

Spiritual Growth Church
Requirements
Teacher / Minister

- Teacher -

Holy Bible Study - 20 weeks

People Of The Holy Bible - 20 weeks

The Gospels Of Jesus Christ / Yehoshua - 20 weeks

- Minister -

Holy Bible Study - 20 weeks

People Of The Holy Bible - 20 weeks

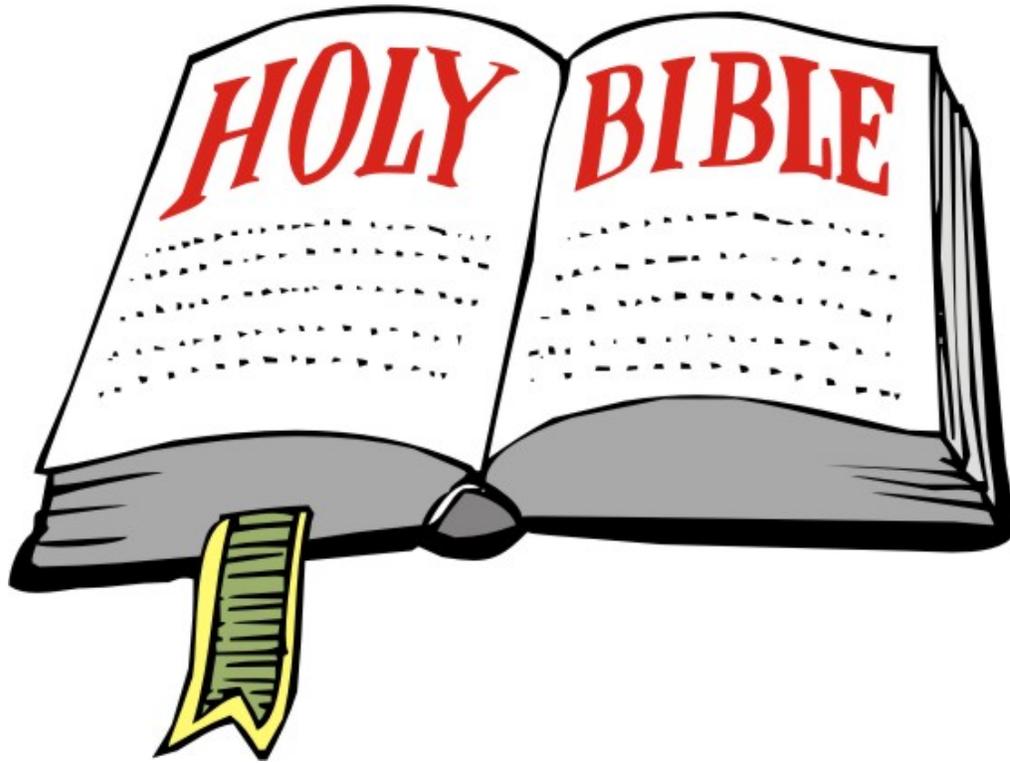
The Gospels Of Jesus Christ / Yehoshua - 20 weeks

Lessons In Leadership From The Word Of GOD - 20 weeks

THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

Revnee Lea

The road to success is not straight. There is a curve called Failure, a loop called Confusion, speed bumps Called Friends, red lights called Enemies, caution Lights called Family. You will have flats called Jobs. But, if you have a spare called Determination, an engine called Perseverance, insurance called Faith, A driver called God, you will make it to a place called Success.



**PEOPLE
OF
THE HOLY BIBLE**

OLD TESTAMENT

ADAM

EVE

ABEL

CAIN

NOAH

LOT

MELCHIZEDEK

ISHMAEL

ABRAHAM

SARAH

ISAAC

HAGAR

REBEKAH

ESAU

JACOB

RACHEL

LABAN

JOSEPH

REUBEN

JUDAH

MOSES

JETHRO

AARON

NADAB / ABIHU

MIRIAM

CALEB

KORAH

ELEAZAR

BALAAM

JOSHUA

RAHAB

EHUD

DEBORAH

GIDEON

ABIMELECH

JEPHTAH

SAMSON

DELILAH

RUTH & NAOMI

BOAZ

HANNAH

ELI

SAMUEL

SAUL

DAVID

JONATHAN

ABIGAIL

ABNER

MICHAL

NATHAN

ABSALOM

JOAB

ABISHAI

DAVID'S MIGHTY MEN

BATH-SHEBA

SOLOMON

JEROBOAM

ELIJAH

AHAB

JEZEBEL

ELISHA

JEHU

HEZEKIAH

JOSIAH

REHOBOAM

ASA

JEHOSHAPHAT

JOASH

UZZIAH

MANASSEH

ZERUBBABEL

EZRA

NEHEMIAH

MORDECAI

ESTHER

HAMAN

JOB

ISAIAH

JEREMIAH

EZEKIEL

DANIEL

SHADRACH / MESHACH / ABEDNEGO

NEBUCHADNEZZAR

NEW TESTAMENT

JOSEPH

HEROD

MATTHEW

MARY (LAZARUS'S SISTER)

PETER

HEROD ANTIPAS

JUDAS ISCARIOT

PILATE

ZACHARIAS

ELISABETH

MARY

JAMES

MARTHA

JOHN THE BAPTIST

NICODEMUS

CAIAPHAS

JOHN

MARY MAGDALENE

THOMAS

STEPHEN

PHILIP

PAUL

CORNELIUS

HEROD AGRIPPA I

JOHN MARK

BARNABAS

SILAS

LUKE

AQUILA, PRISCILLA

APOLLOS

HEROD AGRIPPA II

TIMOTHY

PEOPLE OF THE HOLY BIBLE

Week 1 – Old Testament

Adam

Eve

Abel

Cain

Noah

Lot

Melchizedek

Week 2 -

Ishmael

Abraham

Sarah

Isaac

Hagar

Rebekah

Week 3 -

Esau

Jacob

Rachel

Laban

Joseph

Reuben

Judah

Week 4 -

Moses

Jethro

Aaron

Nadab / Abihu

Miriam

Caleb

Week 5 -

Korah

Eleazar

Balaam

Joshua

Rahab

Ehud

Deborah

Week 6 -

Gideon

Abimelech

Jephtah

Samson

Delilah

Week 7 -

Ruth & Naomi

Boaz

Hannah

Eli

Samuel

Saul

Week 8 -

David

Jonathan

Abigail

Abner

Michal

Week 9 -

Nathan

Absalom

Joab

Abishai

David's Mighty Men

Bath-sheba

Solomon

Week 10 -

Jeroboam

Elijah

Ahab

Jezebel

Elisha

Week 11 -

Jehu

Hezekiah

Josiah

Rehoboam

Asa

Jehoshaphat

Joash

Week 12 -

Uzziah

Manasseh

Zerubbabel

Ezra

Nehemiah

Week 13 -

Mordecai

Esther

Haman

Job

Isaiah

Jeremiah

Ezekiel

Week 14 -

Daniel

Shadrach / Meshach / Abed-nego

Nebuchadnezzar

Week 15 - New Testament

Joseph

Herod

Matthew

Mary (Lazarus's Sister)

Peter

Herod Antipus

Judas Iscariot

Week 16 -
Pilate
Zacharias
Elisabeth
Mary
James
Martha
John The Baptist

Week 17 -
Nicodemus
Caiaphas
John
Mary Magdalene
Thomas
Stephen
Philip

Week 18 -
Paul
Cornelius
Herod Agrippa I
John Mark
Barnabas
Silas
Luke

Week 19 -
Aquila, Priscilla
Apollos
Herod Agrippa II
Timothy

Week 20 - Final Exam
* Open Book Test

**SPIRITUAL GROWTH CHURCH
PEOPLE OF THE HOLY BIBLE**

20 Week Class

Certification upon completion

Sign up Today

Church Office - 805.529.1509

ADAM

We can hardly imagine what it must have been like to be the first and only person on earth. It's one thing for us to be lonely; it was another for Adam, who had never known another human being. He missed much that makes us who we are - he had no childhood, no parents, no family or friends. He had to learn to be human on his own. Fortunately, God didn't let him struggle too long before presenting him with an ideal companion and mate, Eve. Theirs was a complete, innocent, and open oneness, without a hint of shame.

One of Adam's first conversations with his delightful new companion must have been about the rules of the garden. Before God made Eve he had already given Adam complete freedom in the garden, with the responsibility to tend and care for it. But one tree was off-limits, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam would have told Eve all about this. She knew when Satan approached her, that the tree's fruit was not to be eaten. However, she decided to eat the forbidden fruit. Then she offered some to Adam. At that moment, the fate of creation was on the line. Sadly, Adam didn't pause to consider the consequences. He went ahead and ate.

In that moment of small rebellion something large, beautiful, and free was shattered... God's perfect creation. Man was separated from God by his desire to act on his own. The effect on a plate glass window is the same whether a pebble or a boulder is hurled at it - the thousands of fragments can never be regathered.

