

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 27

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

July 2-8: Jonah 4; Nahum 1-3; Philemon; Ezekiel 1-23

How much are people worth to God? In Jonah chapter 4 we read that Jonah was angry with God. God challenges him, asking whether Jonah has a right to be angry. Why do you think God chose Jonah to go to Nineveh? How is God helping Jonah come to terms with his own need of salvation? What does salvation mean for someone like Jonah who doesn't understand God's expectations and actions?

Nahum's prophecy is written in the form of a lyric poem. Nineveh was spared because when Jonah delivered God's message the people repented. But about a hundred years later Nineveh was doomed to destruction as the change occurred only in the individuals of Jonah's day. Future generations of Nineveh's people reverted to their sinful lives as their prevailing culture did not change. My grandmother was born very early in the 20th century, we are now in the early years of the 21st century; so over the period of about 100 years four generations of my family have lived. How important do you think it is to do everything you possibly can to not only make your life an example of faith to your children and grandchildren, but also to tell them the stories of your faith and ensure they have a firm foundation of faith from which their life decisions will be influenced? We see from the experience of Nineveh how quickly a people can change from Godly to ungodly living. What are the stories in your life that let you know God has acted for your good and the good of those you love?

The Book of Philemon is a personal letter from Paul to Philemon, a well-to-do citizen in the Colossian church. He had a slave named Onesimus who had behaved in some inappropriate way and then run away. He was converted to Christianity under Paul's ministry and in this letter we find Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon. The letter is an example to us of Christian love, and a call to forgiveness and reconciliation in much the same way as we experience these things in Christ. It is difficult in our day to think of a Christ-follower like Paul sending a slave back to his master rather than finding some way to set him free. What do you think about this?

Ezekiel was a priest in Judah who was taken away to Babylon sometime after Nebuchadnezzar had conquered. His concern was to keep God's exiled people mindful of the sin in their lives that had caused them to be exiled from the Promised Land, and to remind them God is faithful and will ultimately fulfill God's promises. There is an instruction given to Ezekiel that relates to our role as Christians regarding the instruction we received from Jesus to share the Gospel message so others may be saved. It is found in chapter 3. This book is full of visions and imagery. God is depicted as speaking directly to Ezekiel.

Over and over we read in Ezekiel's account about how the Spirit interacts with him. As Christians, we believe this is the same Holy Spirit of God that we read about coming upon and entering into Jesus' disciples in the upper room in Acts chapter 2, and that we celebrate on the day we remember what happened on that Pentecost. This is the Holy Spirit who inhabits all who are born from above, saved by grace through faith that has come as a gift of God to all who have become members of the Body of Christ. What encounters have you experienced with the Spirit of God that are remarkable to you?

God speaks to Ezekiel about God's people, who put up barriers between themselves and God by their behaviors. Forms of the word rebel, rebellious, and rebellion are found in this writing describing God's people. As Christians we are taught that anything that separates us from God is sin. In chapter 14, verse 23 God promises Ezekiel he will see that God is justified in His judgment as Ezekiel observes that God has just cause for bringing judgment. The end of the parable in chapter 15 tells us the judgment will come because of the unfaithfulness of the people. We have read about unfaithfulness. The thing about the idea of unfaithfulness is that it implies there was a time of faithfulness that came before. Why do people who are faithful to a loving, graceful God, who promises blessing after blessing, become unfaithful? This is important because it still happens today; even in the Church.

By chapter 16 we hear the prophet shouting at the people. Not only is Jerusalem characterized as a prostitute, but she is a really, really bad prostitute; the worst, apparently. Recall other places in the Scriptures in which Israel's unfaithfulness is analogous to prostitution. In chapter 17 we find another parable. And in chapter 18, there is a distinction made between the collective sin of God's people, and the accountability of the individual sinner. In the midst of all the fantastic images described in Ezekiel, and the severe judgments declared by God, we find verses with promises of redemption for those who avoid sin and those who repent when they are confronted with their sin. Chapter 18 speaks of the differences among generations of people, how one generation may sin and the next not, and that there is the possibility of repentance. Remember what we saw in Jonah and Nahum. Chapter 18, verse 32 shows us a fundamental aspect of the nature of God and God's love for the people God created. Look for the promises of redemption alongside the anger of God at the rebellion of those He loves. How is this like human beings with their offspring when they make poor choices and are harmed or cause harm to others? What are the results of sin, even if the sin isn't immediately apparent? Between individuals and God the ultimate results of sin and repentance have eternal ramifications. What does this say to us about our need to continue to grow in our faith and live our lives according to God's expectations?

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 28

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Read 4 chapters per day

July 9-15: Ezekiel 24-48; Revelation 1-3

The next few chapters of Ezekiel continue descriptions of God's judgments on various groups, and what will be happening to Israel. In chapter 33 we see again the reference to the watchman, as we did in chapter 3. Once again, consider the parallel of the role of the watchman in Ezekiel's situation to the role of the Christian among non-Christians, and Christians who are not living as they should. For Christians there is a difference in how we deal with these two groups. How are Christians to relate to non-Christians? What is our primary responsibility toward them? What about Christians – we should each include ourselves in that group because none of us lives perfectly; what is our responsibility toward our sisters and brothers who are not living according to the teaching God has given us? Recall Jesus' commands us to in the Gospels and the first chapter of Acts. Do you think individual Christians will be accountable before God for those with whom they did or did not share the Good News? Is this similar to the way we have read God has made each individual accountable before Him for their own sin? What about those in the Church who are not living out their faith? We read about that throughout the New Testament.

