

The Message
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Introduction to *The Message*

Reading is the first thing, just reading the Bible. As we read we enter a new world of words and find ourselves in on a conversation in which God has the first and last words. We soon realize that we are included in the conversation. We didn't expect this. But this is precisely what generation after generation of Bible readers do find: The Bible is not only written about us but to us. In these pages we become insiders to a conversation in which God uses words to form and bless us, to teach and guide us, to forgive and save us.

We aren't used to this. We are used to reading books that explain things, or tell us what to do, or inspire or entertain us. But this is different. This is a world of revelation: God revealing to people just like us—men and women created in God's image—how God works and what is going on in this world in which we find ourselves. At the same time that God reveals all this, God draws us in by invitation and command to participate in God's working life. We gradually (or suddenly) realize that we are insiders in the most significant action of our time as God establishes his grand rule of love and justice on this earth (as it is in heaven). "Revelation" means that we are reading something we couldn't have guessed or figured out on our own. Revelation is what makes the Bible unique.

And so just reading this Bible, *The Message*, and listening to what we read, is the first thing. There will be time enough for study later on. But first, it is important simply to read, leisurely and thoughtfully. We need to get a feel for the way these stories and songs, these prayers and conversations, these sermons and visions, invite us into this large, large world in which the invisible God is behind and involved in everything visible and illuminates what it means to live here—really live, not just get across the street. As we read, and the longer we read, we begin to "get it"—we are in conversation with God. We find ourselves listening and answering in matters that most concern us: who we are, where we came from, where we are going, what makes us tick, the texture of the world and the communities we live in, and—most of all—the incredible love of God among us, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Through reading the Bible, we see that there is far more to the world, more to us, more to what we see and more to what we don't see—more to everything!—than we had ever dreamed, and that this "more" has to do with God.

This is new for many of us, a different sort of book—a book that reads us even as we read it. We are used to picking up and reading books for what we can get out of them: information we can use, inspiration to energize us, instructions on how to do something or other, entertainment to while away a rainy day, wisdom that will guide us into living better. These things can and do take place when reading the Bible, but the Bible is given to us in the first place simply to invite us to make ourselves at home in the world of God, God's Word and world, and become familiar with the way God speaks and the ways in which we answer him with our lives. Our reading turns up some surprises. The biggest surprise for many is how accessible this book is to those who simply open it up and read it. Virtually anyone can read this Bible with understanding. The reason that new translations are made every couple of generations or so is to keep the language of the Bible current with the common speech we use, the very kind of language in which it was first written. We don't have to be smart or well-educated to understand it, for it is written in the words and sentences we hear in the marketplace, on school playgrounds, and around the dinner table.

Because the Bible is so famous and revered, many assume that we need experts to explain and interpret it for us—and, of course, there are some things that need to be explained. But the first men and women who listened to these words now written in our Bibles were ordinary, everyday, working-class people. One of the greatest of the early translators of the Bible into English, William Tyndale, said that he was translating so that the "boy that driveth the plough" would be able to read the Scriptures.

One well-educated African man, who later became one of the most influential Bible teachers in our history (Augustine), was greatly offended when he first read the Bible. Instead of a book cultivated and polished in the literary style he admired so much, he found it full of homespun, earthy stories of plain, unimportant people. He read it in a Latin translation full of slang and jargon. He took one look at what he considered the "unspiritual" quality of so many of its characters and the everydayness of Jesus, and he contemptuously abandoned it. It was years before he realized that God had not taken the form of a sophisticated intellectual to teach us about highbrow heavenly culture so we could appreciate the finer things of God. When he saw that God entered our lives as a Jewish servant in order to save us from our sins, he started reading the book gratefully and believingly.

Some are also surprised that Bible reading does not introduce us to a "nicer" world. This biblical world is decidedly not an ideal world, the kind we see advertised in travel posters. Suffering and injustice and ugliness are not purged from the world in which God works and loves and saves. Nothing is glossed over. God works patiently and deeply, but often in hidden ways, in the mess of our humanity and history. Ours is not a neat and tidy world in which we are assured that we can get everything under our control. This takes considerable getting used to—there is mystery everywhere. The Bible does not give us a predictable cause-effect world in which we can plan our careers and secure our futures. It is not a dream world in which everything works out according to our adolescent expectations—there is pain and poverty and abuse at which we cry out in indignation, "You can't let this happen!" For most of us it takes years and years and years to exchange our dream world for this real world of grace, mercy, sacrifice and love, freedom and joy—the God-saved world.

Yet another surprise is that the Bible does not flatter us. It is not trying to sell us anything that promises to make life easier. It doesn't offer secrets to what we often think of as prosperity or pleasure or high adventure. The reality that comes into focus as we read the Bible has to do with what God is doing in a saving love that includes us and everything we do. This is quite different from what our sin-stunted and culture-cluttered minds imagine. But our Bible reading does not give us access to a mail-order catalog of idols from which we can pick and choose to satisfy our fantasies. The Bible begins with God speaking creation and us into being. It continues with God entering into personalized and complex relationships with us, helping and blessing us, teaching and training us, correcting and disciplining us, loving and saving us. This is not an escape from reality but a plunge into more reality—a sacrificial but altogether better life all the way.

God doesn't force any of this on us: God's Word is personal address, inviting, commanding, challenging, rebuking, judging, comforting, directing—but not forcing. Not coercing. We are given space and freedom to answer, to enter the conversation. For, more than anything else, the Bible invites our participation in the work and language of God.

As we read, we find that there is a connection between the Word Read and the Word Lived. Everything in this book is live-able. Many of us find that the most important question we ask as we read is not "What does it mean?" but "How can I live it?" So we read personally, not impersonally. We read in order to live our true selves, not just get information that we can use to raise our standard of living. Bible reading is a means of listening to and obeying God, not gathering religious data by which we can be our own gods.

You are going to hear stories in this book that will take you out of your preoccupation with yourself and into the spacious freedom in which God is working the world's salvation. You are going to come across words and sentences that stab you awake to a beauty and hope that will connect you with your real life. Be sure to answer.

Genesis

First, God. God is the subject of life. God is foundational for living. If we don't have a sense of the primacy of God, we will never get it right, get life right, get our lives right. Not God at the margins; not God as an option; not God on the weekends. God at center and circumference; God first and last; God, God, God. Genesis gets us off on the right foot. Genesis pulls us into a sense of reality that is God-shaped and God-filled. It gives us a vocabulary for speaking accurately and comprehensively about our lives—where we come from and where we are going, what we think and what we do, the people we live with and how to get along with them, the troubles we find ourselves in and the blessings that keep arriving. Genesis uses words to make a foundation that is solid and true. Everything we think and do and feel is material in a building operation in which we are engaged all our lives long. There is immense significance in everything that we do. Our speech and our actions and our prayers are all, every detail of them, involved in this vast building operation comprehensively known as the kingdom of God. But we don't build the foundation. The foundation is given. The foundation is firmly in place. Jesus concluded his most famous teaching by telling us that there are two ways to go about our lives—we can build on sand or we can build on rock. No matter how wonderfully we build, if we build on sand it will all fall to pieces like a house of cards. We build on what is already there, on the rock. Genesis is a verbal witness to that rock: God's creative acts, God's intervening and gracious judgments, God's call to a life of faith, God's making a covenant with us. But Genesis presents none of this to us as an abstract, bloodless truth or principle. We are given a succession of stories with named people—people who loved and quarreled, believed and doubted, had children and married, experienced sin and grace. If we pay attention, we find that we ourselves are living variations on these very stories: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and his sons, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Joseph and his brothers. The stories show clearly that we are never outsiders or spectators to anything in Heaven and Earth. God doesn't work impersonally from space; he works with us where we are, as he finds us. No matter what we do, whether good or bad, we continue to be part of everything that God is doing.

Exodus

The human race is in trouble. We've been in trouble for a long time. Enormous energies have been and continue to be expended by many, many men and women to get us out of the trouble we are in—to clean up the world mess. The skill, the perseverance, the intelligence, the devotion of the people who put their shoulders to the wheel to pull us out of the muck—parents and teachers, healers and counselors, rulers and politicians, writers and pastors—are impressive.

At the center and core of this work is God. The most comprehensive term for what God is doing to get us out of the mess we are in is salvation. Salvation is God doing for us what we can't do for ourselves. Salvation is the biggest word in the vocabulary of the people of God. The Exodus is a powerful and dramatic and true story of God working salvation. The story has generated an extraordinary progeny through the centuries as it has reproduced itself in song and poem, drama and novel, politics and social justice, repentance and conversion, worship and holy living. It continues to capture the imagination of men and women, especially men and women in trouble. It is significant that God does not present us with salvation in the form of an abstract truth, or a precise definition or a catchy slogan, but as story.

Exodus draws us into a story with plot and characters, which is to say, with design and personal relationships. Story is an invitation to participate, first through our imagination and then, if we will, by faith—with our total lives in response to God. This Exodus story continues to be a major means that God uses to draw men and women in trouble out of the mess of history into the kingdom of salvation. About half the book (chapters 1-19 and 32-34) is a gripping narrative of an obscure and severely brutalized people who are saved from slavery into a life of freedom. The other half (chapters 20-31 and 35-40) is meticulous, some think tedious, basic instruction and training in living the saved, free life. The story of salvation is not complete without both halves.

Leviticus

One of the stubbornly enduring habits of the human race is to insist on domesticating God. We are determined to tame him, to reduce him to a size that fits conveniently our plans and ambitions and tastes.

Our Scriptures are even more stubborn in telling us we can't do it. God cannot fit into our plans; we must fit into his. We require much as he is and not teaching and long training for living in response to God as we want him to be. The book of Leviticus is a kind of extended time-out for instruction, a detailed and meticulous preparation for living "holy" in a culture that doesn't have the faintest idea what "holy" is. It is a narrative pause: Our ancestors are on their way, having been saved out of Egypt, to settle in the land of Canaan. They will soon be picking their way through a minefield of gods and goddesses designed to appeal to our god-fantasies—god-fantasies that will in fact cripple or kill us. The teaching and training in Leviticus continues to be adapted and reworked in every country and culture where God is forming a saved people to live as he created them to live—holy as he is holy.

The first thing that strikes us as we read Leviticus in this light is that God is actually present with us; nothing in us, our relationships, or our environment is left out. The second thing is that God provides a way (sacrifices and feasts and Sabbaths) to bring everything into his holy presence—an awesome thing. And like ancient Israel, we stand in his presence at every moment (Psalm 139). Our Lord makes his habitation in us and among us. Once we realize this, the seemingly endless details and instructions of Leviticus become signposts of good cares about the details of our lives, willing everything in and around us into the transformation that St. Paul elsewhere commends:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out (Romans 12:1-2).

Numbers

Becoming a truly human community is long, complex, messy business. Simply growing up as a man or woman demands all the wisdom, courage and patience that we can muster. But growing up with others, parents and siblings and neighbors, to say nothing of odd strangers and mean enemies, immensely complicates the growing up.

The book of Numbers plunges us into the mess of growing up. The pages in this section of the biblical story give us a realistic feel for what is involved in being included in the People of God, which is to say, a human community that honors God, lives out love and justice in daily affairs, learns how to deal with sin in oneself and others, and follows God's commands into a future of blessing. And it deals with all this without illusions.

Many of us fondle a romanticized spirituality in our imaginations—the "God's in his heaven/All's right with the world" sort of thing. When things don't go "Right," we blame others or ourselves, muddle through as best we can (often with considerable crankiness), and wish that we had been born at a different time—"Bible times" maybe!—when living a holy life was so much easier. That's odd because the Bible, our primary text for showing us what it means to be a human being created by God and called to a life of obedient faith and sacrificial love, nowhere suggests that life is simple or even "natural." We need a lot of help.

We need organizational help. When people live together in community, jobs have to be assigned, leaders appointed, inventories kept. Counting and list making and rosters are as much a part of being a community of God as prayer and instruction and justice. Accurate arithmetic is an aspect of becoming the People of God.

We also need relational help. The people who find themselves called and led and commanded by God find themselves in the company of men and women who sin a lot—quarrel, bicker, grumble, rebel, fornicate, steal—you name it, we do it. We need help in getting along with each other. Wise discipline is required in becoming the People of God.

It follows that counting and quarreling take up considerable space in the book of Numbers. Because these things continue to be unavoidable aspects of our becoming the People of God, this book is essential in the training of our imaginations to take in some of the less-than-romantic details by which we are formed into this People.

Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is a sermon—actually, a series of sermons. It is the longest sermon in the Bible and maybe the longest sermon ever. Deuteronomy presents Moses preaching on the Plains of Moab with all Israel assembled before him. It is his last sermon. When he completes it, he will leave his pulpit on the plains, climb a mountain, and die.

The setting is stirring and emotion packed. Moses entered the biblical story of salvation as a little baby born in Egypt under a death threat. Now, 120 years later, eyesight sharp as ever and walking with "a spring in his step" (Deuteronomy 34:7), he preaches this immense sermon and dies, still brimming with words and life.

This sermon does what all sermons are intended to do: Take God's words, written and spoken in the past, and take the human experience, ancestral and personal, of the listening congregation, and then reproduce the words and experience as a single event right now, in this present moment. No word that God has spoken is a mere literary artifact to be studied; no human experience is dead history merely to be regretted or admired. The continuous and insistent Mosaic repetitions of "today" and "this day" throughout these sermons keep attentions taut and responsive. Live this! Now!

The Plains of Moab are the last stop on the forty-year journey from Egyptian slavery to Promised-Land freedom. The People of Israel have experienced a lot as a congregation: deliverance, wandering, rebellion, war, providence, worship, guidance. The People of Israel have heard a lot from God: commandments, covenant conditions, sacrificial procedures. And now, poised at the River Jordan, ready to cross over and possess the new land, Moses, preaching his great Plains-of-Moab sermon, makes sure that they don't leave any of it behind—not so much as one detail of their experience or God's revelation. He puts their entire experience of salvation and providence into the present tense (chapters 1-11), he puts the entire revelation of commandment and covenant into the present tense (chapters 12-28), and then he wraps it all up in a charge and a song and a blessing to launch them into today's obedience and believing (chapters 29-34).

“Let's go.”

The History Books

The twelve biblical books stretching from Joshua to Esther are conventionally designated "the history books." But the word "history" doesn't tell the whole story, for this is history attentive to the conditions in which people have encountered and experienced God. The Hebrew people were intent on observing and participating in what happened in and around them because they believed that God was personally alive and active in the world, in their community, and in them. Life could not be accounted for by something less than the life of God, no matter how impressive and mysterious an experience was—whether an eclipse of the sun, spots on the liver of a goat, or the hiss of steam from a fissure in the earth. God could not be reduced to astronomical, physiological, geological, or psychological phenomena; God was alive, always and everywhere working his will, challenging people with his call, evoking faith and obedience, shaping a worshiping community, showing his love and compassion, and working out judgments on sin. And none of this was "in general" or "at large," but at particular times, in specific places, with named persons: history.

For biblical people, God is not an idea for philosophers to discuss or a force for priests to manipulate. God is not a part of creation that can be studied and observed and managed. God is a person—a person to be worshiped or defied, believed or rejected, loved or hated, in time and place. That is why these books immerse us in dates and events, in persons and circumstances—in history. God meets us in the ordinary and extraordinary occurrences that make up the stuff of our daily lives. It never seemed to our biblical ancestors that they could deal better with God by escaping from history, "getting away from it all," as we say. History is the medium in which God works salvation, just as paint and canvas is the medium in which Rembrandt made works of art. We cannot get closer to God by distancing ourselves from the mess of history.

This deeply pervasive sense of history—the dignity of their place in history, the presence of God in history—accounts for the way in which the Hebrew people talked and wrote. They did not, as was the fashion in the ancient world, make up and embellish fanciful stories. Their writings did not entertain or explain; they revealed the ways of God with men and women and the world. They gave narrative shape to actual people and circumstances in their dealings with God, and in God's dealings with them.

But for the Hebrews there simply was no secular history. None. Everything that happened was happening in a world penetrated by God. Since they do not talk a lot about God in their storytelling, it is easy to forget that God is always the invisible and mostly silent presence in everything that is taking place. But if we forget for very long, we will understand neither what is written nor the way it is written. God is never absent from these narratives and never peripheral to them. As far as these writers were concerned, the only reason for paying attention to people and events was to stay alert to God.

This is a difficult mind-set for us to acquire, for we are used to getting our history from so-called historians, scholars, and journalists for whom God is not seen as involved or present in what they study and write. We are thoroughly trained to read history solely in terms of politics and economics, human interest and environmental conditions. If we have a mind for it, we can go ahead and fit God in somewhere or other. The historical books—Joshua through Esther—are radically and refreshingly

different. They pull us into a way of reading history that involves us and everyone around us in all the operations of God.

Joshua

Land. Land flowing with milk and honey. Promised land. Holy land. Canaan land. The land. Joshua, Moses' successor as leader of Israel, was poised at the River Jordan to enter and take possession of Canaan, an unremarkable stretch of territory sandwiched between massive and already ancient civilizations. It would have been unimaginable to anyone at the time that anything of significance could take place on that land. This narrow patch had never been significant economically or culturally, but only as a land bridge between the two great cultures and economies of Egypt and Mesopotamia. But it was about to become important in the religious consciousness of humankind. In significant ways, this land would come to dwarf everything that had gone on before and around it.

The People of Israel had been landless for nearly five hundred years. The "fathers"—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons—had been nomads in the land of Canaan. That was followed by a long period of slavery in Egypt (over four hundred years!), a miraculous deliverance into freedom led by Moses, and then forty years of testing and training for living as a free people under God's guidance and blessing.

The company camped at the Jordan on the day that opens the book of Joshua had nearly half a millennium of slavery behind them. They were a dispossessed, ragtag crew—and only very recently set free. The transition from being landless slaves to landholding, free men and women was huge. Joshua leads the transition, first in taking the land (chapters 1 through 12), then in distributing it among the twelve tribes (chapters 13 through 22), and finally by concluding with a solemn covenant-witness that bound the people to the gift of the land and the worship of the God from whom they received it (chapters 23 and 24).

For most modern readers of Joshua, the toughest barrier to embracing this story as sacred is the military strategy of "holy war," what I have translated as the "holy curse"—killing everyone in the conquered cities and totally destroying all the plunder, both animals and goods. Massacre and destruction. "No survivors" is the recurrent refrain. We look back from our time in history and think, *How horrible*. But if we were able to put ourselves back in the thirteenth century B.C., we might see it differently, for that Canaanite culture was a snake pit of child sacrifice and sacred prostitution, practices ruthlessly devoted to using the most innocent and vulnerable members of the community (babies and virgins) to manipulate God or gods for gain.

As the book of Joshua takes the story of salvation forward from the leadership and teaching of Moses, it continues to keep us grounded in places and connected to persons: place names, personal names—hundreds of them. What we often consider to be the subjects of religion—ideas, truths, prayers, promises, beliefs—are never permitted to have a life of their own apart from particular persons or places. Biblical religion has a low tolerance for "great ideas" or "sublime truths" or "inspirational thoughts" apart from the people or places in which they occur. God's great love and purposes for us are worked out in the messes, storms and sins, blue skies, daily work, and dreams of our common lives, working with us as we are, and not as we should be.

People who want God as an escape from reality, from the often hard conditions of this life, don't find this much to their liking. But to the man or woman wanting more reality, not less, this continuation of the salvation story—Joshua's fierce and devout determination to win the land for his people and his

extraordinary attention to getting all the tribes and their families, name by name, assigned to their own places—is good news indeed. Joshua lays a firm foundation for a life that is grounded.

Judges

Sex and violence, rape and massacre, and brutality and deceit do not seem to be congenial materials for use in developing a story of salvation. Given the Bible's subject matter—God and salvation, living well and loving deeply—we quite naturally expect to find in its pages leaders for us who are good, noble, honorable men and women showing us the way. So it is always something of a shock to enter the pages of the book of Judges and find ourselves immersed in nearly unrelieved mayhem.

It might not gravel our sensibilities so much if these flawed and reprobate leaders were held up as negative moral examples, with lurid, hellfire descriptions of the punishing consequences of living such bad lives. But the story is not told quite that way. There is a kind of matter-of-fact indifference in the tone of the narration, almost as if God is saying, "Well, if this is all you're going to give me to work with, I'll use *these* men and women, just as they are, and get on with working out the story of salvation." These people are even given a measure of dignity as they find their places in the story; they are most certainly not employed for the sake of vilification or lampoon.

God, it turns out, does not require good people in order to do good work. He can and does work with us in whatever moral and spiritual condition he finds us. God, we are learning, does some of his best work using the most unlikely people. If God found a way to significantly include these leaders ("judges") in what we know is on its way to becoming a glorious conclusion, he can certainly use us along with our sometimes-impossible friends and neighbors.

Twice in Judges (see 17:6 and 21:25) we find a telling refrain: "There was no king in Israel. People did whatever they felt like doing." But we readers know that there was a king in Israel: *God* was king. And so, while the lack of an earthly king accounts for the moral and political anarchy, the presence of the sovereign God, however obscurely realized, means that the reality of the kingdom is never in doubt.

1st and 2nd Samuel

Four lives dominate First and Second Samuel: Hannah's, Samuel's, Saul's, and David's. These are large lives—large because they live in the largeness of God. Not one of them can be accounted for in terms of cultural conditions or psychological dynamics; God is the country in which they live. The stories of these lives are not exemplary in the sense that we are meant to stand back and admire them, knowing that we will never be able to live either that gloriously or that tragically ourselves. Rather, they are immersions into the actual business of living itself: This is what it means to be human.

These four stories do not show us how we should live but how in fact we do live, authenticating the reality of our daily experience as the stuff that God uses to work out his purposes of salvation in us and in the world. There is surprisingly little explicit God talk here—whole pages sometimes without the name of God appearing. But God is the commanding and accompanying presence who provides both plot and texture to every sentence. This cluster of interlocking stories trains us in perceptions of ourselves, our sheer and irreducible humanity, that cannot be reduced to personal feelings or ideas or circumstances. If we want a life other than mere biology, we must deal with God. There is no alternate way.

One of many welcome consequences in learning to "read" our lives in the lives of Hannah, Samuel, Saul, and David is a sense of affirmation and freedom: We don't have to fit into prefabricated moral or mental or religious boxes before we are admitted into the company of God—we are taken seriously just as we are and given a place in his story. For it is, after all, his story; none of us is the leading character in the story of our life.

We do violence to the biblical revelation when we "use" it for what we can get out of it or what we think will provide color and spice to our otherwise bland lives. That results in a kind of "boutique spirituality"—God as decoration, God as enhancement. The Samuel narrative will not allow that. As we submit our lives to what we read, we find that we are not being led to see God in our stories but to see our stories in God's. God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves.

1st and 2nd Kings

God's sovereignty is one of the most difficult things for people of faith to live out. But we have no choice: God is sovereign. God rules. Not only in our personal affairs, but also in the cosmos. Not only in our times and places of worship, but also in office buildings, political affairs, factories, universities, hospitals, even in nightclubs and at rock concerts. It's a wild and extravagant notion, to be sure. But nothing in our Scriptures is attested to more frequently or emphatically.

Yet not much in our daily experience confirms it. Most of us are knocked around much of the time by forces and wills that give no hint of God. Still, generation after generation, men and women of sound mind continue to give sober witness to God's sovereign rule. One of the enduring titles given to Jesus is King.

So how do we manage to live believably and obediently in and under this revealed sovereignty in a world that is mostly either ignorant or defiant of it? The books of Kings turn out to provide essential data on what we can expect as we live under God's sovereign rule.

The story of the Hebrew kings, begun in the books of Samuel, makes it clear that it was not God's idea that the Hebrews have a king. God never abdicated his sovereignty to any of the Hebrew kings; the idea was that they would represent his sovereignty, not that he would delegate his sovereignty to them. But human beings, no matter how well-intentioned or gifted, don't seem to be able to represent God's rule anywhere close to satisfactorily. The books of Kings, in that light, are a relentless exposition of failure—a centuries-long documentation proving that the Hebrew demand of God to give them a king was about the worst thing they could have asked for.

But through the centuries, readers of this text have commonly realized something: In the midst of the incredible mess these kings are in the making of God's purposes, God continues to work his purposes and *uses them* in the work. They are part of his sovereign rule, whether they want to be or not, whether they know it or not. God's purposes are worked out in confrontation and revelation, in judgment and salvation, but they are worked out.