In the case of man's sin, however, God already had a plan in motion to overcome the effects of the rebellion. The entire Bible is the story of how that plan unfolds, ultimately leading to God's own visit to earth through his son, Jesus. His sinless life and death made it possible for God to offer forgiveness to all who want it. Our small and large acts of rebellion prove that we are descendants of Adam. Only by asking forgiveness of Jesus Christ can we become children of God.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * The first zoologist-namer of animals
- * The first landscape architect, placed in the garden to care for it
- * Father of the human race
- * The first person made in the image of God, and the first human to share an intimate personal relationship with God

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Avoided responsibility and blamed others; chose to hide rather than to confront; made excuses rather than admitting the truth
- * Greatest mistake; teamed up with Eve to bring sin into the world

Lessons from his life:

- * As Adam's descendants, we all reflect to some degree the image of God
- * God wants people who, though free to do wrong, choose instead to love him
- * We should not blame others for our faults
- * We cannot hide from God

Vital statistics:

* Where: Garden of Eden

* Occupation: Caretaker, gardener, farmer

* Relatives: Wife: Eve. Sons: Cain, Abel, Seth. Numerous other children.
The only man who never had an earthly mother or father

Key verses:

“And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me,
she gave me of the tree, and I did eat” (Genesis 3:12).

“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22).

Adam’s story is told in Genesis 1:26-5:5. He is also mentioned in 1 Chronicles 1:1;
Job 31:33; Luke 3:38; Romans 5:14; 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45; 1 Timothy 2:13, 14.

EVE

We know very little about Eve, the first woman in the world, yet she is the mother of us all. She has the final piece in the intricate and amazing puzzle of God's creation. Adam now had another human being with whom to fellowship - someone with an equal share in God's image. Here was someone alike enough for companionship, yet different enough for relationship. Together they were greater than either could have been alone.

Eve was approached by Satan in the Garden of Eden, where she and Adam lived. He questioned her contentment. How could she be happy when she was not allowed to eat from one of the fruit trees? Satan helped Eve shift her focus from all that God had done and given to the one thing he had withheld. And Eve was willing to accept Satan's viewpoint without checking with God.

Sound familiar? How often is our attention drawn from the much which is ours to the little that isn't? We get that "I've got to have it" feeling. Eve was typical of us all, and we consistently show we are her descendants by repeating her mistakes. Our desires, like Eve's, can be quite easily manipulated. They are not the best basis for actions. We need to keep God in our decision-making process always. His word, the Holy Bible, is our guidebook in decision making.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * First wife and mother
- * First female. As such she shared a special relationship with God, had no co-responsibility with Adam over creation, and displayed certain characteristics of God

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Allowed her contentment to be undermined by Satan
- * Acted impulsively without talking either to God or to her mate
- * Not only sinned, but shared her sin with Adam
- * When confronted, blamed others

Lessons from her life:

- * The female shares in the image of God
- * The necessary ingredients for a strong marriage are commitment to each other, companionship with each other, complete oneness, absence of shame (Genesis 2:24, 25)
- * The basic human tendency to sin goes back to the beginning of the human race

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Garden of Eden
- * Occupation: Wife, helper, companion, co-manager of Eden
- * Relatives: Husband: Adam. Sons: Cain, Abel, Seth. Numerous other children

Key verse:

"And the Lord God said, it is not good that the man should be alone, I will make him an help meet" (Genesis 2:18).

Eve's story is told in Genesis 2:19-4:26. Her death is not mentioned in Scripture.

ABEL

Abel was the second child born into the world, but the first one to obey God. All we know about this man is that his parents were Adam and Eve, he was a shepherd, he presented pleasing sacrifices to God, and his life was ended by his jealous older brother, Cain.

The Holy Bible doesn't tell us why God liked Abel's gift and disliked Cain's, but both Cain and Abel knew what God expected. Only Abel obeyed. Throughout history, Abel is remembered for his obedience and faith (Hebrews 11:4), and he is called "righteous" (Matthew 23:35).

The Holy Bible is filled with God's general guidelines and expectations for our lives. It is also filled with more specific directions. Like Abel, we must obey regardless of the cost, and trust God to make things right.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * First member of the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11
- * First shepherd
- * First martyr for truth (Matthew 23:35)

Lessons from his life:

- * God hears those who come to him
- * God recognizes the innocent person, and sooner or later punishes the guilty

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Just outside of Eden
- * Occupation: Shepherd
- * Relatives: Parents: Adam and Eve. Brother: Cain

Key verse:

"By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh" (Hebrews 11:4).

Abel's story is told in Genesis 4:1-8. He is also mentioned in Matthew 23:35; Luke 11:51; Hebrews 11:4 and 12:24.

CAIN

Conflicts between children in a family seem inevitable. Sibling relationships allow both competition and cooperation. In most cases, the mixture of loving and fighting eventually creates a strong bond between brothers and sisters. It isn't unusual, though, to hear parents say, "They fight so much I hope they don't kill each other before they grow up." In Cain's case, the troubling potential became a tragedy.

Cain got angry. Furious. Both he and his brother Abel had made sacrifices to God, and his had been rejected. Cain's reaction gives us a clue that his attitude was probably wrong from the start. Cain had a choice to make. He could correct his attitude about his sacrifice to God, or he could take out his anger on his brother. His decision is a clear reminder of how often we are aware of opposite choices, yet choose the wrong just as Cain did. We may not be choosing to murder, but we are still intentionally choosing what we shouldn't.

The feelings motivating our behavior can't always be changed by simple thought-power. But here we can begin to experience God's willingness to help. Asking for his help to do what is right can prevent us from doing what we will later regret.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * First human child
- * First to follow in father's profession, farming

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * When disappointed, reacted in anger
- * Took the negative option even when a positive possibility was offered
- * Was the first murderer

Lessons from his life:

- * Anger is not necessarily a sin, but actions motivated by anger can be sinful.
Anger should be the energy behind good action, not evil action
- * What we offer to God must be from the heart - the best we are and have
- * The consequences of sin may last a lifetime

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Near Eden, which was probably located in present-day Iraq or Iran
- * Occupation: Farmer, then nomad
- * Relatives: Parents: Adam and Eve. Brothers: Abel, Seth, and others not mentioned by name

Key verse:

"If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? And if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door" (Genesis 4:7).

Cain's story is told in Genesis 4:1-17. He is also mentioned in Hebrews 11:4; 1 John 3:12; Jude 1:11.

NOAH

The story of Noah's life involves not one, but two great and tragic floods. The world in Noah's day was flooded with evil. Of God's people, only Noah remembered the God of creation, perfection, and love. God's response to the severe situation was a 120-year-long last chance, during which he had Noah build a graphic illustration of the message of his life. For Noah, obedience meant a long-term commitment to a project.

Many of us have trouble sticking to any project, whether or not it is directed by God. It is interesting that the length of Noah's obedience was greater than the lifespan of people today. Our only comparable long-term project is our very lives. But perhaps this is one great challenge Noah's life gives us - to live an entire lifetime of obedience and gratitude.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Only follower of God left in his generation
- * Second father of the human race
- * Man of patience, consistency, and obedience
- * First major shipbuilder

Weakness and mistake:

- * Got drunk and embarrassed himself in front of his sons

Lessons from his life:

- * God is faithful to those who obey him
- * God does not always protect us from trouble, but cares for us in spite of trouble
- * Obedience is a long-term commitment
- * A man may be faithful, but his sinful nature always travels with him

Vital statistics:

- * Where: We're not told how far from the Garden of Eden people had settled
- * Occupation: Farmer, shipbuilder, preacher
- * Relatives: Grandfather: Methuselah. Father: Lamech. Sons: Ham, Shem, and Japheth

Key verse:

"Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he" (Genesis 6:22).

Noah's story is told in Genesis 5:29-10:32. He is also mentioned in 1 Chronicles 1:4; Isaiah 54:9; Ezekiel 14:14, 20; Matthew 24:37, 38; Luke 3:36; 17:26, 27; Hebrews 11:7; 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5.

LOT

Some people simply drift through life. Their choices, when they can muster the will to choose, tend to follow the course of least resistance. Lot was such a person.

While still young, Lot lost his father. Although this must have been hard on him, he was not left without strong role models in his grandfather Terah and his uncle Abram, who raised him. Still, Lot did not develop their sense of purpose. Throughout his life he was so caught up in the present moment that he seemed incapable of seeing the consequences of his actions. It is hard to imagine what his life would have been like without Abram's careful attention and God's intervention.

By the time Lot drifted out of the picture, his life had taken an ugly turn. He had so blended into the sinful culture of his day that he did not want to leave it. Then his daughters committed incest with him. His drifting finally took him in a very specific direction - destruction.

Lot, however, is called "just" and "righteous" in the New Testament (2 Peter 2:7, 8). Ruth, a descendant of Moab, was an ancestor of Jesus, even though Moab was born as a result of Lot's incestuous relationship with one of his daughters. Lot's story gives hope to us that God forgives and often brings about positive circumstances from evil.

What is the direction of your life? Are you headed toward God or away from him? If you're a drifter, the choice for God may seem difficult, but it is the one choice that puts all other choices in a different light.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * He was a successful businessman
- * Peter calls him a just and righteous man (2 Peter 2:7, 8)

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * When faced with decisions, he tended to put off deciding, then chose the easiest course of action
- * When given a choice, his first reaction was to think of himself

Lesson from his life:

- * God wants us to do more than drift through life; he wants us to be an influence for him

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Lived first in Ur of the Chaldeans (Chaldees), then moved to Canaan with Abram. Eventually he moved to the wicked city of Sodom
- * Occupation: Wealthy sheep and cattle rancher; also a city official
- * Relatives: Father: Haran. Adopted by Abram when his father died. The name of his wife, who turned into a pillar of salt, is not mentioned

Key verse:

"And while he lingered, the men laid hold upon his hand, and upon the hand of his wife, and upon the hand of his two daughters; the Lord being merciful unto him: and they brought him forth, and set him without the city" (Genesis 19:16).

Lot's story is told in Genesis 11-14; 19. He is also mentioned in Deuteronomy 2:9; Luke 17:28-32; 2 Peter 2:7.

