezekiah, and some other kings of Judah and Israel as well. The theme of the book has to do with redemption, again like Isaiah, but from Hosea's perspective the emphasis is not redemption because of God's glory, but because of God's love. The analogy of a marital relationship is seen in this book with regard to God's relationship to Israel.

It is not only the general population of Israel under God's judgment, but also the priests and kings. The prophet draws a parallel between their sin against God and unfaithfulness in human marriage. Prostitution and adultery are here set in a spiritual context, spoken of as relevant to the peoples' broken relationship to God. Think about what that means in terms of day to day spiritual life. What does it mean to commit adultery, "spiritual adultery" as far as our relationship with God is concerned? What about "spiritual prostitution"? As you read, look for the actions which cause the prophet to rebuke the people. Find the verbs within the text that speak of specific actions and intentions. Notice the words of chapter 8, verse 11, "Though Ephraim built many altars for sin offerings, these have become altars for sin." Think back to Leviticus where we read about God's Laws for His people. They appear to be in the kind of broken relationship with God as sometimes happens in marriages where the relationship is broken but the pretense is put on that everything is going along fine. They are going through the prescribed rituals and assuming that they can do whatever else they want; even engage in un-Godly forms of worship and other activities in God's temple, at God's holy altar. Notice the desire of God to redeem the people, and God's requirements. Do you see anything here that is similar to Paul's instructions about the Christian life?

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WEEK 18

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Read 4 chapters per day

April 30-May 6: Hosea chapters 12-14; Romans chapters 1-16; Amos chapters 1-9

Chapter 12 of Hosea reminds the people, once again, where they have come from. Recall some of the stories we have read that are referred to here as God rebukes the people for their alliances with those nations from whom God has once delivered them. What are the things God has delivered you from that you sometimes find yourself back into, for which you have to repent? God's love for us always prevails, but we must be open to receive it and to allow God to continue to change us into people who will not reject God by sinning against God. This is part of the process of sanctification by God's grace which we cooperate with by God's grace.

Paul's letter to the church in Rome is a thorough explanation of the foundations of Christianity. He knows the grace God has granted him and that it is available to all people, Jews and Gentiles. We can see in this letter that God has imparted to Paul great understanding of God's grace; that it is by grace we are saved, through faith, as a gift of God. In this letter we clearly see the Gospel message. As you read, look for Paul's explanation of why people need to be saved and how people are saved. Consider what the benefits of salvation are in this life, as well as the struggles, and how to overcome the struggles by the power of God's Spirit helping us.

At the end of chapter 11, Paul quotes from the Hebrew Bible books Isaiah and Job. What do these verses, Romans 11:33-36, say to us about our relationship to God? Do you think we should take care in expressing our opinions concerning the ways God chooses to relate to those God has created? Romans chapter 12 begins with Paul's exhortation to the church concerning transformation. Clearly the church is to be different from the world. Do you observe your life to be more like or unlike the un-Christian world around you? If the church is to impact to world for Christ in ways that make new disciples, is it important for the church to become more and more like Jesus and less and less like the world? Will you choose to draw closer to God and allow God to continue to transform you? How?

The first two verses of chapter 12 tell us that if we offer ourselves to God in worship we will be transformed and our minds will be renewed so God's will for our lives becomes known to us. Paul goes on to present his take on the Christian's relationship to others in the church and to the wider world. As you read, be sure to take note of when Paul is talking about the Christian in relationship to each of these two groups. There is a difference. How does Paul tell the Christians in Rome that they are to relate to each other? To other Christians and Jewish believers? To unbelievers? How is all of this part of God's plan of salvation?

Returning to the Hebrew Scriptures we find Amos, another prophet of God. While Hosea's concern had to do with Israel's unfaithfulness in terms of love, Amos sees the people in a state of total disregard for God's righteousness and justice. Like God's glory and love, God's righteousness and justice are the essence of God. Human beings were created in God's image. After sin entered the world and corrupted that image, God set apart Israel to be the model through which God revealed Himself. But they were unable to uphold the standard of God's law. They rebelled against God's expectations and rejected His glory and love. Amos reveals the injustices Israel not only tolerated in their midst, but also perpetrated themselves.