1st and 2nd Chronicles

The story of Israel's kings is first narrated in the books of Samuel and Kings. Here is another telling of the same story, a hundred or so years later, by another voice and from another perspective. Some of the earlier narrative is omitted and there are substantial additions, but it is recognizably the same story. Israel's fortunes have changed considerably since the earlier authoritative writing; God's people are in danger of losing touch with what made them God's people in the first place. Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, and Persia have been calling all the shots. The People of Israel are, it seems, mired in internal religious pettiness. Will they be obliterated?

The task of Chronicles was to recover and restore Israel's confidence and obedience as God's people. Names launch this story—page after page of names. Holy history is not constructed from impersonal forces or abstract ideas; it is woven from names—persons, each one unique. There is no true storytelling without names. Chronicles erects a solid defense against depersonalized religion. The narrative backbone of Chronicles is worship—the place of worship (the Jerusalem Temple), the ministers of worship (the priests and Levites), the musical components of worship (both vocal and instrumental), and the authoritative role of King David, the master of worship. We see that nothing takes precedence over worship in nurturing and protecting our identity as the People of God. The People of God are not primarily a political entity or a military force or an economic power; they are a holy congregation diligent in worship. To lose touch with the Davidic (and Moses-based) life of worship would be to disintegrate as a holy people. To be seduced by the popular pagan worship of surrounding cultures would be to be obliterated as a holy people.

Few worshipping congregations will recognize architectural continuities between the Temple and their local church sanctuaries. Not many communities have access to a pool of Levites from which to recruit choirs and appoint leaders of worship. So what's left? Well, worship is left—and names. Christians have characteristically read and prayed themselves into Chronicles in order to stay alert to the irreducibly personal in all matters of faith and practice, and to maintain a critical awareness that the worship of God is the indispensable foundation for living whole and redeemed lives.

Ezra

History had not treated the People of Israel well, and they were in decline. A super-power military machine, Babylon, had battered them, and then, leaving their city and Temple a mound of rubble, hauled them off into exile. Now, years later, a few Jews back in Jerusalem had been trying to put the pieces back together decade after weary decade. But it was not going well at all. They were hanging on by their fingernails. And then Ezra arrived.

This is an extreme case of a familiar story, repeated with variations in most centuries and in most places in the world. Men and women who find their basic identity in God, as God has revealed himself to Israel and through the Messiah, don't find an easy time of it. We never have. We never will. Our identity is under constant challenge and threat—sometimes by hostile assault, at other times by subtle and smiling seductions. Whether by assault or seduction, the People of God have come perilously close to obliteration several times. We are never out of danger.

Because of Ezra, Israel made it through. God didn't leave Ezra to do this work single-handedly; he gave him substantial and critical help for the rescue operation in the person of Nehemiah, whose work providentially converged with his. (Important details of the Ezra story are in the memoirs of Nehemiah, the book that follows this one.) The People-of-God identity was recovered and preserved. Ezra used worship and text to do it. He engaged the people in the worship of God, the most all-absorbing, comprehensive act in which men and women can involve themselves. Worship is how our God-formed identities become most deeply embedded in us. Ezra also led the people into an obedient listening to the text of Scripture. Listening and following God's revelation are the primary ways in which we stay attentively obedient to the living presence of God among us.

Ezra made his mark: Worship and text continue to be foundational for recovering and maintaining our identity as the People of God.

Nehemiah

Separating life into distinct categories of "sacred" and "secular" damages—sometimes irreparably—any attempt to live a whole and satisfying life, a coherent life with meaning and purpose, a life lived to the glory of God. Nevertheless, the practice is widespread. But where did people come up with the habit of separating themselves and the world around them into these two camps? It surely wasn't from the Bible. The Holy Scriptures, from beginning to end, strenuously resist such a separation.

The damage a sacred-secular split does to life is most obvious when applied to daily work. It is common for us to refer to the work of pastors, priests, and missionaries as "sacred," and that of lawyers, farmers, and engineers as "secular." It is also wrong. Work, by its very nature, is holy. The biblical story is dominated by people who have jobs in gardening, shepherding, the military, politics, carpentry, tent making, homemaking, fishing, and more.

Nehemiah is one of these. He started out as a government worker in the employ of a foreign king. Then he became—and this is the work he tells us of in these memoirs—a building contractor, called in to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. His coworker Ezra was a scholar and teacher working with the Scriptures. Nehemiah worked with stones and mortar. The stories of the two men are interwoven in a seamless fabric of vocational holiness. Neither job was more or less important or holy than the other. Nehemiah needed Ezra; Ezra needed Nehemiah. God's people needed the work of both of them. We still do.

Esther

It seems odd that the awareness of God, or even of the People of God, brings out the worst in some people. God, the source of all goodness and blessing and joy, at times becomes the occasion for nearly unimaginable acts of cruelty, atrocity, and evil.

There is a long history of killing men and women simply because they are perceived as reminders or representatives of the living God, as if killing people who worship God gets rid of God himself. We've seen an extraordinary frenzy of such "god" killings in the modern era. To no one's surprise, God is still alive and present.

The book of Esther opens a window on this world of violence directed, whether openly or covertly, against God and God's people. The perspective it provides transcends the occasion that provoked it, a nasty scheme to massacre all the exiled Jews who lived in the vast expanse of fifth-century-B.C. Persia. Three characters shape the plot. Mordecai, often identified simply as "the Jew," anchors the story. He is solid, faithful, sane, godly. His goodness is more than matched by the evil and arrogant vanity of Haman, who masterminds the planned massacre. Mordecai's young, orphaned, and ravishing cousin, Esther, whom he has raised, emerges from the shadows of the royal harem to take on the title role.

It turns out that no God-representing men and women get killed in this story—in a dramatic turnaround, the plot fails. But millions before and after Esther have been and no doubt will continue to be killed. There is hardly a culture or century that doesn't eventually produce a Haman determined to rid the world of evidence and reminders of God. Meanwhile, Esther continues to speak the final and definitive word: You can't eliminate God's people. No matter how many of them you kill, you can't get rid of the communities of God-honoring, God-serving, God-worshiping people scattered all over the earth.

The Wisdom Books

There is a distinctive strain of writing in the Bible that more or less specializes in dealing with human experience—as it is. This *is* what is involved in being human, and don't you forget it. "Wisdom" is the common designation given to this aspect of biblical witness and writing.

The word in this context refers more to a kind of attitude, a distinctive stance, than to any particular ideas, or doctrines, or counsel. As such, Wisdom is wide-ranging, collecting under its umbrella diverse and unlikely fellow travelers. What keeps the feet of these fellow travelers on common ground is Wisdom's unrelenting insistence that nothing in human experience can be omitted or slighted if we take God seriously and respond to him believingly.

God and God's ways provide the comprehensive plot and sovereign action in the Holy Scriptures, but human beings—every last one of us, including every last detail involved in our daily living—are invited and honored participants in it. There are no spectator seats provided for the drama of salvation. There is no "bench" for incompetent players.

It is fairly common among people who get interested in religion or God to get proportionately *disinterested* with their jobs and families, their communities and colleagues. But that is not the way God intends it. Wisdom counters this tendency by giving witness to the precious nature of human experience in all its forms, whether or not it feels or appears "spiritual."

Job

Job suffered. His name is synonymous with suffering. He asked, "Why?" He asked, "Why me?" And he put his questions to God. He refused to take silence for an answer. He refused to take clichés for an answer. He refused to let God off the hook. Job said boldly what some of us are too timid to say. He made poetry out of what in many of us is only a tangle of confused whimpers. He shouted out to God what a lot of us mutter behind our sleeves. He refused to accept the role of a defeated victim.

It is not only because Job suffered that he is important to us. It is because he suffered in the same ways that we suffer—in the vital areas of family, personal health, and material things. Job is also important to us because he searchingly questioned and boldly protested his suffering. Indeed, he went "to the top" with his questions.

It is important to note what Job does *not* do in this story, lest we expect something from him that he does not intend. Job does not curse God, as his wife suggests he should do, getting rid of the problem by getting rid of God. But neither does Job explain suffering. He does not instruct us in how to live so that we can avoid suffering. Suffering is a mystery, and Job comes to respect the mystery. The honest, innocent Job is surrounded by the conventional religious wisdom of the day in the form of speeches by Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu. The contrast is unforgettable. The counselors methodically and pedantically recite their bookish precepts to Job. At first Job rages in pain and roars out his protests, but then he becomes silent in awestruck faith before God, who speaks from out of a storm—a "whirlwind" of deity.

Real faith cannot be reduced to spiritual bromides and merchandised in success stories. It is refined in the fires and the storms of pain. The book of Job does not reject answers as such. There is content to biblical religion. It is the secularization of answers that is rejected—answers severed from their Source, the living God, the Word that both batters us and heals us. The book of Job not only is a witness to the dignity of suffering and God's presence in our suffering but is also our primary biblical protest against religious truth that has been reduced to explanations or "answers." We cannot have truth about God divorced from the mind and heart of God.

Psalms

As a pastor, I was charged with, among other things, teaching people to pray—helping them give voice to the entire experience of being human, and helping them to give voice to it both honestly and thoroughly. I found that it was not as easy as I expected. Getting started is easy enough. The impulse to pray is deep within us, at the very center of our created being, and so practically anything will do to get us started—"Help!" and "Thanks!" are our basic prayers. But honesty and thoroughness don't come quite as spontaneously.

Faced with the prospect of conversation with a holy God who speaks worlds into being, it is not surprising that we have trouble. We feel awkward and out of place: "I'm not good enough for this. I'll wait until I clean up my act and prove that I am a decent person." Or we excuse ourselves on the grounds that our vocabulary is inadequate: "Give me a few months—or years!—to practice prayers that are polished enough for such a sacred meeting. Then I won't feel so stuttery and ill at ease."

My usual response when presented with these difficulties is to put the Psalms in a person's hand and say, "Go home and pray these." A common response of those who do what I ask is surprise—they don't expect this kind of thing in the Bible. We tend to think that prayer is what good people do when they are doing their best. It is not. We suppose that there must be an "insider" language that must be acquired before God takes us seriously in our prayer. There is not. Prayer is elemental. It is the means by which we get everything in our lives out in the open before God.

In many English translations, the Psalms can sound smooth and polished, sonorous with Elizabethan rhythms and diction. As literature, they are beyond compare. But as *prayers* they are not quite right. In Hebrew, the Psalms are earthy and rough. They are not genteel. And so I wanted to provide men and women access to the kind of language that is most immediate to them, which also happens to be the language in which these psalm-prayers were first expressed and written. Only as we are honest in and thorough in our praying do we become whole and truly human Jesus Christ, who also prayed the Psalms.

Proverbs

Many people think that what's written in the Bible has mostly to do with getting people into heaven—getting right with God, saving their eternal souls. It does have to do with that, of course, but not *mostly*. It is equally concerned with living on this earth—living well, living in robust sanity. In our Scriptures, heaven is not the primary concern, to which earth is a tagalong afterthought. "On earth as it is in heaven" is Jesus' prayer.

“Wisdom” is the biblical term for this on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven everyday living. Wisdom is the art of living skillfully in whatever actual conditions we find ourselves. It has virtually nothing to do with information as such, with knowledge as such. A college degree is no certification of wisdom. Nor is wisdom primarily concerned with keeping us out of moral mud puddles, although it does have a profound moral effect upon us.

Wisdom has to do with becoming skillful in honoring our parents and raising our children, handling our money and conducting our sexual lives, going to work and exercising leadership, using words well and treating friends kindly, eating and drinking healthily, cultivating emotions within ourselves and attitudes toward others that make for peace. Threaded through all these items is the insistence that the way we think of and respond to God is the most practical thing we do. In matters of everyday practicality, nothing—absolutely nothing—takes precedence over God.

Proverbs concentrates on these concerns more than any other book in the Bible. Attention to the here and now is everywhere present in the stories, legislation, pages of prayers, and sermons that are spread over the hundreds of the Bible. Proverbs distills it all into riveting images and aphorisms that keep us connected, in holy obedience, to the ordinary.

Ecclesiastes

Unlike the animals, who seem quite content to simply be themselves, we humans are always looking for ways to be more than or other than what we find ourselves to be. We explore the countryside for excitement, search our souls for meaning, shop the world for pleasure. We try this. Then we try that. The usual fields of endeavor are money, sex, power, adventure, and knowledge.