MELCHIZEDEK

Do you like a good mystery? History is full of them! They usually involve people. One of the most mysterious people in the Holy Bible is the King of Peace, Melchizedek. He appeared one day in the life of Abraham (then Abram) and was never heard from again. What happened that day, however, was to be remembered throughout history and eventually became a subject of a New Testament letter (Hebrews).

This meeting between Abram and Melchizedek was most unusual. Although the two men were strangers and foreigners to each other, they shared a most important characteristic: both worshiped and served the one God who made heaven and earth. This was a great moment of triumph for Abram. He had just defeated an army and regained the freedom of a large group of captives. If there was any doubt in his mind about whose victory it was, Melchizedek set the record straight by reminding Abram, "Blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand" (Genesis 14:20). Abram recognized that this man worshiped the same God he did.

Melchizedek was one of a small group of God-honoring people throughout the Old Testament who came in contact with the Jews (Israelites) but were not Jews themselves. This indicates that the requirement to be a follower of God is not genetic, but is based on faithfully obeying his teachings and recognizing his greatness.

Do you let God speak to you through other people? In evaluating others, do you consider God's impact on their lives? Are you aware of the similarities between yourself and others who worship God, even if their form of worship is quite different from yours? Do you know the God of the Holy Bible well enough to know if you truly worship him? Allow Melchizedek, Abraham, David, and Jesus, along with many other persons in the Holy Bible, to show you this great God, creator of heaven and earth. He wants you to know how much he loves you; he wants you to know him personally.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * The first priest/king of Scripture - a leader with a heart tuned to God
- * Good at encouraging others to serve God wholeheartedly
- * A man whose character reflected his love for God
- * A person in the Old Testament who reminds us of Jesus and who some believe really was Jesus

Lesson from his life:

- * Live for God and you're likely to be at the right place at the right time.
Examine your heart: to whom or what is your greatest loyalty?
If you can honestly answer God, you are living for him.

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Ruled in Salem, site of the future Jerusalem
- * Occupation: King of Salem and priest of the most high God

Key verses:

“For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the most high God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings, and blessed him; ... now consider how great this man was, unto whom even the patriarch Abraham gave the tenth of the spoils” (Hebrews 7:1, 4).

Melchizedek’s story is told in Genesis 14:17-20. He is also mentioned in Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 5-7.

ISHMAEL

Have you ever wondered if you were born into the wrong family? We don't know much about how Ishmael viewed life, but that question must have haunted him at times. His life, his name, and his position were bound up in a conflict between two jealous women. Sarah, impatient with God's timetable, had taken matters into her own hands, deciding to have a child through another woman. Hagar, servant that she was, submitted to being used this way. But her pregnancy gave birth to strong feelings of superiority toward Sarah. Into this tense atmosphere, Ishmael was born.

For 16 years Abraham thought Ishmael's birth had fulfilled God's promise. He was surprised to hear God say that the promised child would be Abraham and Sarah's very own. Sarah's pregnancy and Isaac's birth must have had a devastating impact on Ishmael. Until then he had been treated as a son and heir, but this late arrival made his future uncertain. During Isaac's weaning celebration, Sarah caught Ishmael teasing his half brother. As a result, Hagar and Ishmael were permanently expelled from Abraham's family.

Much of what happened throughout his life cannot be blamed on Ishmael. He was caught in a process much bigger than himself. However, his actions showed that he had chosen to become part of the problem and not part of the solution. He chose to live under his circumstances rather than above them.

The choice he made is one we must all make. There are circumstances over which we have no control (heredity, for instance), but there are others that we can control (decisions we make). At the heart of the matter is the sin-oriented nature we have all inherited. It can be partly controlled, although not overcome, by human effort. In the context of history, Ishmael's life represents the mess we make when we don't try to change the things we could change. The God of the Holy Bible has offered a solution. His answer is not control, but a changed life. To have a changed life, turn to God, trust him to forgive your sinful past, and begin to change your attitude toward him and others.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * One of the first to experience the physical sign of God's covenant, circumcision
- * Known for his ability as an archer and hunter
- * Fathered 12 sons who became leaders of warrior tribes

Weakness and mistake:

- * Failed to recognize the place of his half brother, Isaac, and mocked him

Lesson from his life:

- * God's plans incorporate people's mistakes

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Canaan and Egypt
- * Occupation: Hunter, archer, warrior
- * Relatives: Parents: Hagar and Abraham. Half brother: Isaac

Key verses:

“And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? Fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation” (Genesis 21:17, 18).

Ishmael’s story is told in Genesis 16-17; 25:12-18; 28:8, 9; 36.

He is also mentioned in 1 Chronicles 1:28-31; Romans 9:7-9; Galatians 4:12-31.

ABRAHAM

We all know that there are consequences to any action we take. What we do can set into motion a series of events that may continue long after we're gone. Unfortunately, when we are making a decision most of us think only of the immediate consequences. These are often misleading because they are short-lived.

Abraham had a choice to make. His decision was between setting out with his family and belongings for parts unknown or staying right where he was. He had to decide between the security of what he already had and the uncertainty of traveling under God's direction. All he had to go on was God's promise to guide and bless him. Abraham could hardly have been expected to visualize how much of the future was resting on his decision of whether to go or stay, but his obedience affected the history of the world. His decision to follow God set into motion the development of the nation that God would eventually use as his own when he visited earth himself. When Jesus Christ came to earth, God's promise was fulfilled; through Abraham the entire world was blessed.

You probably don't know the long-term effects of most decisions you make. But shouldn't the fact that there will be long-term results cause you to think carefully and seek God's guidance as you make choices and take action today?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * His faith pleased God
- * Became the founder of the Jewish nation
- * Was respected by others and courageous in defending his family at any cost
- * Was not only a caring father to his own family, but practiced hospitality to others
- * Was a successful and wealthy rancher
- * Usually avoided conflicts, but when they were unavoidable, he allowed his opponent to set the rules for settling the dispute

Weakness and mistake:

- * Under direct pressure, he distorted the truth

Lessons from his life:

- * God desires dependence, trust, and faith in him - not faith in our ability to please him
- * God's plan from the beginning has been to make himself known to all people

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Born in Ur of the Chaldeans (Chaldees); spent most of his life in the land of Canaan
- * Occupation: Wealthy livestock owner
- * Relatives: Brothers: Nahor and Haran. Father: Terah. Wife: Sarah. Nephew: Lot. Sons: Ishmael and Isaac
- * Contemporaries: Abimelech, Melchizedek

Key verse:

“And he believed in the Lord and he counted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).

Abraham’s story is told in Genesis 11-25. He is also mentioned in Exodus 2:24; Acts 7:2-8; Romans 4; Galatians 3; Hebrews 2, 6, 7, 11.

SARAH

There probably isn't anything harder to do than wait, whether we are expecting something good, something bad, or an unknown.

One way we often cope with a long wait (or even a short one) is to begin helping God get his plan into action. Sarah tried this approach. She was too old to expect to have a child of her own, so she thought God must have something else in mind. From Sarah's limited point of view this could only be to give Abraham a son through another woman - a common practice in her day. The plan seemed harmless enough. Abraham would sleep with Sarah's servant girl, who would then give birth to a child. Sarah would take the child as her own. The plan worked beautifully - at first. But as you read about the events that followed, you will be struck by how often Sarah must have regretted the day she decided to push God's timetable ahead.

Another way we cope with a long wait is to gradually conclude that what we're waiting for is never going to happen. Sarah waited 90 years for a baby! When God told her she would finally have one of her own, she laughed, not so much from a lack of faith in what God could do, but from doubt about what he could do through her. When confronted about her laughter, she lied - as she had seen her husband do from time to time. She probably didn't want her true feelings to be known.

What parts of your life seem to be "on hold" right now? Do you understand that this may be part of God's plan for you? The Holy Bible has more than enough clear direction to keep us busy while we're waiting for some particular part of life to move ahead.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was intensely loyal to her own child
- * Became the mother of a nation and an ancestor of Jesus
- * Was a woman of faith, the first woman listed in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Had trouble believing God's promises to her
- * Attempted to work problems out on her own, without consulting God
- * Tried to cover her faults by blaming others

Lessons from her life:

- * God responds to faith even in the midst of failure
- * God is not bound by what usually happens; he can stretch the limits and cause unheard-of events to occur

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Married Abram in Ur of the Chaldeans (Chaldees), then moved with him to Canaan
- * Occupation: Wife, mother, household manager
- * Relatives: Father: Terah. Husband: Abraham. Brothers: Nahor and Haran. Nephew: Lot. Son: Isaac

Key verse:

“Through faith also Sarah herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised” (Hebrews 11:11).

Sarah’s story is told in Genesis 11-25. She is also mentioned in Isaiah 51:2; Romans 4:19; 9:9; Hebrews 11:11; 1 Peter 3:6.

ISAAC

A name carries great authority. It sets you apart. It triggers memories. The sound of it calls you to attention anywhere.

Many Holy Bible names accomplished even more. They were often descriptions of important facts about one's past and hopes for the future. The choice of the name Isaac, "laughter," for Abraham and Sarah's son must have created a variety of feelings in them each time it was spoken. At times it must have recalled their shocked laughter at God's announcement that they would be parents in their old age. At other times, it must have brought back the joyful feelings of receiving their long-awaited answer to prayer for a child. Most important, it was a testimony to God's power in making his promise a reality.

In a family of forceful initiators, Isaac was the quiet, "mind-my-own-business" type unless he was specifically called on to take action. He was the protected only child from the time Sarah got rid of Ishmael until Abraham arranged his marriage to Rebekah.