We have previously read through the entire Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), as well as First and Second Kings and read many references to God's laws; the blessings that follow obedience and the curses that follow disobedience. There is also much instruction regarding how the Tabernacle and Temple should be built and the order and content of appropriate worship. Following Ezekiel's prophecy of the coming new covenant and restoration of Israel in chapter 36 and beyond, there is a message about restoring worship and the return of the glory of the Lord. Again, Ezekiel is communicating his visions. Notice the similarities and differences between the instructions given here and those in books we have previously read.

As we begin the Book of the Revelation let's be aware that we will notice some similarities with Ezekiel.

Revelation (note that it is not Revelations as some people think) is the last book of our New Testament and traditionally attributed to someone named John. The title of the book (also called the Apocalypse) refers to something that was previously hidden having been revealed. As we see in the first three verses, God, through Jesus Christ, has revealed to John "what must soon take place". The words of the book are referred to as prophecy, and blessing is promised to those who hear the prophecy and take it to heart.

Many Christians are intimidated, or fear they will be frightened by Revelation or be unable to understand it, and therefore avoid reading it. Some believe it takes a Biblical scholar to read and interpret it correctly. But the Scripture itself states that whether we read it or hear it we will be blessed. It places no conditions on the person. There are differences among the interpretations of various Bible teachers, historically as well as among the Church today. I will not discuss this here, nor will I impose my interpretation upon you. As you read, realize that John's vision took place following Jesus' resurrection and prior to His return. Worship of God is depicted, as is the truth of the corrupt nature of human society - that God is really in control and will ultimately bring forth justice. In this week's reading there are messages to seven specific churches in which we may or may not see our own virtues and short-comings reflected. In this book the author intends to teach Christians about God, the world they live in, and how intentionally they should devoted themselves to God while living here as well as looking to the second coming of Christ. So there are descriptions of destruction of evil, a promise of hope, and messages to churches in various spiritual conditions about the impact their behavior and witness is on each other and the world around them. God's mission, expressed throughout Scripture, concerns the redemption and re-creation of all that is fallen. Revelation speaks to those concerns.

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 29

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Read 4 chapters per day

July 16-22: Revelation 4-22; Psalms 1-9

This week's reading takes us through the rest of John's Revelation. We see God's glory and the praise God receives in the heavenly realm expressed in unique ways by heavenly beings. Try to visualize the images described. Also remember that the writer is relating his own experiences of the revelation he is receiving. If you are familiar with any interpretations of the book, try to put them on a shelf and hear the words as if you are the one receiving the prophecy for the first time. Are you remembering to pray before you read, and ask the Holy Spirit to show you what God wills for you to glean from each day's reading?

John's vision is extensively detailed and filled with amazing imagery. Continue to try to imagine the scenes as they play out in your mind through John's descriptions. There are very violent scenes, very beautiful scenes, as well as assurances of salvation for God's people. But in this book we also read of struggles and suffering that God's people will go through. There are descriptions of who will and will not be with God when the end of the world, as we know it, finally comes. What specific references do you find that clearly state the differences between these two groups? All four Gospels tell us of these differences. And you can find similar references in the Hebrew Bible books we have read thus far. Words to look for include: deception, patient endurance, adultery and prostitution; contrasted with a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. Why does God pour out His wrath on some and receive others? Look for answers in Revelation as you read. What is the response of God's angels to the wrath God releases into the earth and on its people? Who is God? And how does Revelation drive home the necessity of accepting, worshipping, and loving God as God is, rather than as we would have God be based on our own biases? What does God expect of God's people according to what has been revealed to us by God through John?

The book of Psalms is a book of poetry, some of which was set to music and sung in some manner. Although often attributed to David, there are several poets whose writings make up this collection. It is a book of prayer in the most basic sense. Its writers praise God, cry out to God, complain to God, repent before God, worship God, and give thanks to God, etc. Often these prayers are directly related to historical events in the Psalmists' lives. Storytelling in song is also an important part of the writings. We will read the history of Israel told over and over in different ways through these verses. This is a way of remembering and passing down the stories. In the liturgies of the Church throughout each year we tell and retell the stories of God, God's people, and the enemies of God and God's people. We go through Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost; remembering the stories and passing them on to our children in the hope that as we remember we will remain connected in relationship with God and all God's creation in ways that will lead to salvation. As you read through the Psalms look for the hope of salvation. The Psalms are quoted often in the New Testament writings. Look for a quote from Psalm 2 in this week's reading from Revelation.

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 30

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Read 4 chapters per day

July 23-29: Psalms 10-37

There are sometimes words used in the introduction to certain Psalms; sheminith, gittith, shiggaion, and miktam are among them. It is believed these are musical terms or descriptions of types of music or they way the music should be played. Often in the Psalms you will read the word Selah. We are not certain of this word's meaning either, but it is assumed it is indicating some kind of musical direction such as a rest, or some kind of change in the music occurring at the points where Selah is written. It may be helpful to stop at those points and take a moment to reflect on what has already been expressed by the Psalmist before going on, and after reading the entire Psalm consider how the sections separated by Selah are related to one another.

An interesting way to move through the Psalms, and one which may give each of us insight into ourselves, is to listen to the tone of voice of the Psalmist. After reading each Psalm, try reading it again, perhaps aloud, using the inflections and tones you think the writing indicates. Remember these were poems that were often song lyrics, intended to be communicated out loud. Probably created, learned, and used in a form of oral tradition, then later written down. You may need to try this more than once to find the Psalmist's voice. When you speak in the Psalmist's voice can you identify with the Psalmist? Have you had similar feelings? Have you ever been as transparent, open, honest with God as the Psalmists were?