Everything we try is so promising at first! But nothing ever seems to amount to very much. We intensify our efforts—but the harder we work at it, the less we get out of it. Some people give up early and settle for a humdrum life. Others never seem to learn, and so they flail away through a lifetime, becoming less and less human by the year, until by the time they die there is hardly enough humanity left to compose a corpse.

Ecclesiastes is a famous—maybe the world's most famous—witness to this experience of futility. The acerbic wit catches our attention. The stark honesty compels our notice. And people do notice—oh, how they notice! Nonreligious and religious alike notice. Unbelievers and believers notice. More than a few are surprised to find this kind of thing in the Bible.

But it is most emphatically and necessarily in the Bible in order to call a halt to our various and futile attempts to make something of our lives, SO that we can give our full attention to God—who God is and what he does to make something of us. Ecclesiastes actually doesn't say that much about God; the author leaves that to the other sixty-five books of the Bible. His task is to expose our total incapacity to find the meaning and completion of our lives on our own.

It is our propensity to go off on our own, trying to be human by our own devices and desires, that makes Ecclesiastes necessary reading. Ecclesiastes sweeps our souls clean of all "lifestyle" spiritualities so that we can be ready for God's visitation revealed in Jesus Christ. Ecclesiastes is a John-the-Baptist kind of book. It functions not as a meal but as a bath. It is not nourishment; it is cleansing. It is scrubbed repentance. It is purging. We read Ecclesiastes to get clean from illusion and sentiment, from ideas that are idolatrous and feelings that cloy. It is an exposé and rejection of every arrogant and ignorant expectation that we can live our lives by ourselves on our own terms.

Ecclesiastes challenges the naive optimism that sets a goal that appeals to us and then goes after it with gusto, expecting the result to be a good life. The author's cool skepticism, a refreshing negation to the lush and seductive suggestions swirling around us, promising everything but delivering nothing, clears the air. And once the air is cleared, we are ready for reality—for God.

[Ecclesiastes is transliterated from a Greek word that is usually translated "the Preacher" or "the Teacher." Because of the experiential stance of the writing in this book, giving voice to what is so basic among men and women throughout history, I have translated this word "the Quester" in the text.]

Song of Songs

We don't read very far in the Song of Songs before we realize two things: one, it contains exquisite love lyrics, and two, it is very explicit sexually. The Song, in other words, makes a connection between conjugal love and sex—a very important and very biblical connection to make. There are some who would eliminate sex when they speak of love, supposing that they are making it more holy. Others, when they think of sex, never think of love. The Song proclaims an integrated wholeness that is at the center of Christian teaching on committed, wedded love for a world that seems to specialize in loveless sex.

The Song is a convincing witness that men and women were created physically, emotionally, and spiritually to live in love. At the outset of Scripture we read, "It's not good for the Man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). The Song of Songs elaborates on the Genesis story by celebrating the union of two diverse personalities in love.

We read Genesis and learn that this is the created pattern of joy and mutuality. We read the Song and see the goal and ideal toward which we all press for fulfillment. Despite our sordid failures in love, we see here what we are created for, what God intends for us in the ecstasy and fulfillment that is celebrated in the lyricism of the Song.

Christians read the Song on many levels: as the intimacy of marital love between man and woman, God's deep love for his people, Christ's Bridegroom love for his church, the Christian's love for his or her Lord. It is a prism in which all the love of God in all the world, and all the responses of those who love and whom God loves, gathers and then separates into individual colors.

The Prophets

Over a period of several hundred years, the Hebrew people gave birth to an extraordinary number of prophets—men and women distinguished by the power and skill with which they presented the reality of God. They delivered God’s commands and promises and living presence to communities and nations who had been living on God-fantasies and God-lies.

Everyone more or less believes in God. But most of us do our best to keep God on the margins of our lives or, failing that, refashion God to suit our convenience. Prophets insist that God is the sovereign center, not off in the wings awaiting our beck and call. And prophets insist that we deal with God as God reveals himself, not as we imagine him to be.

These men and women woke people up to the sovereign presence of God in their lives. They yelled, they wept, they rebuked, they soothed, they challenged, they comforted. They used words with power and imagination, whether blunt or subtle.

Sixteen of these prophets wrote what they spoke. We call them the “writing prophets.” They comprise the section from Isaiah to Malachi in our Bibles. These sixteen Hebrew prophets provide the help we so badly need if we are to stay alert and knowledgeable regarding the conditions in which we cultivate faithful and obedient lives before God. For the ways of the world—its assumptions, values, and methods—are never going to work, are never on the side of God.

The prophets purge our imaginations of this world's assumptions on how life is lived and what counts in life. Over and over again, God the Holy Spirit uses these prophets to separate his people from the cultures in which they live, putting them back on the path of simple faith and obedience and worship in defiance of all that the world admires and rewards. Prophets train us in discerning the difference between the ways of the world and the ways of the gospel, keeping us present to the presence of God.

We don’t read very many pages into the Prophets before realizing there was nothing easygoing about them. Prophets were not popular figures. They never achieved celebrity status. They were decidedly uncongenial to the temperaments and dispositions of the people with whom they lived. And the centuries have not mellowed them. They aren’t particularly sensitive to our feelings. They have very modest, as we would say, “relationship skills.” We like leaders, especially religious leaders, who understand our problems (“come alongside us” is our idiom for it), leaders with a touch of glamour, leaders who look good on posters and television.

The hard-rock reality is that prophets don't fit into our way of life.

For a people who are accustomed to “fitting God” into their lives, or, as we like to say, “making room for God,” the prophets are hard to take and easy to dismiss. The God of whom the prophets speak is far too large to fit into our lives. If we want anything to do with God, we have to fit into him.

The prophets are not “reasonable,” accommodating themselves to what makes sense to us. They are not diplomatic, tactfully negotiating an agreement that allows us a say in the outcome. What they do is haul

us unceremoniously into a reality far too large to be accounted for by our explanations and expectations. They plunge us into mystery, immense and staggering.

Their words and visions penetrate the illusions with which we cocoon ourselves from reality. We humans have an enormous capacity for denial and self-deceit. We incapacitate ourselves from dealing with the consequences of our sin, facing judgment, and embracing truth. The prophets step in and help us first to recognize and then enter the new life God has for us, the life that hope in God opens up.

They don't explain God, they shake us out of old conventional habits of small-mindedness, of trivial and trivializing God-gossip, and set us on our feet in wonder, obedience, and worship. If we insist on understanding them before living into them, we will never get it.

Basically the prophets did two things: First, they worked to get people to accept the worst as God's judgment—not a religious catastrophe or a political disaster, but *judgment*. If what seems like the worst turns out to be *God's* judgment, it can be embraced, not denied or avoided, for God is good and intends our salvation. So judgment, while certainly not what we human beings anticipate in our planned future, can never be the worst that can happen. It is the best, for it is the work of God to set the world, and us, right.

Second, the prophets worked to get people who were beaten down to open themselves up to hope in God's future. In the wreckage of exile and death and humiliation and sin, the prophets ignited hope, opening lives to the new work of salvation that God is about at all time and everywhere.

One of the bad habits that we pick up early in our lives is separating things and people into secular and sacred. We assume that the secular is what we are more or less in charge of: our jobs, our time, our entertainment, our government, our social relations. The sacred is what God has charge of: worship, the Bible, heaven and hell, church and prayers. We then contrive to set aside a sacred place for God, designed, we say, to honor God, but really intended to keep him in his place, leaving us free to have the final say about everything else that goes on.

Prophets will have none of this. They contend that everything, absolutely everything, takes place on sacred ground. God has something to say about every aspect of our lives: the way we feel and act in the so-called privacy of our hearts and homes, the way we make our money and the way we spend it, the politics we embrace, the wars we fight, the catastrophes we endure, the people we hurt and the people we help. Nothing is hidden from the scrutiny of God, nothing is exempt from the rule of God, nothing escapes the purposes of God. Holy, holy, holy.

Prophets make it impossible to evade God or make detours around God. Prophets insist on receiving God in every nook and cranny of life. For a prophet, God is more real than the next-door neighbor.

Isaiah

For Isaiah, words are watercolors and melodies and chisels to make truth and beauty and goodness. Or, as the case may be, hammers and swords and scalpels to *unmake* sin and guilt and rebellion. Isaiah does not merely convey information. He creates visions, delivers revelation, arouses belief. He is a poet in the most fundamental sense—a *maker*, making God present and that presence urgent. Isaiah is the supreme poet-prophet to come out of the Hebrew people.

The characteristic name for God in Isaiah is "The Holy." As we read this large and comprehensive gathering of messages that were preached to the ancient people of Israel, we find ourselves immersed in both the presence and the action of The Holy. If "holy" was ever a pious, pastel-tinted word in our vocabularies, the Isaiah-preaching quickly turns it into something blazing. Holiness is the most attractive quality, the most intense experience we ever get of sheer *life*—authentic, firsthand living, not life looked at and enjoyed from a distance. We find ourselves in on the operations of God himself, not talking about them or reading about them. Holiness is a furnace that transforms the men and women who enter it. "Holy, Holy, Holy" is not needlepoint. It is the banner of a revolution—the revolution.

The book of Isaiah is expansive, dealing with virtually everything that is involved in being the People of God. The impressive art of Isaiah involves taking the stuff of our ordinary and often disappointing human experience and showing us how it is the very stuff that God uses to create and save and give hope. As this vast panorama opens up before us, it turns out that nothing is unusable by God. He uses everything and everybody as material for his work, which is the remaking of the mess we have made of our lives.

"Symphony" is a term many find useful to capture the fusion of simplicity and complexity presented in the book of Isaiah. The major thrust is clearly God's work of salvation: "The Salvation Symphony" (the name Isaiah means "God saves"). The prominent themes repeated and developed throughout this vast symphonic work are judgment, comfort, and hope. All three elements are present on nearly every page, but each also gives distinction to the three "movements" of the book that so powerfully enact salvation: Messages of Judgment (chapters 1-39), Messages of Comfort (chapters 40-55), and Messages of Hope (chapters 56-66).

Jeremiah

Jeremiah's life and Jeremiah's book are a single piece. He wrote what he lived; he lived what he wrote. There is no dissonance between his life and his book. Some people write better than they live; others live better than they write. Jeremiah, writing or living, was the same Jeremiah.

This is important to know because Jeremiah is the prophet of choice for many when we find ourselves having to live through difficult times and want some trustworthy help in knowing what to think, how to pray, how to carry on. We'd like some verification of credentials. This book provides the verification.

We live in disruptive times. There have certainly been comparable times of disruption in the past that left everyone reeling, wondering what on earth or in heaven was going on. But whatever their occasion or size, troubles require attention.

Jeremiah's troubled life spanned one of the most troublesome periods in Hebrew history: the decades leading up to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., followed by the Babylonian exile. Everything that could go wrong *did* go wrong. And Jeremiah was in the middle of all of it, praying and preaching, suffering and striving, writing and believing. He lived through crushing storms of hostility and furies of bitter doubt. Every muscle in his body was stretched to the limit by fatigue; every thought in his mind was subjected to questioning; every feeling in his heart was put through fires of ridicule.

What happens when everything you believe in and live by is smashed to bits by circumstances? Sometimes the reversals of what we expect from God come to us as individuals, other times to our entire communities. When it happens, does catastrophe lead to an abandonment of God? Or, worse, does it trigger a stubborn grasping to the old, collapsed system of belief, holding on for dear life to an illusion?

Anyone who lives in disruptive times looks for companions who have been through such times already, wanting to know how they got through, how they made it, what it was like. In looking for a companion who has lived through catastrophic disruption and survived with grace, biblical people more often than not come upon Jeremiah and receive him as a true, honest, and God-revealing companion for the worst of times.

Lamentations

Lamentations is a concentrated and intense biblical witness to suffering. Suffering is a huge, unavoidable element in the human condition. To be human is to suffer. No one gets an exemption. It comes as no surprise, then, to find that our Holy Scriptures, immersed as they are in the human condition, provide extensive witness to suffering.

There are two polar events in the history of the Hebrew people: the Exodus from Egypt and the Exile into Babylon. The Exodus is the definitive story of salvation into a free life. God delivers his people from Egyptian slavery. It is a story of freedom. It's accompanied by singing and dancing—an exuberant experience. The Exile is the definitive story of judgment accompanied by immense suffering. God's people are taken into Babylonian slavery. The fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. marks the event. It is a time of devastation and lament. It is a terrible experience. The two events, the Exodus and the Exile, are bookends holding together the wide-ranging experiences of God's people that fall between the exuberance that accompanies salvation and the suffering associated with judgment.