In his own family, Isaac had the patriarchal position, but Rebekah had the power. Rather than stand his ground, Isaac found it easier to compromise or lie to avoid confrontations.

In spite of these shortcomings, Isaac was part of God's plan. The model his father gave him included a great gift of faith in the one true God. God's promise to create a great nation through which he would bless the world was passed on by Isaac to his twin sons.

It is usually not hard to identify with Isaac in his weaknesses. But consider for a moment that God works through people in spite of their shortcomings and, often, through them. As you pray, put into words your desire to be available to God. You will discover that his willingness to use you is even greater than your desire to be used.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * He was the miracle child born to Sarah and Abraham when she was 90 years old and he was 100
- * He was the first descendant in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham
- * He seems to have been a caring and consistent husband, at least until his sons were born
- * He demonstrated great patience

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Under pressure he tended to lie
- * In conflict he sought to avoid confrontation
- * He played favorites between his sons and alienated his wife

Lessons from his life:

- * Patience often brings rewards
- * Both God's plans and his promises are larger than people
- * God keeps his promises! He remains faithful though we are often faithless
- * Playing favorites is sure to bring family conflict

Vital statistics:

- * Where: The area called the Negeb, in the southern part of Palestine, between Kadesh and Shur (Genesis 20:1)
- * Occupation: Wealthy livestock owner
- * Relatives: Parents: Abraham and Sarah. Half brother: Ishmael. Wife: Rebekah
Sons: Jacob and Esau

Key verse:

“And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed, and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him” (Genesis 17:19).

Isaac's story is told in Genesis 17:15-35:29. He is also mentioned in Romans 9:7, 8; Hebrews 11:17-20; James 2:21-24.

HAGAR

Escape of some kind is usually the most tempting solution to our problems. In fact, it can become a habit. Hagar was a person who used that approach. When the going got tough, she usually got going - in the other direction.

However, it is worthwhile to note that the biggest challenges Hagar faced were brought on by other people's choices. Sarah chose her to be a substitute child-bearer, and Hagar probably had little to say in the matter.

It isn't hard to understand how Hagar's pregnancy caused her to look down on Sarah. But that brought on hard feelings, and Sarah consequently punished Hagar. This motivated her first escape. When she returned to the family and gave birth to Ishmael, Sarah's continued barrenness must have contributed to bitterness on both sides.

When Isaac was finally born, Sarah looked for any excuse to have Hagar and Ishmael sent away. She found it when she caught Ishmael teasing Isaac. In the desert, out of water and facing the death of her son, Hagar once again tried to escape. She walked away so she wouldn't have to watch her son die. Once again, God graciously intervened.

Have you noticed how patiently God operates to make our escape attempts fail? Have you begun to learn that escape is only a temporary solution? God's continual desire is for us to face our problems with his help. We experience his help most clearly in and through conflicts and difficulties, not away from them. Are there problems in your life for which you've been using the "Hagar solution"? Choose one of those problems, ask for God's help, and begin to face it today.

Strength and accomplishment:

- * Mother of Abraham's first child, Ishmael, who became founder of the Arab nations

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * When faced with problems, she tended to run away
- * Her pregnancy brought out strong feelings of pride and arrogance

Lessons from her life:

- * God is faithful to his plan and promises, even when we complicate the process
- * God shows himself as one who knows us and wants to be known by us
- * The New Testament uses Hagar as a symbol of those who would pursue favor with God by their own efforts, rather than by trusting in his mercy and forgiveness

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Canaan and Egypt
- * Occupation: Servant, mother
- * Relatives: Son: Ishmael

Key verse:

"And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands" (Genesis 16:9).

Hagar's story is told in Genesis 16-21. She is also mentioned in Galatians 4:24, 25.

REBEKAH

Some people are initiators. They help get the ball rolling. Rebekah would easily stand out in this group. Her life was characterized by initiative. When she saw a need she took action, even though the action was not always right.

It was Rebekah's initiative that first caught the attention of Eliezer, the servant Abraham sent to find a wife for Isaac. It was common courtesy to give a drink to a stranger, but it took added character to also fetch water for ten thirsty camels. Later, after hearing the details of Eliezer's mission, Rebekah was immediately willing to be Isaac's bride.

Several later events help us see how initiative can be misdirected. Rebekah was aware that God's plan would be channeled through Jacob, not Esau (Genesis 25:23). So not only did Jacob become her favorite; she actually planned ways to ensure that he would overshadow his older twin. Meanwhile, Isaac preferred Esau. This created a conflict between the couple. She felt justified in deceiving her husband when the time came to bless the sons, and her ingenious plan was carried out to perfection.

Most of the time we try to justify the things we choose to do. Often we attempt to add God's approval to our actions. We are responsible for what we do and must always be cautious about our motives. When thinking about a course of action, are you simply seeking God's stamp of approval on something you've already decided to do? Initiative and action are admirable and right when they are controlled by God's wisdom.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * When confronted with a need, she took immediate action
- * She was accomplishment oriented

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Her initiative was not always balanced by wisdom
- * She favored one of her sons
- * She deceived her husband

Lessons from her life:

- * Our actions must be guided by God's Word
- * God makes use even of our mistakes in his plan
- * Parental favoritism hurts a family

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Haran, Canaan
- * Occupation: Wife, mother, household manager
- * Relatives: Grandparents: Nahor and Milcah. Father: Bethuel. Husband: Isaac. Brother: Laban. Twin sons: Esau and Jacob

Key verses:

“And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death” (Genesis 24:67).

“And Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob” (Genesis 25:28).

Rebekah’s story is told in Genesis 24-49. She is also mentioned in Romans 9:10.

ESAU

Common sense isn't all that common. In fact, the common thread in many decisions is that they don't make sense. Esau's life was filled with choices he must have regretted bitterly. He appears to have been a person who found it hard to consider consequences, reacting to the need of the moment without realizing what he was giving up to meet that need. Trading his birthright for a bowl of pottage (stew) was the clearest example of this weakness. He also chose wives in direct opposition to his parents' wishes. He learned the hard way.

What are you willing to trade for the things you want? Do you find yourself, at times, willing to negotiate anything for what you feel you need now? Do your family, spouse, integrity, body, or soul get included in these deals? Do you sometimes feel that the important parts of life escaped while you were grabbing for something else?

If so, your initial response, like Esau's, may be deep anger. In itself that isn't wrong, as long as you direct the energy of that anger toward a solution and not toward yourself or others as the cause of the problem. Your greatest need is to find a focal point other than "what I need now." The only worthy focal point is God. A relationship with him will not only give an ultimate purpose to your life; it will also be a daily guideline for living. Meet him in the pages of the Holy Bible.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Ancestor of the Edomites
- * Known for his archery skill
- * Able to forgive after explosive anger

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * When faced with important decisions, tended to choose according to the immediate need rather than the long-range effect
- * Angered his parents by poor marriage choices

Lessons from his life:

- * God allows certain events in our lives to accomplish his overall purposes, but we are still responsible for our actions
- * Consequences are important to consider
- * It is possible to have great anger and yet not sin

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Canaan
- * Occupation: Skillful hunter
- * Relatives: Parents: Isaac and Rebekah. Brother: Jacob.
Wives: Judith, Basemath, and Mahalath

Key verses:

“Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears” (Hebrews 12:14-17).

Esau’s story is told in Genesis 25-36. He is also mentioned in Malachi 1:2; Romans 9:13; Hebrews 12:16, 17.

JACOB

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are among the most significant people in the Old Testament. It is important to realize that this significance is not based upon their personal characters, but upon the character of God. They were all men who earned the grudging respect and even fear of their peers; They were wealthy and powerful, and yet each was capable of lying, deceit, and selfishness. They were not the perfect heroes we might have expected; instead they were just like us, trying to please God, but often falling short.

Jacob was the third link in God's plan to start a nation from Abraham. The success of that plan was more often in spite of than because of Jacob's life. Before Jacob was born, God promised that his plan would be worked out through Jacob and not his twin brother, Esau. Although Jacob's methods were not always respectable, his skill, determination, and patience have to be admired. As we follow him from birth to death, we are able to see God's work.

Jacob's life had four stages, each marked by a personal encounter with God. In the first stage, Jacob lived up to his name, which means "one who supplants, undermines, or grabs." He grabbed Esau's heel at birth, and by the time he fled from home, he had also grabbed his brother's birthright and blessing. During his flight, God first appeared to him. Not only did God confirm to Jacob his blessing, but he awakened in Jacob a personal knowledge of himself. In the second stage, Jacob experienced life from the other side, being manipulated and deceived by Laban. But there is a curious change: the Jacob of stage one would simply have left Laban, whereas the Jacob of stage two, after deciding to leave, waited six years for God's permission. In the third stage, Jacob was in a new role as grabber. This time, by the Jordan River, he grabbed on to God and wouldn't let go. He realized his dependence on the God who had continued to bless him. His relationship to God became essential to his life, and his name was changed to Israel, "a prince who prevails with God." Jacob's last stage of life was to be grabbed - God achieved a firm hold on him. In responding to Joseph's invitation to come to Egypt, Jacob was clearly unwilling to make a move without God's approval.