The people to whom Amos is prophesying are affluent and careless. They do acts of worship of God as required, but are more concerned with other things. They neglect God and exploit and abuse others for their own gain. No matter what circumstances God brings into their midst they refuse to turn to Him. God promises consequences and God promises reason for hope. Where do you see God's people today tolerating injustice according to God's standard of what is right? Where do you see the church acting to overcome injustice with God's help? Where do you see the church remaining careless about injustice because of greater attention to its affluence, to other things? What does the Bible teach us about the impact on our Christian witness when we ignore the part of living our Christian faith that would bring about justice in our communities? Is it enough that we ourselves are saved; or is part of our salvation about bringing salvation to others in the context of God's glory, love, grace, righteousness, and justice? In what ways is God calling you to look beyond your own circumstances to where God would help you address injustice?

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Read 4 chapters per day

May 7-13: James chapters 1-5; Jude; Haggai chapters 1-2; Galatians chapters 1-6; Malachi chapters 1-4; 1 Peter chapters 1-5; 2 Peter 1-3; Micah chapters 1-2

This week we will be bouncing back and forth between the Old Testament and the New. Throughout this week's readings you will notice an emphasis on the actions of those who live Godly lives that come from faith, in contrast with warnings about what happens to our faith when we treat our worship and daily living with a less than enthusiastic attitude toward God and others. As you read and consider the reflection below, think about the part our actions in this life impact our salvation.

James presents Jesus as Messiah to the Jewish people, as we can see in the first verse. Remember, many of the Jews were dispersed throughout the Roman Empire and Jewish people, being the people Jesus primarily ministered to during his earthly life, were the first to believe he is their Messiah. James writes about God's expectations of those with faith in all God has done in Christ as they live day to day in this world. He also talks about the differences God expects between those who follow Christ and those who don't. He discusses the relationship of what Christ followers believe and what they do as a result of their faith. What does James tell us is expected of the church?

Heresy is a belief or opinion that contradicts a previously established belief, and that if accepted changes something essential about that belief. Doctrine is teaching that is carefully defined and established as truthful on the basis of specific principles. Sometimes change is good and necessary. But it can also lead people astray from established beliefs in ways that are potentially destructive. Jude observed the effects of heretical teachings on the early church. He refers to Hebrew Bible characters whose stories exemplify the errors of these teachings and the necessity of holding firmly to established Christian doctrine. Various heresies have threatened true Christian beliefs throughout church history. What do you think can be done to keep people from becoming misinformed about Christian doctrine? Do you think this is an important issue in the church today? Why or why not?

In Ezra we read about God's people returning to Jerusalem from captivity to rebuild the temple. The prophet, Haggai, brings correction to these people who are more concerned with their own houses than they are with the house of God. Do you see any ways in which the essence of this correction applies to the lives of contemporary Christians in the US?

Galatians takes us back to Paul's writings about Christian faith. We find in Galatia a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, and controversies over Christian doctrine concerning how practical application of doctrine is demonstrated through actions. Does this relate in any way to what is written in James? Paul confronts the Galatian church with her errors, but in order to be heard and believed he had to make a case for his authority to speak to these issues. What was the main issue in the controversy over Paul's authority? What do you think is the role of established authority in the church? Where do you think this authority comes from and how can Christians know when they're hearing teaching that is contrary to Christian doctrine?

Have you ever experienced the difference between someone giving you a gift out of obligation and someone who truly wanted to bless you by giving you something? Sometimes religious practices can deteriorate from what was originally an open, heartfelt, sincere desire to please God to a set of rules and rituals people are expected to follow; but which have lost their meaning to those practicing them.

In Galatians chapters 4-6 Paul is addressing legalistic practices that the people have developed. And he addresses sin, which has also infiltrated the church. What is the freedom we have in Christ? Why should we celebrate God's gift of love freely rather than be drawn away from God by other things? How do we handle sin in our own lives and the lives of those we are in fellowship with in the church? In Malachi God's people are corrected for going through the motions of worship, but with the attitude that it is a burden. How can we see this attitude manifesting throughout this short book? Do you see any resemblance to attitudes among people in today's church? In you?