In Luke 24:44-48, we read, "He (Jesus) said to them, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.' Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.'"

Do you remember reading the Psalms quoted as you read through the Gospels? Christians hear God's promise of salvation in Jesus Christ in the Psalms. But this was long before the writers of the gospels quotes the Psalms. What do you think the salvation messages written down in the Psalms meant to the ancient Israelites who sung and heard them? Was the hope of salvation available to them even though Christ Jesus had not yet come?

Sixteen of the Psalms contained in the Book of Psalms as it exists in today's Christian Bible (there are Psalms in other books of the Bible as well) are referred to as "Messianic Psalms." (Psalms 2, 8, 16, 22, 23, 24, 40, 41, 45, 68, 69, 72, 89, 102, 110, & 118) They are Jewish poems that speak of the Messiah. You will read six of them this week. As Christians, we believe Jesus Christ is the Messiah and, therefore, the One to whom the Psalmists refer. Some Jewish people agree with this. They identify themselves as Messianic Jews. Some Jews who believe Jesus is the Messiah have converted to Christianity, choosing to identify with Christians rather than retaining their Jewish practices. Others do not believe the Messiah has yet come. It is important to note that the original Christ followers, including those following closely enough to be called Jesus' disciples, were Jews. Gentiles who believed were considered to have been brought into the branch of Judaism which believed Jesus was the Messiah. The Council of Jewish believers at Jerusalem decided early on that Gentile believers did not need to conform to every aspect of Jewish practice, for example circumcision and most dietary laws (see Acts 15). And Paul wrote about the Gentiles being branches "grafted into" the root of Israel (see Romans 11).

Read carefully and taken in the context of all our Scriptures, it can clearly be seen that Christianity was not intended to replace the Jewish faith as some think. This misconception has been a catalyst for anti-Semitic movements since the early history of the Church. Rather, at Jesus' direction, his Jewish disciples extended their faith in Messiah to the Gentiles - all the nations of the world (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus was a Jewish man, from a family line of Jewish people, who practiced the Judaism of his time. He gathered Jewish people from all walks of Jewish life including Pharisees and Sadducees, taught them, and sent them out to teach others; eventually sending them to people who were not Jews so that everyone in God's creation would have the opportunity to be restored to right relationship with God. Jesus never rejected the Jewish people or their God-given faith. He warned those who did not believe that they needed to repent. Jesus made the way for all people to enter the fellowship of faith in God that God had established through Israel. What have your experiences with Jewish people been like? What do you think about the way the Church changed from being a branch of Judaism that included Gentiles into the fold, to a religion that often considers Jews to be enemies of the Messiah and to this day practices forms of persecution against the Jewish people?

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 31

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Read 4 chapters per day

July 30-August 5: Psalms 38-65

Recall the Easter season back in the spring, a season which speaks to new life; the new life offered to us by God in Jesus Christ if we choose to receive it. We see in this week's reading expressions of great joy and deep despair. But through all experiences the psalmists declare their love of and trust in God. We are often encouraged to love unconditionally, because that's how God loves us and because love comes from God. So without God we are incapable of true love; but what about trust? Do you trust God? Do you trust God unconditionally, as the psalmists appear to?

The composition of the Messianic Psalms (discussed in last week's reflection) is attributed to several different psalmists, including David and Solomon. They contain prophetic passages that refer to Christ's suffering and entering into glory; and His person as Son of God, Son of Man, Son of David, etc. He is depicted as a prophet, priest, and king. His works as the sacrifice for sin, the intercessor, and restorer of God's rule and reign are also described. How do you think the psalmists knew all these things about their hoped-for Messiah? Continue to listen to the sound of the voice of the psalmists as you read; their expressions of repentance, praise and worship to God, their trust in Him. How much closer to God would we draw, how much better would we know Him, if we spent more time and energy in the sort of devotion and reflection on God's goodness, grace, and mercy as the psalmists clearly did? Look for places in the Psalms daily where you relate to something for which the psalmist is repenting, praising God, worshipping God, and putting trust in God.

There are three Messianic Psalms in this week's readings. First consider Psalms 40 and 41. What in these two Psalms calls to mind the experiences of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels? In Psalms 42-44 we hear the psalmist's attempts to encourage himself to continue to hope in God, while continuing to praise God in the midst of personal affliction. What is it that, as God's people, we continue to hope for? Why do we continue in such hope? Is the hope of the psalmist a foolish hope that has no ultimate promise of new life? If so, why do we believe for it? If not, why don't we share it with everyone we meet so they can have the opportunity to choose new life in Christ (the Messiah), too?

Psalms 45 is the other Messianic Psalm in this week's reading. Can you hear the joy and anticipation of the psalmist? What is the psalmist looking forward to? Can you see a relationship between the king who is spoken of and God? In the second verse God has blessed the king. In the sixth, we see the throne is God's, and in the seventh God is referred to as the God of the king. Who else is present in this psalm? Can you picture the scene described? The majesty and richness of God's reign through all eternity is expressed here.

Those under the protection of God in these Psalms, those who are collectively brought into relationship to God/the king are referred to as "she." The beauty of the princess, the city of God, and God's holy mountain are extolled. Where else in this year's reading do you recall this type of imagery? The tone of the Psalms then shifts and we hear admonitions concerning our need for God, our inability to save ourselves. The difference between the righteous and the wicked is expressed.