Can you think of times when God has made himself known to you? Do you allow yourself to meet him as you study his Word? What difference have these experiences made in your life? Are you more like the young Jacob, forcing God to track you down in the wilderness of your own plans and mistakes? Or are you more like the Jacob who placed his desires and plans before God for his approval before taking any action?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Father of the 12 tribes of Israel
- * Third in the Abrahamic line of God's plan
- * Determined, willing to work long and hard for what he wanted
- * Good businessman

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * When faced with conflict, relied on his own resources rather than going to God for help
- * Tended to accumulate wealth for its own sake

Lessons from his life:

- * Security does not lie in the accumulation of goods
- * All human intentions and actions - for good or evil - are woven by God into his ongoing plan

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Canaan
- * Occupation: Shepherd, livestock owner
- * Relatives: Parents: Isaac and Rebekah. Brother: Esau. Father-in-law: Laban.
Wives: Rachel and Leah. Twelve sons and one daughter are mentioned in the Holy Bible

Key verse:

“And behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of” (Genesis 28:15).

Jacob's story is told in Genesis 25-50. He is also mentioned in Hosea 12:2-5; Matthew 1:2; 22:32; Acts 3:13; 7:46; Romans 9:11-13; 11:26; Hebrews 11:9, 20, 21.

RACHEL

History seems to repeat itself. Twice a town well at Haran was the site of significant events in one family's story. It was here that Rebekah met Eliezer, Abraham's servant, who had come to find a wife for Isaac. Many years later, Rebekah's son Jacob returned the favor by serving his cousin Rachel and her sheep from the same well. The relationship that developed between them not only reminds us that romance is not a modern invention, but also teaches us a few lessons about patience and love.

Jacob's love for Rachel was both patient and practical. Jacob had the patience to wait seven years for her, but he kept busy in the meantime. His commitment to Rachel kindled a strong loyalty within her. In fact, her loyalty to Jacob got out of hand and became self-destructive. She was frustrated by her barrenness and desperate to compete with her sister for Jacob's affection. She was trying to gain from Jacob what he had already given: devoted love.

Rachel's attempts to earn the unbearable are a picture of a much greater error we can make. Like her, we find ourselves trying somehow to earn love - God's love. But apart from his Word, we end up with one of two false ideas. Either we think we've been good enough to deserve his love or we recognize we aren't able to earn his love and assume that it cannot be ours. If the Holy Bible makes no other point, it shouts this one: God loves us! His love had no beginning and is incredibly patient. All we need to do is respond, not try to earn what is freely offered. God has said in many ways, "I love you.

I have demonstrated that love to you by all I've done for you. I have even sacrificed my Son, Jesus, to pay the price for what is unacceptable about you - your sin. Now, live because of my love. Respond to me; love me with your whole being; give yourself to me in thanksgiving, not as payment." Live life fully, in the freedom of knowing you are loved.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * She showed great loyalty to her family
- * She mothered Joseph and Benjamin after being barren for many years

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Her envy and competitiveness marred her relationship with her sister, Leah
- * She was capable of dishonesty when she took her loyalty too far
- * She failed to recognize that Jacob's devotion was not dependent on her ability to have children

Lessons from her life:

- * Loyalty must be controlled by what is true and right
- * Love is accepted, not earned

Vital statistics:

* Where: Haran

* Occupation: Shepherdess, housewife

* Relatives: Father: Laban. Aunt: Rebekah. Sister: Leah. Husband: Jacob.

Sons: Joseph and Benjamin

Key verse:

“And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her” (Genesis 29:20).

Rachel’s story is told in Genesis 29-35:20. She is also mentioned in Ruth 4:11.

LABAN

We're all selfish, but some of us have a real corner on the weakness. Laban's whole life was stamped by self-centeredness. His chief goal was to look out for himself. He made profitable arrangements for his sister Rebekah's marriage to Isaac and used his daughters' lives as bargaining chips. Jacob eventually outmaneuvered Laban, but the older man was unwilling to admit defeat. His hold on Jacob was broken, but he still tried to maintain some kind of control by getting Jacob to promise to be gone for good. He realized that Jacob and Jacob's God were more than he could handle.

On the surface, we may find it difficult to identify with Laban. But his selfishness is one point we have in common. Like him, we often have a strong tendency to control people and events to our benefit. Our "good" reasons for treating others the way we do may simply be a thin cover on our self-centered motives. We may not even recognize our own selfishness. One way to discover it is to examine our willingness to admit we're wrong. Laban could not bring himself to do this. If you ever amaze yourself by what you say and do to avoid facing up to wrong actions, you are getting a glimpse of your selfishness in action. Recognizing selfishness is painful, but it is the first step on the road back to God.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Controlled two generations of marriages in the Abrahamic family
- * Quick-witted

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Manipulated others for his own benefit
- * Unwilling to admit wrongdoing
- * Benefited financially by using Jacob, but never fully benefited spiritually by knowing and worshiping Jacob's God

Lessons from his life:

- * Those who set out to use people will eventually find themselves used
- * God's plan cannot be blocked

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Haran
- * Occupation: Wealthy sheep breeder
- * Relatives: Father: Bethuel. Sister: Rebekah. Brother-in-law: Isaac.
Daughters: Rachel and Leah. Son-in-law: Jacob

Key verse:

"Except the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely thou hadst sent me away now empty. God hath seen mine affliction and the labour of my hands, and rebuked thee yesternight" (Genesis 31:42).

Laban's story is told in Genesis 24:1-31:55.

JOSEPH

As a youngster, Joseph was overconfident. His natural self-assurance, increased by being Jacob's favorite son and by knowing of God's designs on his life, was unbearable to his ten older brothers, who eventually conspired against him. But this self-assurance, molded by pain and combined with a personal knowledge of God, allowed him to survive and prosper where most would have failed. He added quiet wisdom to his confidence and won the hearts of everyone he met - Potiphar, the jailer, other prisoners, the king, and after many years, even those ten brothers.

Perhaps you can identify with one or more of these hardships Joseph experienced: he was betrayed and deserted by his family, exposed to sexual temptation, and punished for doing the right thing; he endured a long imprisonment and was forgotten by those he helped. As you read his story, note what Joseph did in each case. His positive response transformed each setback into a step forward. He didn't spend much time asking "Why?" His approach was "What shall I do now?" Those who met Joseph were aware that wherever he went and whatever he did, God was with him. When you're facing a setback, the beginning of a Joseph-like attitude is to acknowledge that God is with you. There is nothing like his presence to shed new light on a dark situation.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Rose in power from slave to ruler of Egypt
- * Was known for his personal integrity
- * Was a man of spiritual sensitivity
- * Prepared a nation to survive a famine

Weakness and mistake:

- * His youthful pride causes friction with his brothers

Lessons from his life:

- * What matters is not so much the events or circumstances of life, but your response to them
- * With God's help, any situation can be used for good, even when others intend it for evil

Vital statistics

- * Where: Canaan, Egypt
- * Occupation: Shepherd, slave, convict, ruler
- * Relatives: Parents: Jacob and Rachel. Eleven brothers and one sister named in the Holy Bible. Wife: Asenath. Sons: Manasseh and Ephraim

Key verse:

"And Pharaoh said unto his servants, Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom the Spirit of God is?" (Genesis 41:38).

Joseph's story is told in Genesis 30-50. He is also mentioned in Hebrews 11:22.

REUBEN

Parents are usually the best judges of their children's character. Jacob summarized the personality of his son Reuben by comparing him to water. Except when frozen, water has no stable shape of its own. It always shapes itself to its container or environment. Reuben usually had good intentions, but he seemed unable to stand against a crowd. His instability made him hard to trust. He had both private and public values, but these contradicted each other. He went along with his brothers in their action against Joseph, while hoping to counteract the evil in private. The plan failed. Compromise has a way of destroying convictions. Without convictions, lack of direction will destroy life. Reuben's sleeping with his father's concubine showed how little he had left of the integrity he had displayed earlier in life.

How consistent are your public and private lives? We may want to think they are separate, but we can't deny that they affect each other. What convictions are present in your life at all times? How closely does Jacob's description of his son - "unstable as water" - describe your life?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Saved Joseph's life by talking the other brothers out of murder
- * Showed intense love for his father by offering his own sons as a guarantee that Benjamin's life would be safe

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Gave in quickly to group pressure
- * Did not directly protect Joseph from his brothers, although as eldest son he had the authority to do so
- * Slept with his father's concubine

Lessons from his life:

- * Public and private integrity must be the same, or one will destroy the other
- * Punishment for sin may not be immediate but is certain

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Canaan, Egypt
- * Occupation: Shepherd
- * Relatives: Parents: Jacob and Leah. Eleven brothers, one sister

Key verses:

"Reuben, thou art my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power; unstable as water, thou shalt not excel; because thou wentest up to thy father's bed; then defiledst thou it: he went up to my couch" (Genesis 49:3, 4).

Reuben's story is told in Genesis 29-50.

JUDAH

People who are leaders stand out. They don't necessarily look or act a certain way until the need for their action is apparent. Among their skills are outspokenness, decisiveness, action, and control. These skills can be used for great good or great evil. Jacob's fourth son, Judah, was a natural leader. The events of his life provided many opportunities to exercise those skills. Unfortunately Judah's decisions were often shaped more by the pressures of the moment than by a conscious desire to cooperate with God's plan. But when he did recognize his mistakes, he was willing to admit them. His experience with Tamar and the final confrontation with Joseph are both examples of Judah's willingness to bear the blame when confronted. It was one of the qualities he passed on to his descendant David.