Peter is addressing the Jews, bringing a message of the hope of salvation in Jesus Christ that is available to all. Can you see the fulfillment of Jesus' commission to Peter in this message? Do you think this message applies to anyone who seeks to follow Jesus? Why or why not?

The third chapter of 2 Peter gives the reason Peter has chosen to write the letter. Do you see good reasons why it was included as one of the books of the Bible available to us today?

Concluding this week's reading we begin the book of the prophet Micah. Like the other prophets whose writings we have read so far, Micah brings words of revelation to God's people concerning what will happen to them as a result of their refusal to acknowledge their sin and change their ways. There is reference to the difference between prophets, such as Micah, who are truly filled with God's power and are able to speak the truth of what they discern from God, and those who choose to tell the people what they want to hear, or even prophesy good things for those who feed them but come against them if they do not. It appears Micah's take on the condition of the people is one in which everybody is seeking to perform their service only because of the wages or reward they receive. There is a verse in this book which is quoted often as summing up all the Lord requires of His people. The end of the book is always read in synagogues on the Day of Atonement. It is a word of hope, and of God's great mercy.

What similarities do you see among the messages/themes of these short Old and New Testament books of our Bible? What do their messages mean for us today?

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Read 4 chapters per day

May 14-20: Micah chapters 3-7; 1 John chapters 1-5; 2 John; 3 John; Deuteronomy chapters 1-16

1 John speaks of fellowship and love among Jesus' disciples. It is written to "my dear children," and "my dear friends." There are directions to God's children, as well as warnings and words of encouragement. Notice the balance among these words. Do you think when we speak to others about discipleship in Christ, and about our relationships with each other in the church, that we should also be balanced with words of encouragement and love as well as correction and warning; holding one another accountable in all things? Some in today's mainstream American culture appear to think love is only expressed through words and actions that make one another feel good. When is bringing correction an act of love? How should correction be communicated in order to be effective? How does bringing correction with love potentially impact another's salvation? How do you respond when a Christian sister or brother gives you a word of correction? 2 John and 3 John are personal letters, both to individuals who appear to be leaders in the church at their specific locations. How do these letters speak to the necessity of accountability among Christians? Why would personal letters be applicable to us today, and therefore included among our scriptures?

Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Pentateuch, known by the Jewish people as the Torah which means it is the Jewish written law. It also refers to this law as being teaching or instruction that speaks of God's people's relationship to God, to each other, to people outside their community of faith, and to the natural world. So far the books of the Pentateuch we have read are:

Genesis – the book of origins that speaks of the beginning of life and life being spoiled by sin,
Exodus – the book of redemption, deliverance out of slavery in Egypt and the promise of a new life,
and Leviticus – the book of worship and communion with God and among God's people.
The fourth book is Numbers, and we will read that soon.

Deuteronomy reviews Israel's history after they left Egypt and restates the law of God as given through Moses. It was likely written many years after the events it describes, by religious leaders to the people in exile in foreign lands. The writers were reminding them of their heritage; and calling them to remember God and that they are God's chosen people. As we read about Israel's shortcomings we would do well to remember that we are no different, except that we have Jesus, our Savior. What do Christians do to remember who we are in relationship to God, other Christians, other people in the world, and how we are to care for the natural world?

Chapter 10 of Deuteronomy continues with the history of Israel after the Exodus. In this chapter, what does God remind the people that God requires of them? What does this chapter go on to tell us is the reason God's people should respond to God in this way? Look for answers to these two questions as you read through the end of Deuteronomy. They will appear over and over. In chapter 13 the people are warned against heeding the words of false prophets, and against following the practices of the surrounding peoples who do not worship the same God. Recall the similar warnings to the church in the New Testament. This is another theme that appears consistently throughout the Scriptures. Why is it important to be able to distinguish true prophets from false prophets? Is it possible for even devout Christians to be led astray from their faith? Is it possible for devout Christians to fall into sin? What can Christians do to cooperate with God's grace in the hope of continuing to grow in relationship with God and other Christians in ways that safeguard from sin and allow us to be the witness of God's love we are to be in the world?