Lamentations, written out of the Exile experience, provides the community of faith with a form and vocabulary for dealing with loss and pain. The precipitating event, the fall of Jerusalem, is told in 2 Kings 25 and Jeremiah 52. It is impossible to overstate either the intensity or the complexity of the suffering that came to a head in the devastation of Jerusalem and then continued on into the seventy years of exile in Babylon. Loss was total. Carnage was rampant. Cannibalism and sacrilege were twin horrors stalking the streets of destroyed Jerusalem. The desperate slaying of innocent children showed complete loss of respect for human worth, and the angry murder of priests showed absolute loss of respect for divine will. The worst that can happen to body and spirit, to person and nation, happened here—a nadir of suffering. And throughout the world the suffering continues, both in large-scale horrors and in personal agonies.

Neither explaining suffering nor offering a program for the elimination of suffering, Lamentations keeps company with the extensive biblical witness that gives dignity to suffering by insisting that God enters our suffering and is companion to our suffering.

Ezekiel

Catastrophe strikes and a person's world falls apart. People respond variously, but two of the more common responses are denial and despair. Denial refuses to acknowledge the catastrophe. It shuts its eyes tight or looks the other way; manages to act as if everything is going to be just fine; it takes refuge in distractions and lies; it hides inside fantasies. Despair is paralyzed by the catastrophe and accepts the end of the world. It is unwilling to do anything, concluding that life, for all intents and purposes, is over. Despair listlessly closes its eyes to a world in which all the color has drained out, a world gone dead.

Among biblical writers, Ezekiel is our master at dealing with catastrophe. When catastrophe struck—it was the sixth-century-B.C. invasion of Israel by Babylon—denial was the primary response. Ezekiel found himself living among a people of God who (astonishingly similar to us!) stubbornly refused to see what was right before their eyes (the denial crowd). There were also some who were unwilling to see anything other than what was right before their eyes (the despair crowd).

But Ezekiel saw. He saw what the people with whom he lived either couldn't or wouldn't see. He saw in wild and unforgettable images, elaborated in exuberant detail, God at work in a catastrophic era. The denial people refused to see that the catastrophe was in fact catastrophic. How could it be? God wouldn't let anything that bad happen to them. Ezekiel showed them. He showed them that, yes, there *was* catastrophe, but God was at work in the catastrophe, sovereignly *using* the catastrophe. He showed them so that they would be able to embrace God in the worst of times.

The despair people, overwhelmed by the devastation, refused to see that life was worth living. How could it be? They had lost everything, or would soon—country, Temple, freedom, and many, many lives. Ezekiel showed them. He showed them that God was and would be at work in the wreckage and rubble, sovereignly using the disaster to create a new People of God.

Whether through denial or despair, the People of God nearly lost their identity as the People of God. But they didn't. God's people emerged from that catastrophic century robust and whole. And the reason, in large part, was Ezekiel.

Daniel

Images generated by the book of Daniel have been percolating through the daily experiences of the People of God for well over two thousand years now, producing a richly aromatic brew stimulating them to obey and trust their sovereign God.

Obedience to God and trust in God's ways are always vulnerable, but especially in times of suffering and persecution. Obedience to God is difficult when we are bullied into compliance to the God-ignoring culture. Trust in God is at risk of being abandoned in favor of the glamorous seductions of might and size. Century after century, Daniel has shot adrenaline into the veins of God-obedience and put backbone into God-trust.

Daniel is composed, in approximately equal parts, of stories (chapters 1-6) and visions (chapters 7-12). The stories tell of souls living faithfully in obedience to God in a time of adversity. The visions are wide-screen renditions of God's sovereignty worked out among nations who couldn't care less about him.

The six soul-survival stories nourish a commitment to integrity and perseverance right now. Hardly a day goes by that we do not have to choose between compliance to what is expedient and loyalty to our Lord. The stories keep us alert to what is at stake day by day, hour by hour.

The four visions of God's history-saving ways are difficult to understand, written as they are in a deliberately cryptic style known as apocalyptic. From time to time they have been subjected to intense study and explanation. But for a first reading, perhaps it is better simply to let the strange symbolic figures give witness to the large historical truth that God is sovereign. In the course of all the noise and shuffling and strutting and posing of arrogant rulers and nations that we call history, God is serenely sovereign; we can trust him to bring all things and people under his rule.

There are always some of us who want to concentrate on the soul, and others of us who want to deal with the big issues of history. Daniel is one of our primary documents for keeping it all together—the personal and the political, present and the future, the soul and society.

Hosea

We live in a world awash in love stories. Most of them are lies. They are not love stories at all—they are lust stories, sex-fantasy stories, domination stories. From the cradle we are fed with lies about love.

This would be bad enough if it only messed up human relationships with one another—man and woman, parent and child, friend and friend—but it also messes up human relationships with God. The huge, mountainous reality of all existence is that God is love, that God loves the world. Each single detail of the real world that we face and deal with day after day is permeated by this love.

But when our minds and imaginations are crippled with lies about love, we have a hard time understanding this fundamental ingredient of daily living, love, either as a noun or as a verb. And if the basic, orienting phrase "God is love" is plastered over with cultural graffiti that obscures and defaces the truth of the way the world is, we are not going to get very far in living well. We require true stories of love if we are to live truly.

Hosea is the prophet of love, but not love as we imagine or fantasize it. He was a parable of God's love for his people lived out as God revealed and enacted it—a lived parable. It is an astonishing story: a prophet commanded to marry a common whore and have children with her. It has an even more astonishing message: God loves us in just this way—goes after us at our worst, keeps after us until he gets us, and makes lovers of men and women who know nothing of real love. Once we absorb this story and the words that flow from it, we will know God far more accurately. And we will be well on our way to being cured of all the sentimentalized and neurotic distortions of love that incapacitate us from dealing with the God who loves us and loving the neighbors who don't love us.

Joel

When disaster strikes, understanding of God is at risk. Unexpected illness, death, national catastrophe, social disruption, personal loss, plague or epidemic and devastation by flood or drought turn men and women who haven't given God a thought in years into instant theologians: "God is absent." "God is angry." "God is playing favorites, and I'm not the favorite." "God is ineffectual." "God is holding a grudge from a long time ago, and now we're paying for it."

It is the task of the prophet to stand up at such moments and clarify who God is and how he acts. If the prophet is good—that is, accurate and true—the disaster becomes a lever for prying people's lives loose from their sins and setting them free for God. Joel was one of the good ones: He used a current event in Israel to call his people to an immediate awareness that there wasn't a day that went by that they weren't dealing with God.

The event was a terrible locust plague that was creating an agricultural disaster in Israel. He projected it onto a big screen and used it to put the reality of God in focus in the lives of his people. Then he expanded the focus to include everything and everyone everywhere—the whole world crowded into Decision Valley for God's verdict. This powerful picture has kept God's people alert to the eternal consequences of their decisions for many centuries.

There is a sense in which catastrophe doesn't introduce anything new into our lives. It simply exposes the moral or spiritual reality that already exists but has been hidden beneath business as usual. Then, suddenly, there it is us: a moral universe in which our accumulated decisions—on what we say and do, on how we treat others, on whether or not we will obey God's commands—are set in the stark light of God's judgment.

Right and wrong, and the decisions we make about them, seldom come to us neatly packaged and precisely defined. Joel's prophetic words give us opportunity for "deathbed repentances" before we die, while there is still time and space for a lot of good living to the glory of God.

Amos

More people are exploited and abused in the cause of religion than in any other way. Sex, money, and power all take a backseat to religion as a source of evil. Religion is the most dangerous energy source known to humankind. The moment a person (or government or religion or organization) is convinced that God is either ordering or sanctioning a cause or project, anything goes. The history, worldwide, of religion-fueled hate, killing, and oppression is staggering.

The biblical prophets are on the front lines of those doing something about it. The biblical prophets continue to be the most powerful and effective voices ever heard on this earth for keeping religion honest, humble, and compassionate. Prophets sniff out injustice, especially injustice that is dressed up in religious garb. They sniff it out a mile away. Prophets see through hypocrisy, especially hypocrisy that assumes a religious pose. Prophets are not impressed by position or power or authority. They aren't taken in by numbers, size, or the appearance of success.

They pay little attention to what men and women say about God or do for God. They listen to God and rigorously test all human language and action against what they hear. Among these prophets, Amos towers as defender of the downtrodden poor and accuser of the powerful rich who use God's name to legitimize their sin.

None of us can be trusted in this business. If we pray and worship God and associate with others who likewise pray and worship God, we absolutely must keep company with these biblical prophets. We are required to submit all our words and acts to their passionate scrutiny to prevent the perversion of our religion into something self-serving. A spiritual life that doesn't give a large place to prophet-articulated justice will end up making us worse instead of better, separating us from God's ways instead of drawing us into them.

Obadiah

It takes the entire Bible to read any part of the Bible. Even the brief walk-on appearance of Obadiah has its place. No one, whether in or out of the Bible, is without significance. It was Obadiah's assignment to give voice to God's word of judgment against Edom.

Back in the early stages of the biblical narrative, we are told the story of the twins Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25-36). They came out of the womb fighting. Jacob was ancestor to the people of Israel; Esau, ancestor to the people of Edom. The two neighboring peoples, Israel mostly to the west of the Jordan River and Dead Sea and Edom to the southeast, never did get along. They had a long history of war and rivalry. When Israel was taken into exile—first the northern kingdom by the Assyrians and later the southern kingdom by the Babylonians—Edom stood across the fence and watched, glad to see her old relative get beaten up.

At first reading, this brief but intense prophecy of Obadiah, targeted at Edom, is a broadside indictment of Edom's cruel injustice to God's chosen people. Edom is the villain and God's covenant people the victim.

But the last line of the prophecy takes a giant step out of the centuries of hate and rivalry and invective. Israel, so often a victim of Edomite aggression through the centuries, is suddenly revealed to be saved from the injustices of the past and taking up a position of rule over their ancient enemies the Edomites. But instead of doing to others what had been done to them and continuing the cycle of violence that they had been caught in, they are presented as taking over the reins of government and administering God's justice justly. They find themselves in a new context—God's kingdom—and realize that they have a new vocation: to represent God's rule. It is not much (one verse out of twenty-one!), but it is a glimmer (it is the final verse!).

On the Day of Judgment, dark retaliation and invective do not get the last word. Only the first rays of the light of justice appear in Obadiah. But these rays will eventually add up to a kingdom of light, in which all nations will be judged justly from the eternal throne in heaven.

Jonah

Everybody knows about Jonah. People who have never read the Bible know enough about Jonah to laugh at a joke about him and the "whale." Jonah has entered our folklore. There is a playful aspect to his story, a kind of slapstick clumsiness about Jonah as he bumbles his way along, trying, but always unsuccessfully, to avoid God.

But the playfulness is not frivolous. This is deadly serious. While we are smiling or laughing at Jonah, we drop the guard with which we are trying to keep God at a comfortable distance, and suddenly we find ourselves caught in the purposes and commands of God. All of us. No exceptions.

Stories are the most prominent biblical way of helping us see ourselves in "the God story," which always gets around to the story of God making and saving us. Stories, in contrast to abstract statements of truth, tease us into becoming participants in what is being said. We find ourselves involved in the action. We may start out as spectators or critics, but if a story is good (and the biblical stories are very good!), we find ourselves no longer just listening to but also inhabiting it.

One reason that the Jonah story is so enduringly important for nurturing the life of faith in us is that Jonah is not a hero too high and mighty for us to identify with—he doesn't do anything great. Instead of being held up as an ideal to admire, we find Jonah to be a companion in our ineptness. Here is someone on our level. Even when Jonah does it right (like preaching, finally, in Nineveh) he does it wrong (by getting angry at God). But the whole time, God is working within and around Jonah's very ineptness and accomplishing his purposes in him.

Micah

Prophets use words to remake the world. The world—heaven and earth, men and women, animals and birds—was made in the first place by God's Word. Prophets, arriving on the scene and finding that world in ruins, finding a world of moral rubble and spiritual disorder, take up the work of words again to rebuild what human disobedience and mistrust have demolished. These prophets learn their speech from God. Their words are God-grounded, God-energized, God-passionate. As their words enter the language of specific communities, men and women find themselves in the presence of God, who enters the mess of human sin to rebuke and renew.