Whether or not we have Judah's natural leadership qualities, we share with him a tendency to be blind toward our own sin. Too often, however, we don't share his willingness to admit mistakes. From Judah we can learn that it is not wise to wait until our errors force us to admit to wrongdoing. It is far better to admit our mistakes openly, to shoulder the blame, and to seek forgiveness.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was a natural leader - outspoken and decisive
- * Thought clearly and took action in high-pressure situations
- * Was willing to stand by his word and put himself on the line when necessary
- * Was the fourth son of 12, through whom God would eventually bring David and Jesus, the Messiah

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Suggested to his brothers they sell Joseph into slavery
- * Failed to keep his promise to his daughter-in-law, Tamar

Lessons from his life:

- * God is in control, far beyond the immediate situation
- * Procrastination often makes matters worse
- * Judah's offer to substitute his life for Benjamin's is a picture of what his descendant Jesus would do for all people

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Canaan and Egypt
- * Occupation: Shepherd
- * Relatives: Parents: Jacob and Leah. Wife: Bathshua. Daughter-in-law: Tamar. Eleven brothers, at least one sister, and at least five sons

Key verses:

“Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise: thy hand shall be in the neck of thine enemies; thy father’s children shall bow down before thee. Judah is a lion’s whelp: from the prey, my son, thou art gone up: he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as an old lion; who shall rouse him up? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be” (Genesis 49:8-10).

Judah’s story is told in Genesis 29:35-50:26. He is also mentioned in 1 Chronicles 2-4.

MOSES

Some people can't stay out of trouble. When conflict breaks out, they always manage to be nearby. Reaction is their favorite action. This was Moses. He seemed drawn to what needed to be righted. Throughout his life, he was at his finest and his worst responding to the conflicts around him. Even the burning bush experience was an illustration of his character. Having spotted the fire and seen that the bush did not burn, he had to investigate. Whether jumping into a fight to defend a Hebrew slave or trying to referee a struggle between two kinsmen, when Moses saw conflict, he reacted.

Over the years, however, an amazing thing happened to Moses' character. He didn't stop reacting, but rather learned to react correctly. The kaleidoscopic action of each day of leading two million people in the wilderness was more than enough challenge for Moses' reacting ability. Much of the time he served as a buffer between God and the people. At one moment he had to respond to God's anger at the people's stubbornness and forgetfulness. At another moment he had to react to the people's bickering and complaining. At still another moment he had to react to their unjustified attacks on his character.

Leadership often involves reaction. If we want to react with instincts consistent with God's will, we develop habits of obedience to God. Consistent obedience to God is best developed in times of less stress. Then when stress comes, our natural reaction will be to obey God.

In our age of lowering moral standards, we find it almost impossible to believe that God would punish Moses for the one time he disobeyed outright. What we fail to see, however, is that God did not reject Moses; Moses simply disqualified himself to enter the Promised Land. Personal greatness does not make a person immune to error or its consequences.

In Moses we see an outstanding personality shaped by God. But we must not misunderstand what God did. He did not change who or what Moses was; he did not give Moses new abilities and strengths. Instead, he took Moses' characteristics and molded them until they were suited to his purposes. Does knowing this make a difference in your understanding of God's purpose in your life? He is trying to take what he created in the first place and use it for its intended purposes. The next time you talk with God, don't ask, "What should I change into?" but "How should I use my own abilities and strengths to do your will?"

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Egyptian education; desert training
- * Greatest Jewish leader; set the Exodus in motion
- * Prophet and lawgiver; recorder of the Ten Commandments
- * Author of the Pentateuch

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Failed to enter the Promised Land because of disobedience to God
- * Did not always recognize and use the talents of others

Lessons from his life:

- * God prepares, then uses. His timetable is life-sized
- * God does his greatest work through frail people

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Egypt, Midian, Sinai desert
- * Occupation: Prince, shepherd, leader of the Israelites
- * Relatives: Sister: Miriam. Brother: Aaron. Wife: Zipporah. Sons: Gershom and Eliezer.

Key verses:

“By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (Hebrews 11:24, 25).

Moses’ story is told in the book of Exodus through Deuteronomy. He is also mentioned in Acts 7:22-37; Hebrews 11:23-29.

JETHRO

People such as Jethro and Melchizedek - not Hebrews, but nevertheless worshipers of the true God - play an important role in the Old Testament. They remind us of God's commitment to the world. God chose one nation through whom to work, but his love and concern are for all nations!

Jethro's religious background prepared him for, rather than prevented him from, responding in faith to God. When he saw and heard what God had done for the Israelites, he worshiped God wholeheartedly. We can guess that for 40 years as Moses' father-in-law, Jethro had been watching God at work, molding a leader. Moses' and Jethro's relationship must have been close, for Moses readily accepted his father-in-law's advice. Each benefited from knowing the other. Jethro met God through Moses, and Moses received hospitality, his wife, and wisdom from Jethro.

The greatest gift one person can give another is an introduction to God. But that gift is hindered if the believer's attitude is, "I have the greatest gift to pass on to you, while you have nothing to give me in return." Real friends give to and receive from each other. The importance of introducing a friend to God does not make the friend's gifts to us insignificant. Rather, the believer is doubly blessed - first by receiving the gifts the friend wishes to give; then by growing in knowledge of the Lord. For we discover that in introducing another person to God, we increase our own awareness of God.

Is all you know about God a miscellaneous collection of trivia, or do you have a living relationship with him? Only with a vital relationship can you pass on to others the excitement of allowing God to guide your life.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * As father-in-law to Moses, he came to recognize the one true God
- * He was a practical troubleshooter and organizer

Lessons from his life:

- * Supervision and administration are team efforts
- * God's plan includes all nations

Vital statistics:

- * Where: The land of Midian and the Sinai Desert
- * Occupation: Shepherd, priest
- * Relatives: Daughter: Zipporah. Son-in-law: Moses. Son: Hobab

Key verse:

"And Jethro rejoiced for all the goodness which the Lord had done to Israel, whom he had delivered out of the hand of the Egyptians" (Exodus 18:9).

Jethro's story is told in Exodus 2:15-3:1; 18:1-27. He is also mentioned in Judges 1:16; 4:11.

AARON

Effective teamwork happens when each team member uses his or her special skills. Ideally, each member's strengths will contribute something important to the team effort. In this way, members make up for one another's weaknesses. Aaron made a good team with Moses. He provided Moses with one skill he lacked - effective public speaking. But while Aaron was necessary to Moses, he needed Moses as well. Without a guide, Aaron had little direction of his own. There was never any doubt as to who God's chosen and trained leader was. The pliability that made Aaron a good follower made him a weak leader. His major failures were caused by his inability to stand alone. His yielding to public pressure by making an idol was a good example of this weakness.

Most of us have more of the follower than the leader in us. We may even be good followers, following a good leader. But no leader is perfect, and no human deserves our complete allegiance. Only God deserves our complete loyalty and obedience. We need to be effective team members in using the skills and abilities God has given us. But if the team or the leader goes against God's Word, we must be willing to stand alone.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * First High Priest of God in Israel
- * Effective communicator; Moses' mouthpiece

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Pliable personality; gave in to people's demands for a golden calf
- * Joined with Moses in disobeying God's orders about the water-giving rock
- * Joined sister Miriam in complaining against Moses

Lessons from his life:

- * God gives individuals special abilities, which he weaves together for his use
- * The very skills that make a good team player sometimes also make a poor leader

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Egypt, Sinai peninsula
- * Occupation: Priest; Moses' second in command
- * Relatives: Brother: Moses. Sister: Miriam. Sons: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar

Key verses:

"And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses, and he said, Is not Aaron the Levite thy brother? I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he cometh forth to meet thee: and when he seeth thee, he will be glad in his heart... And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people" (Exodus 4:14, 16).

Aaron's story is told in Exodus - Deuteronomy 10:6. He is also mentioned in Hebrews 7:11.

NADAB / ABIHU

Some brothers, like Cain and Abel or Jacob and Esau, get each other in trouble. Nadab and Abihu got in trouble together.

Although little is known of their early years, the Holy Bible gives us an abundance of information about the environment in which they grew up. Born in Egypt, they were eyewitnesses of God's mighty acts of the Exodus. They saw their father, Aaron, their uncle, Moses, and their aunt, Miriam, in action many times. They had first-hand knowledge of God's holiness as few men have ever had, and for a while at least, they followed God wholeheartedly (Leviticus 8:36). But at a crucial moment they chose to treat with indifference the clear instructions from God. The consequence of their sin was fiery, instant, and shocking to all.

We are in danger of making the same mistake as these brothers when we treat lightly the justice and holiness of God. We must draw near to God while realizing that there is a proper fear of God. Don't forget that the opportunity to know God personally is based on his gracious invitation to an always unworthy people, not a gift to be taken for granted. Do your thoughts about God include a humble recognition of his great holiness?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Oldest sons of Aaron
- * Primary candidates to become High Priest after their father
- * Involved with the original consecration of the Tabernacle
- * Commended for doing "all things which the Lord commanded" (Leviticus 8:36)

Weakness and mistake:

- * Treated lightly God's direct commands

Lesson from their lives:

- * Sin has deadly consequences

Vital statistics:

- * Where: The Sinai peninsula
- * Occupation: Priests-in-training
- * Relatives: Father: Aaron. Uncle and Aunt: Moses and Miriam.
Brothers: Eleazar and Ithamar

Key verses:

"And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord" (Leviticus 10:1, 2).

The story of Nadab and Abihu is told in Leviticus 8-10. They are also mentioned in Exodus 24:1, 9; 28:1; Numbers 3:2-4; 26:61

MIRIAM

Ask older brothers or sisters what their greatest trial in life is and they will often answer, "My younger brother (or sister)!" This is especially true when the younger sibling is more successful than the older. The bonds of family loyalty can be strained to the breaking point.