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Read 4 chapters per day

May 21-27: Deuteronomy 17-34; 1 Timothy 1-6; 2 Timothy 1-4

God gives the people the weekly Sabbath, as well as special times throughout their year, and even cyclically over periods of years to rest, remember, celebrate, and forgive one another. Their lives were intended to be structured around these times of devotion to God. God's intention has never been that people should try to "fit God in" when it's convenient, or when something better hasn't come along to take up our time. Take note of these cycles of work, rest, and celebration and reflect on how these ritual seasons may speak to our relationship with God and our relationships to others as we walk the path of discipleship in the world today?

There are songs and blessings written in an ancient poetic literary style in chapters 32-33 that are attributed to Moses. Try reading them as if you were reading the lyrics to a song that tells a story. This sort of poetry, often sung, was a way of perpetuating the memory of the stories of a people through oral tradition during a time when most did not read or write. Before the words of our Bible were written down, they were passed on in the same way the stories of other cultures were preserved for their children and their children's children – through spoken and sung words that were shared in the home and in public gatherings. How does this idea relate to what is written in John chapter 1 about the Word having become flesh and dwelling among people? Deuteronomy calls God's people obedience to God's Law as the basis for a community of faith. It lays the foundational principles of God's expectations for them in relationship to God, the members of the community, and others. It reminds the people who they are, where they have come from, and how important God has been in their lives. It is upon God's historical activity in the people's lives that their identity as a community is based. What historical activity of God, recorded in our Scriptures, do you look to as the basis of your faith and identity as a Christian?

First and Second Timothy are letters from Paul to a young minister named Timothy. They speak of Paul's concern for establishing the way people in the church should conduct themselves, what God's expectations are now that people are no longer under the law but are under grace, and that days are coming when it will be very difficult to live up to these expectations. What is there in our world, and more specifically our American society today, that makes it difficult for Christians to live up to God's expectations? What gets in the way, distracts us, or in some other way interferes with our being able to fully commit to living our lives according to Christ's example? How do you think God's call to become more like Christ should be impacting the choices we make in our daily lives?

Paul speaks of his own sin and refers to himself as, "the worst." He then gives praise and glory to God for God's patience with him and that he has received eternal life from God. How do you feel about your eternal salvation? When was the last time you thought seriously about the reality of what God has done for you?

Paul also instructs Timothy to encourage the church to live a holy life. And again we read warnings against false doctrines. What similarities and differences do you see in the church today compared with the church Paul is describing in these two letters? How do God's expectations of what people should and should not do differ from what people, even in the church, actually do? How are you holding up in living your Christian faith under the pressures exerted by present day society? God gives each Christian grace to be able to live according to God's expectations. We need only allow God's grace to work in and through us, and the Holy Spirit to lead us.

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May 28-June 3: Titus 1-3; Job 1-25

Titus is another of Paul's letters addressed to one of the men who helped him in ministry and was left to look after specific churches to ensure their proper establishment and ongoing ministry. We met Titus in Paul's letter to the Galatians and will see him again in 2 Corinthians. As you read, you will see that Titus was left in Crete, and that he was left there for a specific purpose. What were some of the problems in the churches of Crete? How does Paul recommend that Titus address those problems? Paul uses the phrase: "Encourage and rebuke with all authority." Where in today's church do you see the need for leadership to encourage and rebuke? Do you see a need for clear teaching of the expectations of the church according to the Biblical standard? Why or Why not?

In Job we find a book of the Bible written almost completely in a form of ancient poetry. It contains an account of the life experiences of one man, Job, as he lives in this realm and is seriously impacted by spiritual forces that manifest in his life outside of his control. Job must deal with his own feelings about what is happening to him as well as the treatment he endures from other people in his life as they respond to his situation. Job is also dealing with his own responses to God in light of his situation.