Left to ourselves, we turn God into an object, something we can deal with, some *thing* we can use to our benefit, whether that thing is a feeling or an idea or an image. Prophets scorn all such stuff. They train us to respond to God's presence and voice. Micah, the final member of that powerful quartet of writing prophets who burst onto the world scene in the eighth century B.C. (Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos were the others), like virtually all his fellow prophets—those charged with keeping people alive to God and alert to listening to the voice of God—was a master of metaphor. This means that he used words not simply to define or identify what can be seen, touched, smelled, heard, or tasted, but to plunge us into a world of presence. To experience presence is to enter that far larger world of reality that our sensory experiences point to but cannot describe—the realities of love and compassion, justice and faithfulness, sin and evil.... and God. Mostly God.

Nahum

The stage of history is large. Larger-than-life figures appear on this stage from time to time, swaggering about, swaggering about, brandishing weapons and money, terrorizing and bullying. These figures are not, as they suppose themselves to be, at the center of the stage—not, in fact, anywhere near the center. But they call attention to themselves and often manage to get a significant number of people watching and even admiring them. At any given moment, a few superpower nations and their rulers dominate the daily news. Every century few of these names are left carved on its park benches, marking rather futile, and in retrospect pitiable, attempts at immortality.

The danger is that the noise of these pretenders to power will distract us from what is going on quietly at the center of the stage in the person and action of God. God's characteristic way of working is in quietness and through prayer. "I speak," says poet George Meredith, "of the unremarked / Forces . . . Forces concealed in quiet / People and plants." If we are conditioned to respond to noise and size, we will miss God's word and action.

From time to time, God assigns someone to pay attention to one or another of these persons or nations or movements just long enough to get the rest of us to quit paying so much attention to them and get back to the main action: God! Nahum drew that assignment in the seventh century B.C. Assyria had the whole world terrorized. At the time that Nahum delivered his prophecy, a world free of Assyrian domination was unimaginable. Nahum's task was to make it imaginable—to free God's people from Assyrian paralysis, free them to believe in and pray to a sovereign God. Through Nahum's preaching, his Spirit-born metaphors, his God-shaped syntax, Israel could see that despite her world reputation, Assyria didn't amount to much. Israel could now attend to what was really going on.

It is easy to misunderstand Nahum as simply a Nineveh hater. But the prophet writes and preaches out of the larger context, in which Israel's sins are denounced as vigorously as those of any of her enemies. The effect of Nahum is not to foment religious hate against the enemy but to say, "Don't admire or be intimidated by this enemy. They are going to be judged by the very same standards applied to us."

Habakkuk

It is not unreasonable to assume that since I am God's chosen and beloved, I will get favorable treatment from the God who favors me so extravagantly. It is natural to expect that from the time that I become his follower, I will be exempt from dead ends, muddy detours, and cruel treatment from those who are walking in the other direction. That God followers don't get preferential treatment in life always comes as a surprise. But it's also a surprise to find that there are men and women within the Bible who show up alongside us at such moments.

The prophet Habakkuk is one of them, and a most welcome companion he is. Most prophets, most of the time, speak God's Word to us. They are preachers calling us to listen to God's words of judgment and salvation, confrontation and comfort. They face us with God as he is, not as we imagine him to be. Most prophets are in-your-face assertive, not given to tact, and not diplomatic. But Habakkuk speaks our word to God. He gives voice to our bewilderment, articulates our puzzled attempts to make sense of things, faces God with our disappointment. He insists that God pay attention to us, and he insists with a prophet's characteristic no-nonsense bluntness.

The circumstance that aroused Habakkuk took place in the seventh century B.C. The prophet realized that God was going to use the godless military machine of Babylon to bring his judgment on his own people—use a godless nation to punish a godly nation! It didn't make sense, and Habakkuk was quick and bold to say so. Not a day has passed since then that one of us hasn't picked up and repeated Habakkuk's bafflement: "God, you don't seem to make sense!"

But this prophet-companion who stands at our side does something even more important: He waits, and he listens. It is in his waiting and listening—which then turn into his praying—that he finds himself inhabiting the large world of God's sovereignty. Only there does he eventually realize that the believing-in-God life, the steady, trusting-in-God life, is the full life, the only real life. Habakkuk starts out exactly where we start out with our puzzled complaints and God-accusations, but he doesn't stay there. He ends up in a world, along with us, where "every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good" (Romans 8:28).

Zephaniah

We humans keep looking for a religion that will give us access to God without having to bother with people. We want to go to God for comfort and inspiration when we're fed up with the men and women and children around us. We want God to give us an edge in the dog-eat-dog competition of daily life.

This determination to get ourselves a religion that gives us an inside track with God but leaves us free to deal with people however we like is age-old. It is the sort of religion that has been promoted and marketed with both zeal and skill throughout human history. Business is always booming.

It is also the sort of religion that the biblical prophets are determined to root out. They are dead set against it.

Because the root of a solid spiritual life is embedded in a relationship between a person and God, it is easy to develop the misunderstanding that my spiritual life is something personal between God and me—a private thing to be nurtured by prayers and singing, spiritual readings that comfort and inspire, and worship with like-minded friends. If we think this way for very long, we will assume that the way we treat the people we don't like or who don't like us has nothing to do with God.

That's when the prophets step in and interrupt us, insisting, "Everything you do or think or feel has to do with God. Every person you meet has to do with God." We live in a vast world of interconnectedness, and the connections have consequences, either in things or in people—and all the consequences come together in God. The biblical phrase for the coming together of the consequences is Judgment Day.

We can't be reminded too often or too forcefully of this reckoning. Zephaniah's voice in the choir of prophets sustains the intensity, the urgency.

Haggai

As we look over the centuries of the many and various building projects in God's name—wilderness tabernacle, revival tent, Gothic cathedral, wayside chapel, synagogue, temple, meetinghouse, storefront mission, the catacombs—there doesn't seem to be any connection between the buildings themselves and the belief and behavior of the people who assemble in them.

In noticing this, it is not uncommon for us to be dismissive of the buildings themselves by saying, "A church is not a building; it's people," or "I prefer worshiping God in the great cathedral of the outdoors." These pronouncements are with the scriptural punch line "The God who made the world and everything in it doesn't live in custom-made shrines" (see Acts 17:24), which is supposed to end the discussion. God doesn't live in buildings—period. That's what we often say.

But then there is Haggai to account for. Haggai was dignified with the title of "prophet" (therefore, we must take him seriously). His single task, carried out in a three-and-a-half-month mission, was to get God's people to work at rebuilding God's Temple (the same Temple that had been destroyed by God's decree only seventy or so years earlier).

Compared with the great prophets who preached repentance and salvation, Haggai's message doesn't sound very "spiritual." But in God's economy it is perhaps unwise to rank our assigned work as either more or less spiritual than someone else's. We are not angels; we inhabit space. Material—bricks and mortar, boards and nails—keeps us grounded and connected with the ordinary world in which we necessarily live out our extraordinary beliefs. Haggai keeps us in touch with those times in our lives when repairing the building where we worship is an act of obedience every bit as important as praying in that place of worship.

Zechariah

Zechariah shared with his contemporary Haggai the prophetic task of getting the people of Judah to rebuild their ruined Temple. Their preaching pulled the people out of self-preoccupation and got them working together as the People of God. There was a job to do, and the two prophets teamed up to make sure it got done.

But Zechariah did more than that. For the people were faced with more than a ruined Temple and city. Their self-identity as the People of God was in ruins. For a century they had been knocked around by the world powers, kicked and mocked, used and abused. This once-proud people, their glorious sacred history starred with the names of Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, and Isaiah, had been treated with contempt for so long that they were in danger of losing all connection with that past, losing their magnificent identity as God's people.

Zechariah was a major factor in recovering the magnificence from the ruins of a degrading exile. Zechariah reinvigorated their imaginations with his visions and messages. The visions provided images of a sovereign God that worked their way into the lives of the people, countering the long ordeal of debasement and ridicule. The messages forged a fresh vocabulary that gave energy and credibility to the long-term purposes of God being worked out in their lives.

But that isn't the end of it. Zechariah's enigmatic visions, working at multiple levels, and his poetically charged messages are at work still, like time capsules at in the lives of God's people, continuing to release insight and hope and clarity for the people whom God is using to work out his purposes in a world that has no language for God and the purposes of God.

Malachi

Most of life is not lived in crisis—which is a good thing. Not many of us would be able to sustain a life of perpetual pain or loss or ecstasy or challenge. But crisis has this to say for it: In times of crisis, everything, absolutely everything, is important and significant. Life itself is on the line. No word is casual, no action marginal. And almost always, God and our relationship with him is on the front page.

But during the humdrum times, when things are, as we tend to say, "normal," our interest in God is crowded to the margins of our lives and we become preoccupied with ourselves. "Religion" during such times is trivialized into asking "God-questions"—calling God into question or complaining about him, treating the worship of God as a mere hobby or diversion, managing our personal affairs (such as marriage) for our own convenience and disregarding what God has to say about them, going about our usual activities as if God were not involved in such dailiness.

The prophecy of Malachi is made to order for just such conditions. Malachi creates a crisis at a time when we are unaware of crisis. He wakes us up to the crisis of God during the times when the only thing we are concerned with is us. He keeps us on our toes, listening for God, waiting in anticipation for God, ready to respond to God, who is always coming to us.

Malachi gets in the last word of Holy Scripture in the Old Testament. The final sentences in his message to us evoke the gigantic Moses and Elijah—Moses to keep us rooted in what God has done and said in the past, Elijah to keep us alert to what God will do in the days ahead. By leaving us in the company of mighty Moses and fiery Elijah, Malachi considerably reduces the danger of our trivializing matters of God and the soul.

Matthew

The story of Jesus doesn't begin with Jesus. God had been at work for a long time. Salvation, which is the main business of Jesus, is an old business. Jesus is the coming together in final form of themes and energies and movements that had been set in motion before the foundation of the world.

Matthew opens the New Testament by setting the local story of Jesus in its world historical context. He makes sure that as we read his account of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see the connections with everything that has gone before. "Fulfilled" is one of Matthew's characteristic verbs: such and such happened "that it might be *fulfilled*." Jesus is unique, but he is not odd.

Better yet, Matthew tells the story in such a way that not only is everything previous to us completed in Jesus; *we* are completed in Jesus. Every day we wake up in the middle of something that is already going on, that has been going on for a long time: genealogy and geology, history and culture, the cosmos—God. We are neither accidental nor incidental to the story. We get orientation, briefing, background, reassurance.

Matthew provides the comprehensive context by which we see all God's creation and salvation completed in Jesus, and all the parts of our lives—work, family, friends, memories, dreams—also completed in Jesus. Lacking such a context, we are in danger of seeing Jesus as a mere diversion from the concerns announced in the newspapers. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Mark

Mark wastes no time in getting down to business—a single-sentence introduction, and not a digression to be found from beginning to end. An event has taken place that radically changes the way we look at and experience the world, and he can't wait to tell us about it. There's an air of breathless excitement in nearly every sentence he writes. The sooner we get the message, the better off we'll be, for the message is good, incredibly good: God is here, and he's on our side.

The bare announcement that God exists doesn't particularly qualify as news. Most people in most centuries have believed in the existence of God or gods. It may well be, in fact, that human beings in aggregate and through the centuries have given more attention and concern to divinity than to all their other concerns put together—food, housing, clothing, pleasure, work, family, whatever.

But that God is here right now, and on our side, actively seeking to help us in the way we most need help—*this* qualifies as news. For, common as belief in God is, there is also an enormous amount of guesswork and gossip surrounding the subject, which results in runaway superstition, anxiety, and exploitation. So Mark, understandably, is in a hurry to tell us what happened in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—the Event that reveals the truth of God to us, so that we can live in reality and not illusion. He doesn't want us to waste a minute of these precious lives of ours ignorant of this most practical of all matters—that God is passionate to save us.

Luke

Most of us, most of the time, feel left out—misfits. We don't belong. Others seem to be so confident, so sure of themselves, "insiders" who know the ropes, old hands in a club from which we are excluded.