When we first meet Miriam she is involved in one of history's most unusual baby-sitting jobs. She is watching her infant brother float on the Nile River in a waterproof cradle. Miriam's quick thinking allowed Moses to be raised by his own mother. Her protective superiority, reinforced by that event, must have been hard to give up as she watched her little brother rise to greatness.

Eventually Moses' choice of a wife gave Miriam an opportunity to criticize. It was natural for her insecurity to break out over this issue. With Moses married, Miriam was clearly no longer the most important woman in his life. The real issue, however, was not the kind of woman Moses had married. It was the fact that he was now the most important man in Israel. "Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? Hath he not spoken also by us?" No mention is made of Moses' response, but God had a quick answer for Miriam and Aaron. Without denying their role in his plan, God clearly pointed out his special relationship with Moses. Miriam was stricken with leprosy, a deadly disease, as punishment for her insubordination. But Moses, true to his character, intervened for his sister, so that God healed Miriam of her leprosy.

Before criticizing someone else, we need to pause long enough to discover our own motives. Failing to do this can bring disastrous results. What is often labeled "constructive criticism" may actually be destructive jealousy, since the easiest way to raise our own status is to bring someone else down. Are you willing to question your motives before you offer criticism? Does the critical finger you point need to be pointed first toward yourself?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Quick thinker under pressure
- * Able leader
- * Song writer
- * Prophetess

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Was jealous of Moses' authority
- * Openly criticized Moses' leadership

Lesson from her life:

- * The motives behind criticism are often more important to deal with than the criticism itself

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Egypt, Sinai peninsula
- * Relatives: Brothers: Aaron and Moses

Key verses:

“And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea” (Exodus 15:20, 21).

Miriam’s story is told in Exodus 2 and 15; Numbers 12 and 20. She is also mentioned in Deuteronomy 24:9; 1 Chronicles 6:3; Micah 6:4.

CALEB

The voice of the minority is not often given a hearing. Nevertheless, truth cannot be measured by numbers. On the contrary, it often stands against majority opinion. Truth remains unchanged because it is guaranteed by the character of God. God is Truth; what he says is the last word. At times, a person must even stand alone on the side of truth.

Caleb was not so much a man of great faith as a man of faith in a great God! His boldness rested on his understanding of God, not on his confidence in Israel's abilities to conquer the land. He could not agree with the majority, for that would be to disagree with God.

We, on the other hand, often base our decisions on what everyone else is doing. Few of us are first-order cowards like the ten spies. We are more like the people of Israel, getting our cowardice secondhand. Our search for right and wrong usually starts with questions such as "What do the experts say?" or "What do my friends say?" The question we most often avoid is "What does God say?" The principles we learn as we study the Holy Bible provide a dependable road map for life. They draw us into a personal relationship with the God whose Word is the Holy Bible. The God who gave Caleb his boldness is the same God who offers us the gift of eternal life through his Son, Jesus.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * One of the spies sent by Moses to survey the land of Canaan
- * One of the only two adults who left Egypt and entered the Promised Land
- * Voiced the minority opinion in favor of conquering the land
- * Expressed faith in God's promises, in spite of apparent obstacles

Lessons from his life:

- * Majority opinion is not an accurate measurement of right and wrong
- * Boldness based on God's faithfulness is appropriate
- * For courage and faith to be effective, they must combine words and actions

Vital statistics:

- * Where: From Egypt to the Sinai peninsula to the Promised Land, specifically Hebron
- * Occupation: Spy, soldier, shepherd

Key verse:

"But my servant Caleb, because he had another spirit with him, and hath followed me fully, him will I bring into the land whereinto he went; and his seed shall possess it" (Numbers 14:24).

Caleb's story is told in Numbers 13, 14 and Joshua 14, 15. He is also mentioned in Judges 1 and 1 Chronicles 4:15.

KORAH

Some notorious historical figures might have remained anonymous if they hadn't tried to grab onto more than they could hold. But by refusing to be content with what they had, and by trying to get more than they deserved, they ended up with nothing.

Korah, one of the Israelite leaders, was such a person.

Korah was a Levite who assisted in the daily functions of the Tabernacle. Shortly after Israel's great rebellion against God (Numbers 13, 14), Korah instigated his own mini-rebellion. He recruited a grievance committee and confronted Moses and Aaron. Their list of complaints boils down to three statements: (1) you are no better than anyone else; (2) everyone in Israel has been chosen of the Lord; (3) we don't need to obey you. It is amazing to see how Korah twisted the first two statements - both true - to reach the wrong conclusion.

Moses would have agreed that he was no better than anyone else. He would also have agreed that all Israelites were God's chosen people. But Korah's application of these truths was wrong. Not all Israelites were chosen to lead. Korah's hidden claim was this: "I have as much right to lead as Moses does." His error cost him not only his job - a position of service that he enjoyed - but also his life.

Korah's story gives us numerous warnings: (1) Don't let desire for what someone else has make you discontented with what you already have. (2) Don't try to raise your own self-esteem by attacking someone else's. (3) Don't use part of God's Word to support what you want, rather than allowing it's entirety to shape your wants. (4) Don't expect to find satisfaction in power and position; God may want to work through you in the position you are now in.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Popular leader; influential figure during the Exodus
- * Mentioned among the chief men of Israel (Exodus 6)
- * One of the first Levites appointed for special service in the Tabernacle

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Failed to recognize the significant position God had place him in
- * Forgot that his fight was against someone greater than Moses
- * Allowed greed to blind his common sense

Lessons from his life:

- * There is sometimes a fine line between goals and greed
- * If we are discontented with what we have, we may lose it without gaining anything better

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Egypt, Sinai peninsula
- * Occupation: Levite (Tabernacle assistant)

Key verses:

“And Moses said unto Korah, Hear, I pray you, ye sons of Levi: Seemeth it but a small thing unto you, that the God of Israel hath separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself to do the service of the tabernacle of the Lord, and to stand before the congregation to minister unto them? And he hath brought thee near to him, and all thy brethren the sons of Levi with thee: and seek ye the priesthood also?” (Numbers 16:8-10).

Korah’s story is told in Numbers 16:1-40. He is also mentioned in Numbers 26:9; Jude 1:11.

ELEAZAR

An understudy must know the lead role completely and be willing to step into it at a moment's notice. Eleazar was an excellent understudy, well trained for his eventual leading role. However, his moments in the spotlight were painful. On one occasion, he watched his two older brothers burn to death for failing to take God's holiness seriously. Later, as his father was dying, he was made High Priest, surely one of the most responsible - and therefore potentially most stressful - positions in Israel.

An understudy benefits from having both the script and a human model of the role. Ever since childhood, Eleazar had been able to observe Moses and Aaron. Now he could learn from watching Joshua. In addition, he had God's laws to guide him as he worked as priest and adviser to Joshua.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Succeeded his father, Aaron, as High Priest
- * Completed his father's work by helping lead the people into the Promised Land
- * Teamed up with Joshua
- * Acted as God's spokesman to the people

Lessons from his life:

- * Concentrating on our present challenges and responsibilities is the best way to prepare for what God has planned for our future
- * God's desire is consistent obedience throughout our lives

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Sinai wilderness, Promised Land
- * Occupation: Priest and High Priest
- * Relatives: Father: Aaron. Brothers: Nadab, Abihu, and Ithamar, Aunt and uncle: Miriam and Moses.
- * Contemporaries: Joshua, Caleb

Key verses:

"And the Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron in mount Hor, by the coast of the land of Edom, saying,... Take Aaron and Eleazar his son, and bring them up unto mount Hor: and strip Aaron of his garments, and put them upon Eleazar his son"
(Numbers 20:23-26).

Eleazar is mentioned in Exodus 6:23; Leviticus 10:16-20; Numbers 3:1-4; 4:16; 16:36-40; 20:25-29; 26:1-3, 63; 27:2, 15-23; 32:2; 34:17; Deuteronomy 10:6; Joshua 14:1; 17:4; 24:33.

Balaam

Balaam was one of those noteworthy Old Testament characters who, though not one of God's chosen people, was willing to acknowledge that Jehovah was indeed a powerful God. But he did not believe in Jehovah as the only God. His story exposes the deception of maintaining an outward facade of spirituality over a corrupt inward life. Balaam was a man ready to obey God's command as long as he could profit from doing so. This mixture of motives - obedience and profit - eventually led to Balaam's death. Although he realized the awesome power of Israel's God, his heart was occupied with the wealth he could gain in Moab. There he returned to die when the armies of Israel invaded.

Eventually, each of us lives through the same process. Who and what we are will somehow come to the surface, destroying any masks we may have put on to cover up our real selves. Efforts spent on keeping up appearances would be much better spent on finding the answer to sin in our lives. We can avoid Balaam's mistake by facing ourselves and realizing that God is willing to accept us, forgive us, and literally make us over from within. Don't miss this great discovery that eluded Balaam.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Widely known for his effective curses and blessings
- * Obeyed God and blessed Israel, in spite of Balak's bribe

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Encouraged the Israelites to worship idols (Numbers 31:16)
- * Returned to Moab and was killed in war

Lessons from his life:

- * Motives are just as important as actions
- * Your treasure is where your heart is

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Lived near the Euphrates River, traveled to Moab
- * Occupation: Prophet
- * Relatives: Father: Bosor
- * Contemporaries: Balak (king of Moab), Moses, Aaron

Key verses:

"(They) have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; but was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbad the madness of the prophet" (2 Peter 2:15, 16).

