

REAL PEOPLE, REAL EVENTS, REAL PROPHECY

- A. Introduction: When Jesus was on earth He said: People need more than bread for their life; they must feed on every word of God (Matt 4:4, NLT). We are working on teaching people how to eat God's Word by becoming regular Bible readers. As part of our effort, we're looking at how and why we should read it.
1. This includes examining what the Bible is and how it developed. The Bible is not a book of promises, although it contains many promises. It's not a love letter from God, although it reveals His great love for us. Nor is it a book of success principles, even though its wisdom helps us navigate life effectively.
 - a. The Bible is a collection of 66 books and letters, written by more than forty authors over a 1500 year period. Together, these books tell the story of God's desire for a family and the lengths He's gone to, to obtain this family through Jesus. The writings were (are) inspired by God. II Tim 3:16
 - b. A primary purpose of the Bible is to make us wise unto salvation from sin: The Holy Scriptures... are able to make you wise enough to have faith in Christ Jesus and be saved (II Tim 3:15, CEV).
 2. God created human beings to become His sons and daughters, and He made the earth to be a home for Himself and His family. Both the family and the family home have been damaged by sin, going back to the first man and woman, Adam and Eve. Eph 1:4-5; Gen 2:17; Gen 3:17-19; Rom 5:12; etc.
 - a. Following their sin, God promised that a Redeemer, the Seed (Jesus) of the woman (Mary), would one day come and cleanse the family and the family home of sin, corruption, and death. Gen 3:15
 1. God then began to progressively reveal His plan of redemption, His plan to deliver people from sin and its effects, and transform them into His sons and daughters through Jesus.
 2. The Bible is a record of this unfolding plan of salvation. The writers did not set out to write a religious book. The various authors wrote what they saw and heard as God worked in their generation to advance His plan. Every Bible book adds information to this unfolding plan.
 - b. The Bible is in large part a historical narrative (50% history, 25% prophecy, 25% instruction for living). And, much of the information is verifiable through secular records and archaeology.
 3. We have more to say in this lesson about how the Bible developed and why we know we can trust it.
- B. The first 39 books (the Old Testament) are mainly the history of the people group Jesus was born into—the descendants of a man named Abraham. Abraham's descendants (the Hebrews) became the nation of Israel.
1. Last week we briefly summarized how each Old Testament book adds to the history of these people, from the time of Abraham until 400 years before Jesus came into this world.
 - a. Abraham fathered a son, Isaac, who fathered Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons became the heads of twelve tribes. During Jacob's time, the family (75 in all) moved to Egypt, and was eventually enslaved. They remained in Egypt for over 400 years and grew into one to two million people.
 - b. God delivered Abraham's descendants from Egyptian slavery, gave them His Law at Mount Sinai, and led them back to their ancestral home (Canaan). Once settled in Canaan, they struggled with idol worship. (Job, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth)
 2. Eventually a monarchy (kingship) was established. Saul was Israel's first king, followed by David, and then Solomon. Under their leadership Israel became a respected, prosperous, and peaceful nation.
 - a. As God's plan unfolded, He identified the tribe (Judah) and the family (David's) as the ones through which the promised Seed (Redeemer, Savior) will come. Gen 49:10; II Sam 7:12-16; Ps 89:3-4
 - b. Following Solomon's death in 931 BC, the kingdom split into Israel (the ten northern tribes) and Judah (the two southern tribes). The kingdoms sank into idol worship, until they were destroyed by foreign invaders. (I & II Samuel, I & II Kings; Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon)
 1. In 722 BC the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom (Israel), removed much of the population, and scattered them throughout their empire.
 2. In 586 BC the Babylonian Empire conquered the southern kingdom (Judah) and took most of

the population back to Babylon (modern Iraq) as captives.