With Psalm 51 we return to David's Psalms. These Psalms are related to David's life experiences as recorded in the historical books of the Bible. Psalm 51, for example, is the psalm of David's repentance before God and his pleas for forgiveness and restoration following his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband, Uriah when it is discovered Bathsheba is pregnant by David. In this Psalm we can see the pattern of restoration to relationship with God for sinners: the sin is judged, there is forgiveness and cleansing through blood, being filled with the Holy Spirit for joy and power, service for God among people, acts of worship, and restoration to fellowship with God. Look for this progression as you read this Psalm. It can be used as a prayer of confession in our lives, today. If you recall, David's story can be found across a span of three books of the Hebrew Bible we have read so far this year: I Samuel chapter 16 – the end, II Samuel (whole book), and I Kings chapter 1 – chapter 2:11. Reading through David's story again will shed light on the context of David's Psalms.

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WEEK 32

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Read 4 chapters per day

August 6-12: Psalms 66-75; Matthew 1-18 (beginning the second time through the New Testament for this year)

There are three more Messianic Psalms among this week's readings: Psalms 68, 69, and 72. Continue to look for familiar passages, and for the various attributes of the Messiah. Remember that in these Psalms we sometimes see the Messiah in a position of enduring suffering and sometimes in glory. Also look for references to other people (or "categories" of people) and the Messiah's relationship to them.

With the exception of Psalms 66 and 67, the Psalms in this week's readings are traditionally attributed to David. At the end of Psalm 72 we see, in the 20th verse, "This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse." Psalm 73 begins Book III of the Psalms, and this section of Psalms will begin with several Psalms by a person named Asaph. But we will also find more of David's Psalms as we continue to read.

The present day collection of Psalms, found in our Protestant Bibles, is divided into five books. Book I contains Psalms 1-41, Book II – Psalms 42-72, Book III – Psalms 73-89, Book IV – Psalms 90-106, and Book V – Psalms 107-150. At the end of each book a doxology is found. A doxology is an expression of praise to God. Think of the praise to God sung in some Christian traditions each time we bring our tithes and offerings during worship services. (Praise God from Whom all blessings flow; praise Him all creatures here below; praise Him above, ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.) This is a doxology.

The other Psalms we read this week are more prayers in the form of songs to God. There are often references to places and circumstances in David's life and in the collective experience of God's people. We can see that we would have deeper understanding of the psalmist's message if we connect these expressions to stories found among the Hebrew Bible writings, especially in the Pentateuch and the historical books. But we can also find the writings of the psalmists speak to our present day circumstances in many cases, even if we don't fully understand the psalmist's specific reasons for writing. So let the Psalms speak to your own heart. And if you want to go deeper into the Scriptures for further insight, you can. You have already read many of the Hebrew Bible books.

At the beginning of the Bible Challenge in January, I explained that we would be reading through the Hebrew Bible once and the New Testament twice. This week we begin our second time reading through the New Testament by returning to Matthew' Gospel. You will find that the insights you have gained by having read through the New Testament and much of the Hebrew Bible will prompt new insights as you read Matthew again. There is always something new to see and understand, along with re-affirmation of what we have already seen when reading the Holy Scriptures. God will show us something new or deepen our understanding. As you read, notice the Hebrew Bible quotes that you find familiar because you have read the books in which they are found. In these chapters of Matthew you will find quotes from: Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, and Malachi. See if you can locate them all, and perhaps take time to look back at the chapters in the Hebrew Bible were they are found.

Also notice the four women listed in this genealogy. Interestingly they are all Gentiles. Do you recall their stories? How is it that they became incorporated into this family line that the writer of Matthew uses to establish Jesus as the Jewish Messiah? What connections are you making between the Old and New Testaments that you did not make before? How does this impact on your understanding of who Jesus is and who in the world God, in Jesus, intended to impact with the Gospel message? Keep in mind that this is a Jewish story, most likely written by a Jewish disciple of Jesus about events that occurred in Jesus' Jewish community. But there are also incidents in which Jesus deals with Gentiles. Notice those circumstances and consider what this might mean about Jesus' ministry and his message to his Jewish disciples about the Kingdom of Heaven. What does it mean to be a disciple, according to Matthew, and who may be included in that group?

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 33

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Read 4 chapters per day

August 13-19: Matthew 19-28; 1 Chronicles 1-18

As you conclude the second reading through Matthew, remember to notice the connections with the Hebrew Bible. Look for the quotes, look for new insights. In this week's reading you will find quotes from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is characterized as speaking very harshly to and about the priests, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Jewish rulers. Do you think Matthew's depiction of Jesus was intended to mean that Jesus was condemning all Jews, or even all priests, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Jewish rulers? Remember the writer of Matthew was a Jew. As we read such writing it is important to remember that the original disciples of Jesus, the original Church, was made up of Jews from all classes and ways of expressing their faith in God in the regions where Jesus taught. As Jesus' message spread, Jews from all over the Roman world whose ancestors had been dispersed during the exiles also became followers of Jesus' teaching through the work of Jewish disciples of Jesus. Matthew's harsh words were originally intended for an audience of mostly Jewish Christ followers who were dealing with oppression by Romans and by Jews who did not follow Christ. These Jewish people were among those who understood the reality that even though their nation was occupied by Roman soldiers and ultimately under Roman rule. They knew that if their own Jewish rulers kept the people quiet and just going about their own business, paying their taxes without causing problems, they would be left alone to live peacefully. By challenging the harsh interpretations of God's law these leaders had established, Jesus was seen as threatening the safety of the nation. They knew that even if Jesus was a great military leader who could inspire the people to rise up against Rome and fight for their independence, the nation Israel could never defeat the whole Roman army. And they knew Rome would fight hard to keep control of that part of the world. It was crucial to international trade within the Roman Empire and beyond, as well as to Rome's ability to control the Empire militarily.