As you read, try to imagine watching this story play out on a stage or in a movie; as if you were present and observing, but not at liberty to add to it. There are not many actors; a narrator to set the stage in the first two chapters, Job, the Lord, Satan, a messenger, Job's wife, and his three friends – Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. There are some angels mentioned, and Job's children are described within the context of Job's concern for them. Observe Job's responses to the events of his life. Look at the very first verse of the first chapter and consider the narrator's words. Then notice what the Lord tells Satan about Job. How does God regard Job? As we move into chapter three the scene is made up entirely of Job and his three friends each taking turns with poetic monologues that express each of their points of view based on their understanding of God, God's relationship to individual people, and the perceived impact of individual human action on God's activity in the world. Try listening to each character as if you were watching them in a play. How do each of them understand who God is and how God relates to human beings?

In Job's day people believed there was a direct correlation between an individual's actions and the way their life appeared to play out because of God's response to human actions. Job's friends saw his plight and assumed he must have done something to deserve it. In simple terms their advice boils down to telling him that he needs to repent and change his ways so God will make things right for him again. They persist in their belief that he is either foolishly hiding something from them, or that he is unable to see his sin for himself, as they attempt to convince him that he must be in the wrong.

But if we keep in mind the opening scene of our play, we realize they are in error. The very first verse establishes the premise that in God's eyes Job is "...blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil." And as the action continues, God himself is depicted as saying in his conversation with Satan, "There is no one on earth like him (Job); he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." In chapter 19 we hear Job countering his friends' accusations by maintaining his innocence and recounting his afflictions, even those that are coming from his friends. He then proclaims his hope in God and gives a warning to his friends that they don't know what they're doing by hounding him. He tells them they might also fall into such a situation. As you read on, notice how often Job affirms God's greatness and his devotion to God.

But what about the reality of consequences for our actions; are natural consequences in this world the same as God bringing affliction upon people as punishment for their sins? How does your understanding of God's grace impact your response to this question? Is our understanding of the ways God responds to humans in sin different than in Job's day? How?

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 23

The Bible Challenge 2018 Intro and the reflections and notes for each week may be found at biblechallenge.pendletonchurch.org

Read 4 chapters per day

June 4-10: Job 26-42; John 1-11

In chapter 32 of Job another character is introduced. Elihu, a young man, who has different ideas about Job's situation and has words for Job and his three friends. What is his point of view in comparison and contrast to theirs? How does the idea of a young person like Elihu, having different ideas about the relationship between God and humanity, compare to the ways people view God today in contrast with ways God was understood even a few decades ago in our personal experience? What do you think accounts for changing thoughts and attitudes about God and faith? If God is the same throughout eternity (not all people of faith believe that to be true) how do human beings discern God's expectations of human relationship with God, other people, and the rest of God's creation? What do you think of the idea some people hold that God changes?

Chapter 38 finally brings God's response to Job's pleadings. In it is revealed and emphasized the incredible power and majesty of God. In today's church we tend to view God as our good friend and, like Job's and his friends, we do not understand the way God sees the whole picture. In our limited view of the things of our lives we forget that our understanding of mercy, compassion, judgment, and grace are bound up by our feelings about our circumstances and our loved ones. What we think is right, for ourselves and others, may be a very self-centered view filtered through the lens of our imperfection.

This is because of the existence of sin which has corrupted creation and all that is in it; however well-intentioned we may think we are in such circumstances. How do you see the limited, human understanding of the big picture that God sees impacting the responses of yourself and others you know in times of troubled circumstances? How does the description of Job's encounter with God impact your own understanding of the vastness of God, and God's care and compassion for you even in the midst of circumstances you may not understand? How do you think this may impact your response to future circumstances? How will you respond to God and others when you are facing troubles in this life?

The Book of Job is a classification of ancient writing described as wisdom literature. Such writing deals with the practical problems of life, and the great moral and spiritual questions that impact them. It examines the reality of everyday living at the same time as it looks up to God. Job deals with the question of why the righteous suffer. In the end, in this story, Job is blessed because he came through his circumstances without cursing God. Neither did he consider God or God's actions to be unjust as he suffered. But his friends did make judgments about God and about Job. Job's relationship with God remained intact. How easily are our relationships with God strained; under what circumstances do we make judgments about how God deals with us and the world around us?