- c. During this period God raised up numerous prophets who called His people to repentance and warned them of coming destruction if they did not return to Him. A number of these prophets wrote books that are preserved in the Old Testament. (Isaiah-Zephaniah)
 3. In 539 BC the Persians defeated Babylon and established a new empire in the Middle East. They allowed the captive Israelites return to their homeland (Canaan) to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple.
 - a. Only a remnant went back. The largest portion was from the tribe of Judah. Because of this, the Israelites became known as Jews. The last of the Old Testament documents were completed at this time. (Ezra, Nehemiah, I and II Chronicles, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)
 1. The Old Testament documents were grouped and arranged differently than they are now, but their content corresponds to the 39 Old Testament books we have in our modern Bibles.
 2. These books were (and are) the standard by which ancient writings claiming to be from God were (and are) judged. They are called the canon—or the rule or standard.
 - b. Chronicles was one book at that time and was written by Ezra, a priest who returned with the exiles. It restates the history of the monarchy (Israel's kings) and the divided kingdom.
 1. In his book Ezra reminded the Jews that, despite their failures, the Redeemer would come from them. He retraced the line of the promised Seed from Adam to Abraham to David. I Chron 1-3
 2. In the New Testament, Matthew opened his gospel by picking up Jesus' genealogy where Ezra left off. Matthew did this to demonstrate that Jesus is the promised Seed.
 4. The Old Testament ends with Israel back in the land where the Seed will be born. They were cured of idolatry, and the line of King David was still intact. But, they were a pathetic remnant under the control of a foreign power (Persia). It will be 400 more years before Jesus is born in Bethlehem. Micah 5:2
 - a. During these 400 years, no prophets were sent to Israel and no more Scripture was written. But, events occurred that set the stage for Jesus to come into this world at the right time. Rom 5:6; Gal 4:4
 - b. As we discuss these events, note how God used human choice, and events related to choices, and caused them to serve His ultimate purpose for a family through Jesus.
- C. In 336 BC Alexander the Great came to power in Greece and marched east. He moved with lightning speed and conquered the Persian Empire. In doing, so he took possession of the land of Canaan.
1. Alexander allowed self-government and local religious practices to continue in the lands he conquered. But he wanted to spread Greek culture (known as Hellenism) throughout his empire. To accomplish this, Alexander made common (*koine*) Greek the language of all his new subjects.
 - a. Alexander conquered all the way to the brink of India (the Indus River) where he unexpectedly died in 323 BC. Because he had no heir, his kingdom was divided among four of his generals.
 1. Two of those generals directly affected Israel. General Seleucus took control of Syria (north of Israel). General Ptolemy took control of Egypt to the south.
 2. For one hundred years, their families battled for control of Canaan (331-165 BC). Canaan (modern Israel) formed a land bridge between Asia, Europe, and Africa, and major international trade routes ran through the region. Whoever controlled Canaan those vital routes.
 - b. During this period, the name Palestine began to be used for Canaan. A group called the Philistines lived along the SW coast (known as Philistia). The Greek word Palestine comes from Philistia.
 2. The Seleucids took control of Palestine in 198 BC. In 170 BC a wicked Seleucid general, Antiochus Epiphanes, took Jerusalem. He prohibited the worship of Jehovah, compelled the Jews to sacrifice to idols, and polluted the Temple by erecting a statue of Jupiter on the brazen altar and sacrificing swine.
 - a. The Jews revolted, under the leadership of the Maccabean family. The altar was cleansed and the worship of Jehovah re-established in 165 BC. The Jewish holiday Hanukah (also known as the Feast of Dedication, John 10:22) celebrates this victory.

- b. The family that led the revolt (the Maccabeans) was part of a larger family (the Hasmoneans) who took over as rulers in Palestine (still under Greek control). Tensions continued in Israel as people argued over how much Greek culture should or shouldn't affect them. Various groups developed.
 - 1. The Pharisees strongly opposed Greek culture and separated themselves from everyone and everything they considered unclean. The Sadducees favored some degree of compromise and were willing to cooperate with corrupt government and religious officials to protect their status.
 - 2. The Zealots opposed Hellenism and believed in using violence to gain freedom from the Greek conquerors (including war). The Essenes isolated themselves in the Judean Wilderness east of Jerusalem and studied and copied the Law. They produced and hid the Dead Sea Scrolls.
 - 3. One important note about Greek influence on Palestine's affairs. Before Alexander the Great died, he built the great city of Alexandria in Egypt, and invited many Jews to relocate there.
 - a. In Alexandria, the Old Testament was translated into Greek (294 to 189 BC). It was the first book to be translated into another language. It is called the Septuagint. The fact that the Old Testament was translated then shows us that the Old Testament had been completed or canonized by that time.
 - b. This translation didn't include the Apocrypha, fourteen books that were written in the years between the Old and New Testaments (200 BC to 4 BC). (The Catholic Bible includes eleven of them.)
 - 1. These books give religious history concerning the Jews in this period. None of the authors claimed that their writings were inspired by God. One book states that they knew they were living in a time when there was no prophecy (inspired writing). I Maccabees 4:46; 9:27; 14:41
 - 2. Josephus, a Jewish historian from the 1st century AD, wrote that the Jews did not consider these books to be a part of the Old Testament. Neither Jesus nor the apostles ever quoted from them. The books were considered a good read for spiritual enrichment, but not on a par with Scripture.
 - 4. In the 3rd century BC Rome began to accumulate power and move into the Middle East. In 69 BC a civil war broke out in Palestine, and a Jewish delegation went to Rome to ask for help.
 - a. Rome invaded Palestine in 63 BC, ended the civil war, and took control. Roman officials gave the high priesthood to a family that was sympathetic to Greek influence (the Hyrcannus family).
 - b. The Romans made Herod (an Edomite) king and, in 37 BC, he was crowned king of Israel. He was an immoral, jealous, and vengeful man. Herod was on the throne when Jesus was born. Matt 2:1-3
 - 5. The events that occurred in the years after the Old Testament was completed put certain factors in place that will facilitate the spread of the news that the Redeemer has come once Jesus is born into this world.
 - a. When the Jews returned from exile in Babylon, the custom of reading Scripture in the synagogue on the Sabbath Day began. Synagogues could be formed any place there were ten male Jews. There were about 480 synagogues in Israel by the time of Jesus. The synagogues gave both Jesus and the apostles places to preach the good news that the promised Seed had arrived. Luke 4:16; Acts 13:14
 - b. When Jesus was born, the Roman Empire extended from Britain in the west to Africa in the south, and the Persian Gulf in the east. The Romans kept Greek as the common language of the empire.
 - 1. The joining of a multitude of nations under one empire and language broke down barriers of race and religion, making the spread of new and different ideas easier.
 - 2. Rome built a reliable system of roads and a postal system throughout the empire. Bandits and pirates were hunted down, keeping roads and sea lanes open. For two centuries (27 BC to AD 180) Rome kept the peace, making travel and communication over a large area relatively easy.
- D. Note some things about the Book of Daniel (written in 535 BC) that illustrate the Old Testament's reliability. Not only does it relate verifiable history, the book has many prophecies that have already come to pass.
- 1. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (discovered by archaeologists in 1899) invaded the southern kingdom (Judah) three times and removed Jews from the land in three phases. Daniel, a royal prince, was taken as a 16 or 17 year old in the first invasion (604 BC), and groomed to serve in the king's court. Dan 1:1-6