The Romans didn't believe in God the same way the Jews did. Rome allowed its people to believe as they liked, but also insisted that everyone participate in the "civic religion" that included worship of specific gods, including worshipping Caesar. When Jesus' message spread beyond the Jews to people of many other beliefs, naturally the religious and civic leaders of those communities were also threatened. But many became followers of Jesus and Christianity was born. Unfortunately, throughout Church history the Jewish people as a whole have been persecuted and demeaned by the Church because of inappropriate interpretations of the Scriptures. Jesus was not a Christian, he was a Jew, fully God and fully human, whose message to the world was of reconciliation to God through appropriate obedience to God, all by God's grace. Many Jews followed Jesus, and the Christian Church ultimately developed as Jesus sent his disciples to share the message with all people. But the advent of the Christian Church does not change God's promise to Israel, or the truth taught by John Wesley that God is continually pouring out grace on all people so that all may desire to enter into relationship with God and live in God's peace eternally.

“He remembers his covenant forever,
the promise he made, for a thousand generations,
the covenant he made with Abraham,
the oath he swore to Isaac.
He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree,
to Israel as an everlasting covenant:
“To you I will give the land of Canaan
as the portion you will inherit.”
When they were but few in number,
few indeed, and strangers in it,
they wandered from nation to nation,
from one kingdom to another.
He allowed no one to oppress them;
for their sake he rebuked kings:
“Do not touch my anointed ones;
do my prophets no harm.” Psalm 105:8-15

As followers of the Jewish Messiah, Christians are incorporated into God’s promise to the Jewish people. See Romans 11:1-36. When reading the Scriptures it is always of the utmost importance to take care not to choose out individual passages that bolster our point of view and disregard the rest. Careful reading of Paul’s letter to the Romans makes it clear that the Church must remember where she came from and that God has not and will not abandon the root of God’s outpouring of grace that is Israel. The church has not replaced the faith of those who are truly seeking God, those who have been called by God, and are living according to God’s will the best they can, even if it’s only because they know in themselves what it means to live according to God’s Law (see Romans 2:13-15). When we follow Jesus’ command the Great Commission, at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, we are wise if we model our sharing with others according to Jesus’ example. When he dealt with people who needed help, he helped them. When he saw they were discouraged he encouraged them. When he sent his disciples out he told them to tell the people they met about him. If they listened, they should stay and tell them more. If they did not want to listen, they should shake the dust off their feet and go - peacefully. Nowhere does Jesus tell any disciples to conquer nations of people and threaten them into becoming people who live according to the liturgies of the Christian Church and the customs and traditions of Western Civilization. With all the many and varied ways Christians interpret Scripture and live our faith, it is crucial that we take care to discern what the Holy Spirit is actually leading us to do when we share our faith with others both in and outside the Church. How do you live your Christian faith in everyday life when you encounter people who believe differently?

Like 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles exist as one book in the Hebrew Bible. 1 Chronicles contains much of the same history as you read in Kings about King David. Written much later than Samuel and Kings, probably by the priests who were in Babylon during the period of the Kingdom of Judah’s exile, Chronicles centers on Judah and comes from the perspective of those whose emphasis was on preserving the historical genealogies and other records for the purpose of establishing the relationship of God’s redemption and the role of David’s family line.

As I have said before, we remember our family stories because we remember the people, who were characters in the stories, and what they did. So it is with the Hebrew Bible stories, and we need these family lines clearly established to be able to understand the genealogies we read in the Gospels. This week’s section of 1 Chronicles covers the end of the time of King Saul’s reign and continues into the time of the full establishment of King David’s. Look for similarities and differences in the story details as you compare what you remember of Samuel and Kings with what you are reading now in Chronicles. When writers have different reasons for writing about the same events, the way the stories are told will differ. Consider the differing perspectives of the writers from the time of Samuel and Kings, in comparison and contrast to the writers of Chronicles.

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WEEK 34

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Read 4 chapters per day

August 20-26: 1 Chronicles 19-29; 2 Chronicles 1-17

As you continue reading, you may want to look back and compare the stories as they are told in 1&2 Chronicles with the same stories as they are told in Samuel and Kings. You will find some differences in wording, and some verses that are identical in wording. What differences do you see? How do these differences impact on your understanding of the stories? 1 Chronicles ends with King David's death. In the last verses, reference is made to non-Biblical Hebrew historical writings. This is not the only place in the Holy Scriptures where we find such references. I bring this up because just as you may have heard about recently discovered gospels and other writings by people about Jesus, the Hebrew people also wrote much about their history; what happened to them and why. Not all ancient literature was chosen to be included in our Bible.

David made many mistakes throughout his life that caused a break in relationship between himself and God. He had to atone for them in order to restore the relationship. Sometimes the problems caused by David's choices were more private in nature, but as we see in chapter 21 David's choices also had ramifications for all the people over whom he ruled. Each of us has an impact on our own areas of influence; family members, co-workers, neighbors, and our brothers and sisters in Christ's Church. Our choices are never without some impact on those around us. Humanity is intended by God to exist in community because God, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, exists in community. God's existence is a community of unending love. Humanity was intended to exist with God in this way. When we allow the Holy Spirit to lead and guide our lives, this is the way it is. When we do not, it is not. The cause of inward strife, bitterness, and jealousy, that ultimately leads to conflict is sin. There is no one who is not at fault, and the only way out of sin is through God's love. David's repentance and restoration is a pattern for all of us. David trusted himself into God's hands every time he failed to follow God; and because of God's great love he was restored. We are also loved by God.