John's Gospel is the fourth Gospel included in the Christian Bible. It is different from the Synoptic Gospels. John presents Jesus as the Son of God. We see Jesus referring to Himself using language that indicates His transcendent authority, repeatedly using the phrase, "I am." Referring to the Word, or Logos in the Greek, John connects the person Jesus to the understanding of God as all divine wisdom, all the collective thought of God throughout eternity, expressed in the incarnation, in the Person and the work of Christ. Compare the opening 14 verses to what you have read in the first chapter of Hebrews. Also look at Genesis chapter 1 and notice the language the writer uses to describe how God brought God's creation into being. Then look at John 1:9-13. It is a description of the relationship between human beings and God. Who does John say God considers to be children of God? Try reading the rest of John's Gospel with this in mind.

As you continue reading John's Gospel this week and next, notice all the "I am" statements and all the times Jesus addresses and responds to people emphasizing the authority of His position - "I tell you the truth" "neither do I condemn you" "I have shown you" etc.

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 24

The Bible Challenge 2018 Intro and the reflections and notes for each week may be found at biblechallenge.pendletonchurch.org

Read 4 chapters per day

June 11-17: John 12-21; Numbers 1-18

In John chapter 12 we see the beginning of the events during what we refer to today as “Holy Week.” We read a reference to the chief priests of the Temple in Jerusalem intending not only to kill Jesus, but also Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. What does this tell us about the relative safety of those who were following Jesus at this point in the story? What might they have been expecting Jesus to save them from, if he was indeed their Messiah?

Jesus and His disciples enter Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and He establishes a significant difference between Himself and the Christ that the Jewish people have been waiting for. He speaks of the need to lose one’s life in order to have eternal life. He also makes a connection between this act of self-sacrifice, the prince of this world being driven out, and all men being drawn to Himself. To Christians this is Jesus being revealed as God. But the Jews had always been taught by God, through the tradition of Abraham and Moses, that God is One. John’s gospel tells of people who would not, and could not believe in Jesus as God. The understanding of who and what the coming Messiah was to be wasn’t what Jesus was presenting to them. There had been many who had come and gone claiming to be the Messiah and ultimately causing trouble for the Jewish people with the Romans. Accepting Jesus as the Son of God – which in their understanding was a claim of being one and the same with God, equal in being God – was beyond most of their comprehension. But remember last week’s note. In John 1:9-13 there is a description of the familial relationship between human beings and God. Remember who John says God considers to be children of God. Try reading the rest of John’s Gospel with this in mind. And notice how John connects the Hebrew Bible prophecies to the person Jesus the Christ.

After this, Jesus is depicted speaking privately to His disciples, establishing sacred rituals we still practice, modeling prayer, and warning them of the persecutions to come. He also makes promises to them that will be fulfilled if they remain His disciples and do not go astray. What are these promises? Are they still promises we can look forward to as people of the 21st century? How do these promises relate to the Christian understanding of salvation?

Having read the Book of Acts, we have some perspective into the question of why Peter was unable, in the Gospel accounts, to stand up and defend his faith in Jesus after Jesus was taken into custody; and also why the other disciples have taken on a low profile. Compare what John tells us Jesus said in the 16th chapter to what you know of the work of the Holy Spirit through the disciples in Acts. Does this give you further insight into the constant need that Christians have of the Holy Spirit in order to fulfill God’s plan for our lives? According to what we read in John’s gospel, how does the Holy Spirit relate to our salvation?

The conversation between Jesus and Pilate is, to me, one of the most interesting in all Scripture. In light of John’s gospel and all the other reading you have done so far, consider Pilate’s question, “What is truth?”