One of the ways we have of responding to this is to form our own club, or join one that will have us. Here is at least one place where we are "in" and the others "out." The clubs range from informal to formal in gatherings that are variously political, social, cultural, and economic. But the one thing they have in common is the principle of exclusion. Identity or worth is achieved by excluding all but the chosen. The terrible price we pay for keeping all those other people out so that we can savor the sweetness of being insiders is a reduction of reality, a shrinkage of life.

Nowhere is this price more terrible than when it is paid in the cause of religion. But religion has a long history of doing just that, of reducing the huge mysteries of God to the respectability of club rules, of shrinking the vast human community to a "membership." But with God there are no outsiders.

Luke is a most vigorous champion of the outsider. An outsider himself, the only Gentile in an all-Jewish cast of New Testament writers, he shows how Jesus includes those who typically were treated as outsiders by the religious establishment of the day: women, common laborers (shepherders), the racially different (Samaritans), the poor. He will not countenance religion as a club. As Luke tells the story, all of us who have found ourselves on the outside looking in on life with no hope of gaining entrance (and who of us hasn't felt it?) now find the doors wide open, found and welcomed by God in Jesus.

John

In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, God is presented as speaking the creation into existence. God speaks the word and it happens: heaven and earth, ocean and stream, trees and grass, birds and fish, animals and humans. Everything, seen and unseen, called into being by God's spoken word.

In deliberate parallel to the opening words of Genesis, John presents God as speaking salvation into existence. This time God's Word takes on human form and enters history in the person of Jesus. Jesus speaks the word and it happens: forgiveness and judgment, healing and illumination, mercy and grace, joy and love, freedom and resurrection. Everything broken and fallen, sinful and diseased, called into salvation by God's spoken word.

For, somewhere along the line things went wrong (Genesis tells that story, too) and are in desperate need of fixing. The fixing is all accomplished by speaking—God speaking salvation into being in the person of Jesus. Jesus, in this account, not only speaks the word of God; he is the Word of God.

Keeping company with these words, we begin to realize that our words are more important than we ever supposed. Saying "I believe," for instance, marks the difference between life and death. Our words accrue dignity and gravity in conversations with Jesus. For Jesus doesn't impose salvation as a solution; he narrates salvation into being through leisurely conversation, intimate personal relationships, compassionate responses, passionate prayer, and—putting it all together—a sacrificial death. We don't casually walk away from words like that.

Acts

Because the story of Jesus is so impressive—God among us! God speaking a language we can understand! God acting in ways that heal and help and save us!—there is a danger that we will be impressed, but only be impressed. As the spectacular dimensions of this story slowly (or suddenly) dawn upon us, we could easily become enthusiastic spectators, and then let it go at that—become admirers of Jesus, generous with our oohs and aahs, and in our better moments inspired to imitate him.

It is Luke's task to prevent that, to prevent us from becoming mere spectators of Jesus, fans of the Message. Of the original quartet of writers on Jesus, Luke alone continues to tell the story as the apostles and disciples live it into the next generation. The remarkable thing is that it continues to be essentially the same story. Luke continues his narration with hardly a break—just a pause, perhaps, to dip his pen in the inkwell—writing in the same style, using the same vocabulary.

The story of Jesus doesn't end with Jesus. It continues in the lives of those who believe in him. The supernatural does not stop with Jesus. Luke makes it clear that these Christians he wrote about were no more spectators of Jesus than Jesus was a spectator of God—they are *in* on the action of God, God acting *in* them, God living *in* them. Which also means, of course, in *us*.

Romans

The event that split history into "before" and "after" and changed the world took place about thirty years before Paul wrote this letter. The event—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—took place in a remote corner of the extensive Roman Empire: the province of Judea in Palestine. Hardly anyone noticed, certainly no one in busy and powerful Rome.

When this letter arrived in Rome, hardly anyone read it, certainly no one of influence. There was much to read in Rome—imperial decrees, exquisite poetry, finely crafted moral philosophy—and much of it was world-class. And yet in no time, as such things go, this letter left all those other writings in the dust. Paul's letter to the Romans has had a far larger impact on its readers than the volumes of all those Roman writers put together.

The quick rise of this letter to a peak of influence is extraordinary, written as it was by an obscure Roman citizen without connections. But when we read it for ourselves, we begin to realize that it is the letter itself that is truly extraordinary, and that no obscurity in writer or readers could have kept it obscure for long.

The letter to the Romans is a piece of exuberant and passionate thinking. This is the glorious life of the mind enlisted in the service of God. Paul takes the well-witnessed and devoutly believed fact of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and thinks through its implications. How does it happen that in the death and resurrection of Jesus, world history took a new direction, and at the same moment the life of every man, woman, and child on the planet was eternally affected? What is God up to? What does it *mean* that Jesus "saves"? What's behind all this, and where is it going?

These are the questions that drive Paul's thinking. Paul's mind is supple and capacious. He takes logic and argument, poetry and imagination, Scripture and prayer, creation and history and experience, and weaves them into this letter that has become the premier document of Christian theology.

1st Corinthians

When people become Christians, they don't at the same moment become nice. This always comes as something of a surprise. Conversion to Christ and his ways doesn't automatically furnish a person with impeccable manners and suitable morals.

The people of Corinth had a reputation in the ancient world as an unruly, hard-drinking, sexually promiscuous bunch of people. When Paul arrived with the Message and many of them became believers in Jesus, they brought their reputations with them right into the church.

Paul spent a year and a half with them as their pastor, going over the Message of the "good news" in detail, showing them how to live out this new life of salvation and holiness as a community of believers. Then he went on his way to other towns and churches.

Sometime later Paul received a report from one of the Corinthian families that in his absence things had more or less fallen apart. He also received a letter from Corinth asking for help. Factions had developed, morals were in disrepair, worship had degenerated into a selfish grabbing for the supernatural. It was the kind of thing that might have been expected from Corinthians!

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is a classic pastoral response: affectionate, firm, clear, and unswerving in the conviction that God among them, revealed in Jesus and present in his Holy Spirit, continued to be the central issue in their lives, regardless of how much of a mess they had made of things. Paul doesn't disown them as brother and sister Christians, doesn't throw them out because of their bad behavior, and doesn't fly into a tirade over their irresponsible ways. He takes it all more or less in stride, but also takes them by the hand and goes over all the old ground again, directing them in how to work all the glorious details of God's saving love into their love for one another.

2nd Corinthians

The Corinthian Christians gave their founding pastor, Paul, more trouble than all his other churches put together. No sooner did Paul get one problem straightened out in Corinth than three more appeared.

For anyone operating under the naive presumption that joining a Christian church is a good way to meet all the best people and cultivate smooth social relations, a reading of Paul's Corinthian correspondence is the prescribed cure. But however much trouble the Corinthians were to each other and to Paul, they prove to be a cornucopia of blessings to us, for they triggered some of Paul's most profound and vigorous writing.

The provocation for Paul's second letter to the Christians in Corinth was an attack on his leadership. In his first letter, though he wrote most kindly and sympathetically, he didn't mince words. He wrote with the confident authority of a pastor who understands the ways God's salvation works and the kind of community that comes into being as a result. At least some of what he wrote to them was hard to hear and hard to take.

So they bucked his authority—accused him of inconsistencies, impugned his motives, questioned his credentials. They didn't argue with what he had written; they simply denied his right to tell them what to do.

And so Paul was forced to defend his leadership. After mopping up a few details left over from the first letter, he confronted the challenge, and in the process probed the very nature of leadership in a community of believers.

Because leadership is necessarily an exercise of authority, it easily shifts into an exercise of power. But the minute it does that, it begins to inflict damage on both the leader and the led. Paul, studying Jesus, had learned a kind of leadership in which he managed to stay out of the way so that the others could deal with God without having to go through him. All who are called to exercise leadership in whatever capacity—parent or coach, pastor or president, teacher or manager—can be to Paul for this letter, and to the Corinthians for provoking it.

Galatians

When men and women get their hands on religion, one of the first things they often do is turn it into an instrument for controlling others, either putting or keeping them "in their place." The history of such religious manipulation and coercion is long and tedious. It is little wonder that people who have only known religion on such terms experience release or escape from it as freedom. The problem is that the freedom turns out to be short-lived.

Paul (Saul) of Tarsus was doing his diligent best to add yet another chapter to this dreary history when he was converted by Jesus to something radically and entirely different—a free life in God. Through Jesus, Paul learned that God was not an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways but a personal Savior who set us free to live a free life. God did not coerce us from without but set us free from within.

It was a glorious experience, and Paul set off telling others, introducing and inviting everyone he met into this free life. In his early travels he founded a series of churches in the Roman province of Galatia. A few years later Paul learned that religious leaders of the old school had come into those churches, had called his views and authority into question, and were reintroducing the old ways, herding all these freedom-loving Christians back into the corral of religious rules and regulations.

Paul was, of course, furious. He was furious with the old guard for coming in with their strong-arm religious tactics and intimidating the Christians into giving up their free life in Jesus. But he was also furious with the Christians for caving in to the intimidation.

His letter to the Galatian churches helps them, and us, recover the original freedom. It also gives direction in the nature of God's gift of freedom—most necessary guidance, for freedom is a delicate and subtle gift, easily perverted and often squandered.

Ephesians

What we know about God and what we do for God have a way of getting broken apart in our lives. The moment the organic unity of belief and behavior is damaged in any way, we are incapable of living out the full humanity for which we were created.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians joins together what has been torn apart in our sin-wrecked world. He begins with an exuberant exploration of what Christians believe about God, and then, like a surgeon skillfully setting a compound fracture, "sets" this belief in God into our behavior before God so that the bones—belief and behavior—knit together and heal.

Once our attention is called to it, we notice these fractures all over the place. There is hardly a bone in our body that has escaped injury, hardly a relationship in city or job, school or church, family or country, that isn't out of joint or making us limp in pain. There is much work to be done.

So Paul goes to work. He ranges widely, from heaven to earth and back again, showing how Jesus, the Messiah, is eternally and tirelessly bringing everything and everyone together. He also shows us that in addition to having this work done in and for us, we are participants in this most urgent work. Now that we know what is going on, that the energy of reconciliation is the dynamo at the heart of the universe, it is imperative that we join in vigorously and perseveringly, convinced that every detail in our lives contributes (or not) to what Paul describes as God's plan worked out by Christ, "a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth" (Ephesians 1:10).

Philippians

This is Paul's happiest letter. And the happiness is infectious. Before we've read a dozen lines, we begin to feel the joy ourselves—the dance of words and the exclamations of delight have a way of getting inside us.

But happiness is not a word we can understand by looking it up in the dictionary. In fact, none of the qualities of the Christian life can be learned out of a book. Something more like apprenticeship is required, being around someone who, out of years of devoted discipline, shows us by his or her entire behavior what it is. Moments of verbal instruction will certainly occur, but mostly an apprentice acquires skill by daily and intimate association with a "master," picking up subtle but absolutely essential things, such as timing and rhythm and "touch."

When we read what Paul wrote to the Christian believers in the city of Philippi, we find ourselves in the company of just such a master. Paul doesn't tell us that we can be happy, or how to be happy. He simply and unmistakably is happy. None of his circumstances contribute to his joy: He wrote from a jail cell, his work was under attack by competitors, and after twenty years or so of hard traveling in the service of Jesus, he was tired and would have welcomed some relief.

But circumstances are incidental compared to the life of Jesus, the Messiah, that Paul experiences from the inside. For it is a life that not only happened at a certain point in history, but that also continues to happen, spilling out into the lives of those who receive him, and then continues to spill out all over the place. Christ is, among much else, the revelation that God cannot be contained or hoarded. It is this "spilling out" quality of Christ's life that accounts for the happiness of Christians, for joy is life in excess, the overflow of what cannot be contained within any one person.

Colossians

Hardly anyone who hears the full story of Jesus and learns the true facts of his life and teaching, his crucifixion and resurrection, walks away with a shrug of the shoulders, dismissing him as unimportant. People ignorant of the story or misinformed about it, of course, regularly dismiss him. But with few exceptions, the others know instinctively that they are dealing with a most remarkable greatness.

But it is quite common for those who consider him truly important to include others who seem to be equally important in his company—Buddha, Moses, Socrates, and Muhammad, for a historical start, along with some personal favorites. For these people, Jesus is important, but not central; his prestige is considerable, but he is not preeminent.