Notice the instructions David gives Solomon as the leadership of Israel was being passed on to him. Observe 1 Chronicles 28:19, in which David lets Solomon know the Lord has provided detailed plans for the building of the Temple. Where else in the Hebrew Bible can you recall God providing specific, detailed instructions regarding something significant for God's people? Often in today's world Christians say God doesn't communicate with people like that any more. We are to use our own minds and trust that God will bless our plans just because we chose a particular way that seemed right to us. But God does lead people specifically. People who take time to listen for God's voice and wait for God's timing do receive specific instructions from God as God deems necessary. It is only when we are in a hurry or want to have things our own way that we have trouble hearing from God. Recall the ways God has communicated with people throughout the Scriptures. Consider how God communicates with you. It takes time and discipline to listen for God's voice; in much the same way it takes time and discipline to listen to anyone we want to know well and have a good relationship with.

2 Chronicles picks up Israel/Judah's history with King Solomon's reign. Again, you will find much of the writing familiar because of having read Kings. Chapter 11 of 1 Kings tells of Solomon's failure and the consequences for the nation Israel. But 2 Chronicles leaves these details out. Why do you think the writer of Chronicles chose to present the story in this way?

Recall the kingdom becoming divided. Why did this happen? As you continue to read, notice the kings who were devoted to God and to following God's will; those kings who were either good and became evil, or evil and repented; and those who were evil throughout their reign. What were the circumstances of each of these cases? Also notice the varying relationships between Israel and Judah, and each of their relationships with other nations.

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 35

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

August 27-September 2: 2 Chronicles 18-36; Nehemiah 1-9

The history of God's chosen people is filled with times of following God's laws and times of turning to other gods/idols. However we always find groups of people who remain faithful, who hold their ground even in the midst of changing times and attitudes. These are sometimes referred to as a "remnant" a remaining group of people who refuse to reject God's expectations. Look for ways God reaches out to the people, even the most rebellious ones. God sometimes spoke to them through prophets. Our New Testament speaks of Church-era prophets, both those God has placed in the Church and those called false prophets. Remember we are warned against following false prophets. How do you know the difference? Has God ever spoken through someone to you prophetically? Have you ever been a vessel through whom God has spoken to someone? If so, how did you know it was God's voice and not your own? As you read, continue to observe the changing times among Israel, Judah, and their kings, prophets, and people. Notice how they regard, respond to, and treat one another. Are there similar changing times in other places/societies in modern world history? Look for God's responses and the possibility of God's way of salvation for people in all the circumstances in this week's reading.

Nehemiah was an Israelite and a servant of the King of Persia, Artaxerxes, according to the Scriptures. He was among the exiles who had been taken away from Jerusalem. It is not true that all the Israelites were removed from their homeland. Some had to be left to take care of the land, which had become the newly acquired territories of the conquering nation. But the city Jerusalem was not well cared for. Although the Temple had been rebuilt (you read about this in Ezra some months ago), the city walls were in ruins. Ancient cities had walls surrounding them as a defensive measure to protect against enemy attack. The book called Nehemiah tells us of the man Nehemiah's leadership in rebuilding the walls. It gives us insight into how to effectively motivate people in ways God approves; both those who rank above us and below us in authority. It can also be interpreted as an analogy of people's spiritual state of being. As you read, look for ways you see spiritual principles at work that may apply to the Church today.

Chapter three of Nehemiah begins with a description of the repair of sections of Jerusalem's wall and its gates. Who do you notice is involved in repairing the walls? (look carefully) Does it seem to be a diverse population of the Israelites? Chapters 4-6 describe various forms of opposition faced by those working on rebuilding the wall. What are they and how does Nehemiah resist? Do these forms of opposition have a parallel in our Christian spiritual lives? What does Nehemiah's leadership teach us about how to deal with them? Chapter 7 to the end of this book deals with the re-establishment of many of God's people dwelling in Jerusalem. Notice the events that take place, who is involved and in what capacities, and how the people respond. Does this speak to you about the ebbing and flowing of your own faith? Does it give you encouragement to continue to persevere in the disciplines of your faith and to not allow them to be neglected? How do you think the neglect of attention to spiritual disciplines may impact our salvation? What about our ability to be a credible witness to others?

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 36

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

September 3-9: Nehemiah 10-13; Esther 1-10; Luke 1-14

As you finish reading Nehemiah, consider the significance of the presence of the priests, Levites, and prophets among God's people. The priests and Levites are identified by family line. But where do the prophets come from? (see 9:30). Who are the prophets in our lives today?

Once again the story of Israel's deliverance out of Egypt, and the cycle of obedience and disobedience to God has been told in the narrative of Scripture. Now another promise, a binding agreement, is made with God. The book of Moses is read, the Sabbath restored, and intermarriage with those outside of the covenant with God is forbidden. Consider the significance of each of these practices. Why were they of value to the Israelite community? Do you think if Israel had been consistent in honoring them through actions and attitudes they would have avoided their rebellions against God? What are comparable Christian practices? Why are they of value to the Christian community of faith? How well do you honor them?