Numbers is the fourth book of the Hebrew Bible; part of the Pentateuch. At the beginning we find Moses, having delivered Israel out of Egypt and camped with them at Mt. Sinai, numbering the people of Israel who are able to fight. God has commanded this. The section of Numbers included in this week's reading describes the organization and preparations Israel must make before leaving Mt. Sinai and heading on to the Promised Land. It includes instructions to the people regarding conduct and service. It discusses the requirements of the Nazirites, people set apart for special service to the Lord. Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist were among the Nazirites who came from different times, and whose stories are told elsewhere in Scripture. The famous blessing of the people is also found in this book. You often hear it as part of the benediction at the conclusion of worship services in the church. In chapter 10, verse 11 Israel leaves Mt. Sinai and begins the journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 25

The Bible Challenge 2018 Intro and the reflections and notes for each week may be found at biblechallenge.pendletonchurch.org

Read 4 chapters per day

June 18-24: Numbers 19-36; 1 Corinthians 1-10

The people of Israel under Moses' leadership have set out for the Promised Land. It takes them a very long time to get there; much, much longer than it should have. In this story of Israel's journey, there are descriptions of times God is angry and expresses anger against the people Israel. There are times when the people challenge Moses' authority; even members of Moses' own family. What does God do throughout this story to work through all the relational difficulties between Himself and the people as well as among the people? What are you learning about your relationship to God and others as you read this journey story? What does this story tell us about the impact of our actions and inter-relationships on our entering into the promise of eternal life with God? Israel has been delivered out of bondage, but is now wandering in the wilderness. They have not yet entered the Promised Land.

Another point brought out in this story is the way in which God worked through the prophets. It is clear in the Book of Numbers that God's Spirit rested upon the prophets. In our day, because Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, Christians are always intimately connected to God. What does this connection give us access to? Do we always allow God to move in and through our lives the way God calls us to? Why or Why not? We read in Numbers that when Israel did not obey God there were consequences. Do you think as people with the Holy Spirit dwelling in us that we are also subject to consequences if we choose to resist God's transformative power working in our lives? As God's people are we permitted to live any way we choose or are we to learn Godly discipline?

In 1 Corinthians we find another letter of Paul to a church that is in need of correction. Their errors are not primarily the result of heresy that came from false teachers, as in some of the other churches Paul wrote to. This church is arguing over which of them is following the better teacher of the Gospel, ranking themselves and each other in terms of status. They are also involved in sin of a worldly, physical nature. Apparently they originally had a high degree of spirituality in their Christian practice, but allowed it to degenerate into immoral behaviors of all kinds. Paul asks the people to seek to follow Jesus Christ, and not attribute their faith to anyone else. Notice how Paul justifies his authority to correct these people; to point them back to the foundation of their faith, Jesus Christ. Where in today's church do you observe people moving away from the purity to which God calls His church? Is there anywhere in your own life that you see a need to return to the foundation of Christian faith?

In 1 Corinthians chapter 5 Paul addresses a specific situation of sin in the Corinthian church. He says in verse 3, "...I have already passed judgment on the one who did this..." Earlier in the book, chapter 2:14-16, Paul writes, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: 'For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ." Further on in the 5th chapter and into the 6th, Paul continues to write about the people of the church, the people outside the church, and judgment. As you continue through the book you will find correction concerning sexual sin and idolatry. How do these manifestations of sin impact on our relationship to God and to each other? Keep in mind that as professing Christians Paul holds us to a different standard in comparison to those outside the church. How does all this relate to Paul's words about judgment? Does Paul's point of view differ from the contemporary perspective often found in the church today that Christians are not supposed to judge? What does Paul tell us about judgment with regard to our relationship with God, other Christians, and people outside the church?

As we read 1 Corinthians and other New Testament books that deal with church order and the personal conduct of professing Christians, we must remember that the church of that time did not consider the possibility that it would be more than 2,000 years before Jesus would return as He promised. They thought Jesus was returning really soon, within their lifetime. The society of the day was established and Christians lived within it. So Paul's letters concentrated on how Christians should live within the constructs of their society, even though there may have been aspects of the structure of the society that were inconsistent with Jesus' message. So there were slaves and slave owners, and sometimes either one or both became Christians. There were also established family structures, some of which were based in Jewish cultural norms and others Greco-Roman. Paul's message was that Christians were to live within their circumstances, but to live according to Jesus' example; to change their hearts and behaviors to line up with Jesus' expectations, to change their position in relationship to God and not be concerned about their position in society, nor about changing the society.