The Christians in the town of Colosse, or at least some of them, seem to have been taking this line. For them, cosmic forces of one sort or another were getting equal billing with Jesus. Paul writes to them in an attempt to restore Jesus, the Messiah, to the center of their lives.

The way he makes his argument is as significant as the argument he makes. Claims for the uniqueness of Jesus are common enough. But such claims about Jesus are frequently made with an arrogance that is completely incompatible with Jesus himself. Sometimes the claims are enforced with violence.

But Paul, although unswervingly confident in the conviction that Christ occupies the center of creation and salvation without peers, is not arrogant. And he is certainly not violent. He argues from a position of rooted humility. He writes with the energies of most considerate love. He exhibits again what Christians have come to appreciate so much in Paul—the wedding of a brilliant and uncompromising intellect with a heart that is warmly and wonderfully kind.

1st and 2nd Thessalonians

The way we conceive of the future sculpts the present, gives contour and tone to nearly every action and thought through the day. If our sense of future is weak, we live listlessly. Much emotional and mental illness and most suicides occur among men and women who feel that they "have no future."

The Christian faith has always been characterized by a strong and focused sense of future, with belief in the Second Coming of Jesus as the most distinctive detail. From the day Jesus ascended into heaven, his followers have lived in expectancy of his return. He told them he was coming back. They believed he was coming back. They continue to believe it. For Christians, it is the most important thing to know and believe about the future.

The practical effect of this belief is to charge each moment of the present with hope. For if the future is dominated by the coming again of Jesus, there is little room left on the screen for projecting our anxieties and fantasies. It takes the clutter out of our lives. We're far more free to respond spontaneously to the freedom of God.

All the same, the belief can be misconceived so that it results in paralyzing fear for some, shiftless indolence for others. Paul's two letters to the Christians in Thessalonica, among much else, correct such debilitating misconceptions, prodding us to continue to live forward in taut and joyful expectancy for what God will do next in Jesus.

1st and 2nd Timothy and Titus

Christians are quite serious in believing that when they gather together for worship and work, God is present and sovereign—really present and absolutely sovereign. God creates and guides, God saves and heals, God corrects and blesses, God calls and judges. With such comprehensive and personal leadership from God, what is the place of human leadership?

Quite obviously, it has to be second place. It must not elbow its way to the front: it must not bossily take over. Ego-centered, ego-prominent leadership betrays the Master. The best leadership in spiritual communities formed in the name of Jesus, the Messiah, is inconspicuous, not calling attention to itself but not sacrificing anything in the way of conviction and firmness either.

In his letters to two young associates—Timothy in Ephesus and Titus in Crete—we see Paul encouraging and guiding the development of just such leadership. What he had learned so thoroughly himself, he was now passing on, and showing these men, in turn, how to develop a similar leadership in local congregations. This is essential reading because ill-directed and badly formed spiritual leadership causes much damage to souls. Paul, in both his life and his letters, shows us how to do it right.

Philemon

Every movement we make in response to God has a ripple effect, touching family, neighbors, friends, community. Belief in God alters our language. Love of God affects our daily relationships. Hope in God enters into our work. Also their opposites—unbelief, indifference, and despair. None of these movements and responses, beliefs and prayers, gestures and searches, can be confined to the soul. They spill out and make history. If they don't, they are under suspicion of being fantasies at best, hypocrisies at worst.

Christians have always insisted on the historicity of Jesus—an actual birth, a datable death, a witnessed resurrection, locatable towns. There is a parallel historicity in the followers of Jesus. As they take in everything Jesus said and did—all of it a personal revelation of God in time and place—it all gets worked into local history, and eventually into world history.

Philemon and Onesimus, the slave owner and slave who figure prominently in this letter from Paul, had no idea that believing in Jesus would lead to radical social change. But as the two of them were brought together by this letter, it did. And it still does.

Hebrews

It seems odd to have to say so, but too much religion is a bad thing. We can't get too much of God, can't get too much faith and obedience, can't get too much love and worship. But religion—the well-intentioned efforts we make to "get it all together" for God—can very well get in the way of what God is doing for us. The main and central action is everywhere and always what God has done, is doing, and will do for us. Jesus is the revelation of that action. Our main and central task is to live in responsive obedience to God's action revealed in Jesus. Our part in the action is the act of faith.

But more often than not we become impatiently self-important along the way and decide to improve matters with our two cents' worth. We add on, we supplement, we embellish. But instead of improving on the purity and simplicity of Jesus, we dilute the purity, clutter the simplicity. We become fussily religious, or anxiously religious. We get in the way.

That's when it's time to read and pray our way through the letter to the Hebrews again, written for "too religious" Christians, for "Jesus-and" Christians. In the letter, it is Jesus-and-angels, or Jesus-and-Moses, or Jesus-and-priesthood. In our time it is more likely to be Jesus-and-politics, or Jesus-and-education, or even Jesus-and-Buddha. This letter deletes the hyphens, the add-ons. The focus becomes clear and sharp again: God's action in Jesus. And we are free once more for the act of faith, the one human action in which we don't get in the way but on the Way.

James

When believers gather in churches, everything that can go wrong sooner or later does. Outsiders, on observing this, conclude that there is nothing to the religion business except, perhaps, business—and dishonest business at that. Insiders see it differently. Just as a hospital collects the sick under one roof and labels them as such, the church collects sinners. Many of the people outside the hospital are every bit as sick as the ones inside, but their illnesses are either undiagnosed or disguised. It's similar with sinners outside the church.

So Christian churches are not, as a rule, model communities of good behavior. They are, rather, places where human misbehavior is brought out in the open, faced, and dealt with.

The letter of James shows one of the church's early pastors skillfully going about his work of confronting, diagnosing, and dealing with areas of misbelief and misbehavior that had turned up in congregations committed to his care. Deep and living wisdom is on display here, wisdom both rare and essential. Wisdom is not primarily knowing the truth, although it certainly includes that. It is skill in living. For what good is a truth if we don't know how to live it? What good is an intention if we can't sustain it?

According to church tradition, James carried the nickname "Old Camel Knees" because of thick calluses built up on his knees from many years of determined prayer. The prayer is foundational to the wisdom. Prayer is always foundational to wisdom.

1st and 2nd Peter

Peter's concise confession—"You are the Christ, the Messiah"—focused the faith of the disciples on Jesus as God among us, in person, carrying out the eternal work of salvation (Mark 8:29). Peter seems to have been a natural leader, commanding the respect of his peers by sheer force of personality. In every listing of Jesus' disciples, Peter's name is invariably first.

In the early church, his influence was enormous and acknowledged by all. By virtue of his position, he was easily the most powerful figure in the Christian community. And his energetic preaching, ardent prayer, bold healing, and wise direction vindicated the trust placed in him.

The way Peter handled himself in that position of power is even more impressive than the power itself. He stayed out of the center, didn't abuse power, maintained a scrupulous subordination to Jesus. Given his charismatic personality and well-deserved position at the head, he could easily have taken over, using the prominence of his association with Jesus to promote himself. That he didn't do it, given the frequency with which spiritual leaders do exactly that, is impressive. Peter is a breath of fresh air.

The two letters Peter wrote exhibit the qualities of Jesus that the Holy Spirit shaped in him: a readiness to embrace suffering rather than prestige, a wisdom developed from experience and not imposed from a book, a humility that lacked nothing in vigor or imagination. From what we know of the early stories of Peter, he had in him all the makings of a bully. That he didn't become a bully (and religious bullies are the worst kind) but rather the boldly confident and humbly self-effacing servant of Jesus Christ that we discern in these letters, is a compelling witness to what he himself describes as "a brand-new life" with "everything to live for" (1 Peter 1:3).

1st, 2nd, and 3rd John

The two most difficult things to get straight in life are love and God. More often than not, the mess people make of their lives can be traced to failure or stupidity or meanness in one or both of these areas.

The basic and biblical Christian conviction is that the two subjects are intricately related. If we want to deal with God the right way, we have to learn to love the right way. If we want to love the right way, we have to deal with God the right way. God and love can't be separated.

John's three letters provide wonderfully explicit direction in how this works. Jesus, the Messiah, is the focus: Jesus provides the full and true understanding of God; Jesus shows us the mature working-out of love. In Jesus, God and love are linked accurately, intricately, and indissolubly.

But there are always people around who don't want to be pinned down to the God Jesus reveals, to the love Jesus reveals. They want to make up their own idea of God, make up their own style of love. John was pastor to a church (or churches) disrupted by some of these people. In his letters we see him reestablishing the original and organic unity of God and love that comes to focus and becomes available to us in Jesus Christ.

Jude

Our spiritual communities are as susceptible to disease as our physical bodies. But it is easier to detect whatever is wrong in our stomachs and lungs than in our worship and witness. When our physical bodies are sick or damaged, the pain calls our attention to it, and we do something quickly. But a dangerous, even deadly, virus in our spiritual communities can go undetected for a long time. As much as we need physicians for our bodies, we have even greater need for diagnosticians and healers of the spirit.

Jude's letter to an early community of Christians is just such a diagnosis. It was all the more necessary in that those believers apparently didn't know anything was wrong, or at least not as desperately wrong as Jude points out.

There is far more, of course, to living in Christian community than protecting the faith against assault or subversion. Paranoia is as unhealthy spiritually as it is mentally. The primary Christian posture is, in Jude's words, "keeping your arms open and outstretched, ready for the mercy of our Master, Jesus Christ" (Jude 1:21). All the same, energetic watchfulness is required. Jude's whistle-blowing has prevented many a disaster.

Revelation

The Bible ends with a flourish: vision and song, doom and deliverance, terror and triumph. The rush of color and sound, image and energy, leaves us reeling. But if we persist through the initial confusion and read on, we begin to pick up the rhythms, realize the connections, and find ourselves enlisted as participants in a multidimensional act of Christian worship.

John, a pastor of the late first century, has worship on his mind. The vision, that is, the Revelation, comes to him while he is at worship on a certain Sunday on the Mediterranean island of Patmos. He is responsible for a circuit of churches on the mainland whose primary task is worship. Worship shapes the human community in response to the living God. If worship is neglected or perverted, our communities fall into chaos or under tyranny.

Our times are not propitious for worship. The times never are. The world is hostile to worship. The Devil hates worship. As Revelation makes clear, worship must be carried out under conditions decidedly uncongenial to it. Some Christians even get killed because they worship.

John's Revelation is not easy reading. Besides being a pastor, John is a poet, fond of metaphor and symbol, image and allusion, passionate in his desire to bring us into the presence of Jesus believing and adoring. But the demands he makes on our intelligence and imagination are well rewarded, for in keeping company with John, our worship of God will almost certainly deepen in urgency and joy.

The End of the Story

"Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They're his people, he's their God. He'll wipe every tear from their eyes."

Given popular opinion about gods—wrathful, vindictive, punitive, aloof—one might be forgiven for expecting the Bible to end in a lake of fire. One would certainly have read ample arguments for such an ending: God had good intentions in the beginning, clearly, until his klutzy creation started making a mess of it all. Betrayal in more than one garden. Countless acts of violence. Scandalous acts of self-regard. A lake of fire seems a fitting consequence.

There is a lake of fire, but it's not the end of the story. The end of the story is not wrath but love—love that is not merely theoretical or theological but existential, practical. No longer are God's people imagining, praying, that God will move into their neighborhood; no longer is God promising to one day dwell among his people. No, the end of the story is the fulfillment of these prayers, these promises: God has now moved into the neighborhood. God is now with us.

In reality, God has never not been with us. It was declared by God in the Exodus (Numbers 35:34); it was professed by John in his Gospel (John 1:14): God did and does live in our neighborhood. God has been and is with us. We are not immune to judgment for our sin, and the world as we have stewarded it is not immune to a redemption that looks suspiciously like destruction. Divine wrath and judgment are rightly found in God's story. But they are not the end of God's story, and they are not the most important elements of our story.

The most important element of our story is God once again asserting his witness to us. He proves himself at the end as a good neighbor, wiping every tear from every eye. The character of God is fully revealed in the neighborhood he sets up for us and for himself forever. This is the end of a story that people want to usher in. And that's what John does at the end of his Revelation: "Come, Master Jesus! Bring to fruition what you have promised all along." And then he blesses his readers with a reminder that what is not yet in our experience is now nevertheless here in our midst: "The grace of the Master Jesus be with all of you. Oh, yes!" (Revelation 22:20-21)