The Book of Esther is the last in the historical book section of the Hebrew Bible. It is a story of personal sacrifice/risk and the redemption of a people that resulted. The story takes place during the time of the Persian captivity of God's people under King Xerxes. The opening chapters give us a sense of the relationship between men and women in the setting of the royal Persian household; and also of the politics of Persia. Why was Esther's decision a difficult one? It is interesting to note that God is not mentioned in the entire story. Remember as you read that during times of captivity the people were assimilated into the culture of the land in which they were captive. So very few of them recalled or practiced God's laws as they had been taught. Because of their separation from Jerusalem and the Temple during this time, religious leaders endeavored to establish some way of keeping the Jewish people close to God through remembering their stories. The synagogue and centrality of devotion to God through practices of worship in the home among family members became prominent. In Esther's story we can see God's provision/protection for His chosen people. How difficult is it for American Christians today to maintain their devotion to God throughout our everyday lives in contemporary American culture? Esther's return to allegiance to her people caused their salvation in a foreign land. Where do you see the Church in need of returning to her stories to bring about salvation in the world?

Reading through Luke's Gospel once again, look at the relationship of the Law (about which you have read quite a lot in the Hebrew Bible by now!) to the actions of the characters in this gospel. Notice the direct quotations from the Hebrew Bible and why they are used in this context. Can you sense the power of the words as they are spoken in each setting? How does the use of these words impact on each situation? What explanations, and/or corrections of interpretation of the Law do you see Jesus making among the people with whom He is communicating? How important do you think it is to have God's interpretation of the Scriptures in comparison/contrast to the interpretations people may come up with through human reasoning alone? How do we discern God's interpretation of God's Holy Scriptures? How does interpretation of Scripture impact our understanding of what salvation means?

In Chapter 8 of Luke's Gospel we find an emphasis on women who minister to Jesus and whom Jesus encounters during the course of His ministry. As you continue reading take notice of the people Jesus is in regular relationship with, those He encounters, and those He talks about to others – even the characters in the stories He tells. Do you understand some of the relationships better than others? Which characters in the Gospel do you identify with because you have had to learn the lessons they learned? Which characters do you identify with because you were able to be the one who taught them, shared something of yourself with them, love them like Jesus did? How do our interrelationships with others impact our process of salvation and contribute to or possibly hinder theirs?

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 37

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

September 10-16: Luke 15-24; Acts 1-18

Luke's gospel addresses social discrepancies between the "haves" and the "have-nots" among the community of Israelites in Jesus' day. Notice who is considered to be doing right in Jesus' eyes and who receives correction. Notice who, upon receiving correction, repents and begins to follow Jesus' teaching. Jesus came to reach all people with the message of salvation to eternal life under God's reign. A big part of accomplishing this meant he had to reach out to the marginalized people of the community, those who were discounted and not permitted to the advantages others enjoyed. What does this message say to us today as we enjoy our American lifestyle knowing there are many people in our land who do not have what we have, and have little hope of being able to get it? Continue to observe the interactions among the characters and notice who among them is and is not moving toward salvation according to Jesus' teaching.

As you read again through the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, remember this is the beginning of the Church. As in you did while reading Luke, continue to notice the interrelationships among the various characters in the narrative. Observe how much they relied upon the Holy Spirit and prayed for the Spirit's empowerment and guidance.

At the beginning of the book we find Jesus instructing the disciples to wait. They were waiting for the Holy Spirit and they knew it. When have you had an experience with God in which you knew that God was leading and empowering you to do something specific in this world to draw yourself or others closer to God? The disciples went around proclaiming the gospel message and doing miracles, like Jesus had done, because of the Spirit's power working in and through them. The Spirit is reported to have spoken to the disciples about when and where they should go.

As the church grew and spread beyond the Jewish community into the surrounding Gentile areas, questions concerning the acceptance of Gentiles into the Jewish faith in Jesus as Messiah arose. Notice what the decisive factor that produced the decision to accept Gentile believers was. The Holy Spirit continues to minister through God's Holy Church (remember, the Church isn't the building, it's the people who have been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ and have received the Holy Spirit). Notice also that the early Jewish church leaders determined that Gentiles did not have to become Jews in order to be Christians, devoted followers of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Interestingly, the expectations established by the Jerusalem Council were in accordance with the Law of Moses in which guidelines were given for Gentiles who lived among the Israelites for the purpose of maintaining a peaceful co-existence (Leviticus 17:8-18:26). So, Jesus' statements in the gospels that made it clear he had not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it were upheld at that time. What do you think about the requirements of the Jewish church leaders for the Gentile believers? Does the church continue to uphold these requirements in America today? If not, where in the Scriptures do you find precedent for Gentile believers to disregard these requirements? (If citing a single verse or two, be sure to examine the entire context of the passage in which that verse is located.)

The disciples of Jesus, Jews and Gentiles, also endured various persecutions because of their faith. How do you see miracles and persecutions manifesting in the world today? What miracles and/or persecutions have you witnessed or been on the receiving end of? In light of the fact that God desires to work through the Church, and the Church endures persecution because of it, how do you think we should be praying?

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 38

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

September 17-23: Acts 19-28; Proverbs 1-18

As you conclude your second reading of Acts notice the people who accept the Gospel message and those who reject it; those who desire to follow God according to God's expectations and those who choose their own way. Do you know people who believe they can make their own rules about their relationship to God and that God will accept them as long as they are doing what they believe to be right and good for themselves and the people in their lives? How does this way of thinking line up with or oppose what you read about the people who encounter Jesus' disciples? What examples of unwavering faith in the truth that is found in Jesus Christ do you see exhibited in the disciples' lives? The message Jesus' disciples were sent to share in the world is God's message of peace and reconciliation among all people. As you reflect on your reading of Acts, in what ways did you notice the disciples sharing the message? How did you observe them conducting their own lives? What does this speak to the church today?