As United Methodists we believe our Christ-given mission is "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." Indeed, as more and more people become Christians the world should be changing simply as the result of more and more people taking on Christ-like living in their own cultural contexts. Is it? How is the world around us changing? Are all the changes we are experiencing changes that you think have come as the result of God's expectations being fulfilled or of people's desires being fulfilled? Are there times when the two are the same? How does Paul's perspective impact your understanding of how Christians in today's rapidly changing world are applying Paul's instructions? How do Paul's instructions compare with the teachings of Jesus that we find in the Gospels?

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 26

The Bible Challenge 2018 Intro and the reflections and notes for each week may be found at biblechallenge.pendletonchurch.org

Read 4 chapters per day

June 25-July 1: 1 Corinthians 11-16; 2 Corinthians 1-13; Ephesians 1-6; Jonah 1-3

This week marks the halfway point in our reading through the Bible in a year. This week we finish the first half of the reading. Next week we begin the second. Stick with it! You will continue to be blessed!!

1 Corinthians addresses the importance of orderly Christian gatherings and the celebration of the Lord's Supper, as well as spiritual gifts Christians receive for the works of ministry to which God has called each Christian. Have you recognized the spiritual gifts God has given you so that you can function as God has equipped you in the situations you find yourself? How do you allow them to manifest in your life so you can be a blessing to others in the church and draw those outside the church toward faith in Jesus Christ? In what ways do you see yourself fulfilling Paul's encouragement to "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord,?" Spend some time in prayer seeking God about areas of your everyday life that may need to be given more fully to the Lord's work.

In 2 Corinthians we find Paul's authority as a leader in the church has been challenged. We will read about his defense of his authority, his deep concern for the condition of God's people, and his sincere desire to serve God well.

In chapter 3 of 2 Corinthians Paul continues to defend the authority of his ministry and points out that all the individuals who have God's Spirit because of Paul's ministry in their lives are in themselves the proof of the authenticity of Paul's ministry authority. He goes on to point out the requirements of Christian ministry in terms of where the ability to minister comes from, how ministers conduct themselves, why people minister, and what to expect. The UMC calls all Christians ministers, and we are all in some capacity or another expected to minister God's grace to people as God has called us to do. So, how do Paul's words encourage you in your ministry? In what ways do his words challenge you to examine your life and step up to new heights of faith, love, and service? Remember, among Paul's closing words in this letter he calls the church to, "Aim for perfection."

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a letter describing the essence of the Church ("big C," the whole Church throughout the ages and everywhere). We see what our position (as Christians) is because of God's grace in our lives, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Reflect on God's love for you, which causes God to pour out the Holy Spirit into you so that you may accomplish all God has called you to be and do. Notice the harmony of the interweaving work of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit so that you may be "Rooted and established in love." How does this establishment in love relate to salvation for us and for others whom we might influence?

Remember that while reading 1 Corinthians we reflected on the impact of the culture of the time and place of Paul, and how his writing was likely influenced as a result. Paul exhorts Christians, by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, to lead exemplary lives, do works of service, and overcome powers of darkness in this world (as they manifest in the circumstances of our lives) so we will not be led astray. There is much in this short book about our relationship to God, to each other as Christians, to others in this world, and to the powers of darkness. All Christians are to be actively involved in all these areas. How? What is your role in the Church? Chapter 4, verses 11-13 speak of God's people being prepared for service, to be prepared to fulfill God's call on their lives, and become mature and unified in our knowledge of God. Why is this important to salvation? Do you think this is an ongoing process for all Christians that must continue throughout our lives? How are you working with others to grow in your own faith and help others grow in theirs?

The story of Jonah is a familiar one to people who have been raised in the church even to a small degree. Jonah is a prophet and a missionary. Unlike other Biblical prophets, in this story Jonah is not given messages for Israel or Judah about their relationship to God or to other nations. Jonah is sent to Nineveh to warn them that their sin has come to a point where God intends to bring severe judgment unless they repent. What character traits that you see in Jonah would you consider to be positive? Negative? How would you describe Jonah's relationship with God? What about God's relationship to Nineveh? If they are not "God's people" in the way Israel is, why is God concerned about their repentance? What does this say about God and nations other than Israel or, by extension of the concept, about non-Christians today? What can be learned about salvation and our own relationships with God through Jonah's example?