- a. Through out his life in Babylon, Daniel and interpreted dreams and visions, not only for himself, but for the non-Jewish (or gentile) kings he served.
 - b. King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that no one could interpret. The dream was of a metallic statue with a gold head, silver shoulders and arms, brass thighs, and legs made of iron, with feet of clay mixed with iron. A stone made without hands hit the statue and broke it in pieces. The stone became a mountain that filled the whole earth. Dan 2:31-45
 - c. The Lord revealed to Daniel that the statue represented four great empires that will ultimately be replaced by God's everlasting kingdom. We know from the historical record that Babylon was followed by the Persian Empire, then Greek Empire, and then the Roman Empire.
2. Fifteen years before Persia conquered Babylon, and over 200 years before the Greek Empire existed, Daniel had a vision of Greece suddenly conquering Persia and then being broken into four kingdoms (Dan 8:3-8). The Book of Daniel mentions Greece and Persia by name (Dan 8:20-22).
 - a. Josephus (the historian) later wrote that when Alexander was threatening Jerusalem on his march eastward, the high priest Jaddua, dressed in white, went out to meet him. Alexander bowed before Jaddua. In a dream, he had seen a man in white, and was told to conquer Persia with confidence.
 - b. Jaddua showed Alexander Daniel's book and the prophecy about his success over Persia. The conqueror left Jerusalem in peace, to abide by its own laws and exempted them from paying taxes.
 3. Near the end of Judah's 70 year long captivity in Babylon, the angel Gabriel appeared to Daniel and told the prophet that God was going to deal with Israel for their sin and rebellion for 490 more years.
 - a. He stated 490 years as seventy weeks, or seven periods of seven years in Hebrew (another lesson). Then the Messiah (Anointed One) will come and establish an everlasting kingdom. Dan 9:24-27
 - b. Gabriel gave specific historical events that would take place in these years that make it possible for us to count out the years in the historical record. These events include Jerusalem being rebuilt in perilous times and the Messiah being cut off or killed (many lessons for another day).
 1. The 490 years were to begin when the decree was issued to restore and rebuild Jerusalem. We know from secular historical records that this order was given on March 5, 444 BC. Neh 2:1-8
 2. Gabriel said that from the time the command is given until Messiah comes will be 483 years. Historical records tell us the day Jesus entered Jerusalem and was crucified: Palm Sunday, March 30, AD 33—483 years later. Luke 19:37-44
 3. There is a period of seven years that, to this day, have not been fulfilled. We now know that those final seven years will take place just prior to the second coming of Jesus (another lesson).
- b. Daniel's prophecies are so accurate that critics insist his book was written after the fact. But the historical and archaeological record says otherwise.
 1. Josephus wrote Alexander was shown Daniel's book, making it already complete in 332 BC.
 2. A complete copy of Daniel's book was found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were made in the 2nd and 1st centuries BC. Daniel's scroll is written in a more modern style of Hebrew, instead of ancient Hebrew, as his original manuscript would have been. This puts several centuries between the copy and the original, placing the writing of the original in Daniel's time.
- E. Conclusion: I realize that a lesson like this doesn't seem practical. But the purpose of such a lesson is to show you that the Bible is a record of real people, real events, and fulfilled prophecy related to God's unfolding plan of redemption. We can trust what God tells us in His Book (Old and New Testament).
1. This life is very difficult, and many circumstances can't be easily fixed. But we have a verifiable record of God's interaction with people in the past, as well as promises for the future. This gives us hope and peace in the midst of life's struggles. Rom 15:4
 2. We are part of something bigger than ourselves and the present moment. The Bible assures us that the One who designed the plan is both big and faithful, both now and forever. Much more next week!!