Proverbs is a collection of Wisdom Literature in which important spiritual and practical truths are brought out through various kinds of comparison and contrast. Many of them are attributed to King Solomon, King David's son. But this is a collection, and collections of various proverbs are common in ancient literature. As the people of Solomon's day traveled extensively along trade routes and had relationships among kingdoms and other political entities, there is little doubt that their stories and life wisdom were shared. We find some of the proverbs included in this collection nearly word for word among the literature of other ancient cultures such as Babylonian, Phoenician, Ugaritic, and especially Egyptian. Remember Solomon's visit from the Queen of Sheba? She was astonished at the extent of his wisdom. Remember too that Solomon had made a treaty with the Pharaoh of the time and had married his daughter and brought her to Egypt. Solomon had prayed to God, above all other things, for wisdom to lead the people.

Some Proverbs begin with an address to "my son." How many of these warnings and bits of wisdom did your parents impart to you? What about the ways in which you advise your children, or others who ask for your advice? Where do you see reasons given for following the wisdom imparted through Proverbs?

Women in ancient times were regarded differently than they are regarded in the west today. So when the writer/compiler of Proverbs addresses the son about his relationship with women, the point of view is one of emphasizing the importance of treating the women in the community responsibly; fidelity in one's own marriage and acting honorably with regard to other people's marriages. The expectations for appropriate relationships are clearly expressed. What reasons are given for these expectations? Do such expectations still exist in today's world? Among members of God's church?

In Proverbs we see wisdom as a work of God, brought forth first. Why do you think wisdom was the first thing God "brought forth?" Notice the writer of Proverbs 8 uses several descriptions for how God brought wisdom forth. It appears that wisdom was necessary before any of God's creation was begun and as things were created wisdom was part of the creative process. This is an example of a creation story found in the Bible that is not found in Genesis. Chapter 9 is a compare/contrast between wisdom and folly; interesting that they are both referred to as female in nature. In chapter 10 we see wisdom connected with God and folly connected with sin. Look for examples of each and consider how they apply to your life.

In Proverbs 11 we find an example of a word of wisdom that has become the foundation of laws in our day. "The Lord abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight." Every time I go to the gas station I notice the state seal confirming the measure of gas I'm receiving is correct according to what the digital readout tells me. The scales at Wegmans with which I measure the weight of my produce are all required by law to be calibrated to weigh accurately. Standards of weights and measures have been recognized as necessary for commerce among people since ancient times. Do you think there was a time when this was not so? How do you think such standards came into being? As you continue reading through Proverbs think about what the various sayings may have meant to people of ancient times, how the applications of their meaning has evolved over the centuries, and how they apply to our nations, local communities, and personal lives today. Throughout this week's chapters of Proverbs the emphasis is on contrasting righteousness and wickedness; righteousness having to do with virtue, morality, goodness, justice, etc., and wickedness having to do with evil, depravity, immorality, inequity, etc.

For example: "A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions." Don't we all know people like that? Or, perhaps recognize that sometimes we, ourselves, are foolish in this way? But the overall message of this section of Proverbs is that one way is righteous and the other way wicked; one good and one evil. How does finding no pleasure in understanding but delighting in airing one's own opinions equate to evil, to wickedness? Think about our relationship with God and with others. Look for the sayings that on the surface may not seem to be speaking to important issues of life, but really do affect us in our relationships more significantly than we might prefer to think.

As you read Proverbs, spend time reflecting each day on one or two of the verses that particularly jump out to you. Think about what it means with regard to your life, and glean some of the wisdom God gave King Solomon to help you on to salvation.

BIBLE CHALLENGE 2018

WEEK 39

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

September 24-30: Proverbs 19-31; 1 Corinthians 1-15

Proverbs chapters 25-29 are attributed to Solomon, but selected by “Men of Hezekiah.” We read about Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18-20, 2 Chronicles 29-32, and Isaiah 36-39. King Hezekiah is also referred to in other Hebrew Bible books. His father, Ahaz, had closed down worship in the Temple. One of the first things Hezekiah did as king was to repair the Temple, destroy places of ungodly worship in Judah, and reinstitute the services of the priests and Levites, who functioned in the capacity of carrying out all the worship on behalf of God’s people. He also reinstituted the Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Bible tells us it was celebrated by the people of Judah solemnly and with much rejoicing, as it had been during Solomon’s reign and not since. Some from Israel chose to travel to Jerusalem and celebrate, but most laughed at the idea. Have you ever laughed at wisdom and later had regrets?

Speaking to Christians, Peter writes: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God...” (1 Peter 2:9a). Proverbs speaks warnings and instructions, and seems to address God’s people who are to be God’s example, the people through whom others may be drawn to God. What does Proverbs teach us about the disciplined life of spirituality and practicality we are to lead as followers of God whose task is to bear witness to God’s holiness and God’s requirements for right relationship with God and other people?

In this second reading of 1 Corinthians we recall that Paul was writing to a church that had been strong in faith and sound doctrine, but had fallen away. This had happened not because of heretical teaching creeping in, but because of a weakening of spiritual and practical resolve to live their lives wholly as disciples of Jesus Christ. Consider the sins Paul addresses in the light of the wisdom of Proverbs. Look for the remedy Paul offers. The church at Corinth was full of spiritually gifted people who were aware of their blessings. What happens when people take their blessings for granted; or spend them fully on their own pleasures when God is more likely to be leading them to work for the good of their Christian community and reaching beyond to those who need to hear the gospel message? To what degree are we accountable to God and each other for the ways we use our God-given resources?