Balaam's story is told in Numbers 22:1-24:25. He is also mentioned in Numbers 31:16; Deuteronomy 23:4, 5; Joshua 24:9, 10; Nehemiah 13:2; Micah 6:5; 2 Peter 2:15, 16; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14.

JOSHUA

One of the greatest challenges facing leaders is to replace themselves, training others to become leaders. Many outstanding accomplishments have been started by someone with great ability whose life or career ended before the vision became reality. The fulfillment of that dream then became the responsibility of that person's successor. Death is the ultimate deadline for leadership. One of the best tests of our leadership is our willingness and ability to train for our position.

Moses made an excellent decision when he chose Joshua as his assistant. That choice was later confirmed by God himself when he instructed Moses to commission Joshua as his successor (Numbers 27:15-23). Joshua had played a key role in the Exodus story. Introduced as the field general of Israel's army, he was the only person allowed to accompany Moses partway up the mountain when Moses received the Law.

Joshua and Caleb were the only two among the 12 spies to bring back an encouraging report after being sent into the Promised Land the first time. Other references show him to have been Moses' constant shadow. His basic training was living with Moses - experiencing firsthand what it meant to lead God's people. This was modeling at it's best!

Who is your Moses? Who is your Joshua? You are part of the chain of God's ongoing work in the world. You are modeling yourself after others, and others are patterning their lives after you. How important is God to those you want to be like? Do those who are watching you see God reflected in every area of your life? Ask God to lead you to a trustworthy Moses. Ask him to make you a good Joshua.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Moses' assistant and successor
- * One of only two adults who experienced Egyptian slavery and lived to enter the Promised Land
- * Led the Israelites into their God-given homeland
- * Brilliant military strategist
- * Faithful to ask God's direction in the challenges he faced

Weakness and mistake:

- * He was unable to complete the task of possessing all the land

Lessons from his life:

- * Effective leadership is often the product of good preparation and encouragement
- * The persons after whom we pattern ourselves will have a definite effect on us
- * A person committed to God provides the best model for us

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Egypt, the Sinai wilderness, and Canaan (the Promised Land)
- * Occupation: Special assistant to Moses, warrior, leader
- * Relatives: Father: Nun
- * Contemporaries: Moses, Caleb, Miriam, Aaron

Key verses:

“And Moses did as the Lord commanded him: and he took Joshua, and set him before Eleazar the priest, and before all the congregation: and he laid his hands upon him, and gave him a charge, as the Lord commanded by the hand of Moses” (Numbers 27:22, 23).

Joshua is also mentioned in Exodus 17:9-14; 24:13; 32:17; 33:11; Numbers 11:28; 13; 14; 26:65; 27:18-23; 32:12, 28; 34:17; Deuteronomy 1:38; 3:21, 28; 31:3, 7, 14, 23; 34:9; the book of Joshua; Judges 2:6-10; and 1 Kings 16:34.

RAHAB

Rahab was a survivor. She was accustomed to figuring the odds. As a prostitute, she lived on the edge of society, one stop short of rejection. Her inn, built right into the city walls, provided both lodging and favors to travelers. It was a natural place for the Israelite spies to stay. These were undoubtedly not the first men she had hidden from the police. Her lie to the authorities was a calculated risk: she hoped it would guarantee her (and her guests) immediate safety and also set into motion her plan for long-term survival. By protecting the spies, Rahab hoped that her future safety would be secure.

Stories about the Israelites had been circulating for some time, but now it was evident that the Israelites were about to invade. Living on the wall, Rahab felt especially vulnerable. Yet while she shared the general mood of fear with the rest of Jericho's population, she alone looked for a way of survival. Her faith began with the thought, "If we can't beat them, maybe I can join them." Rahab knew her position was dangerous. In harboring the spies, she was in danger of being caught and killed. She knew that siding with the strangers was risky business: they might lose the battle, or they might refuse to guarantee her safety. Against these real dangers, Rahab sensed that the Israelites relied on a God worth trusting.

God works through people - like Rahab - whom we are inclined to reject. We remember her because of her moral failure; God remembers her because of her faith! If at times you feel like a failure, remember that Rahab rose above her situation through her trust in God. You can do the same!

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Relative of Boaz, and thus an ancestor of David and Jesus
- * One of only two women listed in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11
- * Resourceful, willing to help others at great cost to herself

Weakness and mistake:

- * She was a prostitute

Lesson from her life:

- * She did not let fear affect her faith in God's ability to deliver

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Jericho
- * Occupation: Prostitute / innkeeper, later became a wife
- * Relatives: Ancestor of David and Jesus (Matthew 1:5)
- * Contemporaries: Joshua

Key verse:

- * By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace" (Hebrews 11:31).

Rahab's story is told in Joshua 2 and 6. She is also mentioned in Matthew 1:5, Hebrews 11:31, and James 2:25.

EHUD

At first glance, Ehud's career as a judge in Israel may not seem relevant to us. He clearly lived in another time. He took radical and violent action to free his people. His murder of Eglon shocks us. His war on Moab was swift and deadly. His life is difficult to relate to. But our commitment to God's Word challenges us not to ignore this leader. As we read about his life, some questions come to mind: (1) When was the last time God showed me something wrong in my life and I took immediate and painful action to correct the error? (2) When was the last time I asked God to show me how he could use something unique about me (as he used Ehud's left-handedness)? (3) When was the last time I made a plan to obey God in some specific area of my life and then followed through on that plan? (4) When was the last time my life was an example to others of obedience to God?

The enemies we face are as real as Ehud's, but they are most often within ourselves. The battles we fight are not against other people but against the power of sin. We need God's help in doing battle against sin. We also need to remember that he has already won the war. He has defeated sin at the cross of his Son, Jesus. His help is the cause of each success, and his forgiveness is sufficient for each failure.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Second judge of Israel
- * A man of direct action, a front-line leader
- * Used a perceived weakness (left-handedness) to do a great work for God
- * Led the revolt against Moabite domination and gave Israel 80 years of peace

Lessons from his life:

- * Some conditions call for radical action
- * God responds to the cry of repentance
- * God is ready to use our unique qualities to accomplish his work

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Born during the last years of the wilderness wanderings or during Israel's early years in the Promised Land
- * Occupation: Messenger, judge
- * Relatives: Father: Gera
- * Contemporary: Eglon of Moab

Key verse:

"But when the children of Israel cried unto the Lord, the Lord raised them up a deliverer, Ehud the son of Gera, a Benjamite, a man left-handed" (Judges 3:15).

His story is told in Judges 3:12-30.

DEBORAH

Wise leaders are rare. They accomplish great amounts of work without direct involvement because they know how to work through other people. They are able to see the big picture which often escapes those directly involved, so they make good mediators, advisers, and planners. Deborah fit this description perfectly. She had all these leadership skills, and she had a remarkable relationship with God. The insight and confidence God gave this woman placed her in a unique position in the Old Testament. Deborah is among the outstanding women of history.

Her story shows that she was not power hungry. She wanted to serve God. Whenever praise came her way, she gave God the credit. She didn't deny or resist her position in the culture as a woman and wife, but she never allowed herself to be hindered by it either. Her story shows that God can accomplish great things through people who are willing to be led by him.

Deborah's life challenges us in several ways. She reminds us of the need to be available both to God and to others. She encourages us to spend our efforts on what we can do rather than on worrying about what we can't do. Deborah challenges us to be wise leaders. She demonstrates what a person can accomplish when God is in control.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Fourth and only female judge of Israel
- * Special abilities as a mediator, adviser, and counselor
- * When called on to lead, was able to plan, direct, and delegate
- * Known for her prophetic power
- * A writer of songs

Lessons from her life:

- * God chooses leaders by his standards, not ours
- * Wise leaders choose good helpers

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Canaan
- * Occupation: Prophetess and judge
- * Relatives: Husband: Lapidoth
- * Contemporaries: Barak, Jael, Jabin of Hazor, Sisera

Key verse:

“And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time”
(Judges 4:4).

Her story is told in Judges 4, 5.

GIDEON

Most of us want to know God's plan for our lives, but we're not always sure how to find it. One common misunderstanding is the idea that God's guidance will come to us out of the blue, that it has nothing to do with what we're doing now. But if we're always looking around for God's next assignment, we run the risk of ruining whatever we're working on right now. Fortunately, the Holy Bible points to a kind of guidance that does not put our current projects in jeopardy. In the Holy Bible's description of how God guided many people, we can see that often God's call came while people were completely immersed in the challenge of the moment. A good example of this kind of guidance is seen in Gideon's life.

Gideon had a limited vision, but he was committed to it. His challenge was to obtain food for his family even though hostile invaders were making the growing, gathering, and preparation of the food almost impossible. Gideon was resourceful. He put a winepress to double duty by turning it into a sunken threshing floor, hidden from the Midianites. Gideon was working in his threshing floor when God sent him a messenger with a challenge.

Gideon did not want to jump into a task for which he was ill prepared. The angel had to overcome three objections before Gideon was convinced: (1) Gideon's feelings of responsibility for his family's welfare, (2) his doubts about the call itself, and (3) his feelings of inadequacy for the job. Once Gideon was convinced, however, he obeyed with zest, resourcefulness, and speed. He dedicated those personality traits to God.

Gideon had his weak moments and failures, but he was still God's servant. If you can easily see yourself in Gideon's weakness, can you also see yourself in being willing to serve? Remember Gideon as a man who obeyed God by giving his attention to the task at hand. Then give your full attention to believing God will prepare you for tomorrow when it comes.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Israel's fifth judge. A military strategist who was expert at surprise
- * A member of the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11
- * Defeated the Midianite army
- * Was offered a hereditary kingship by the men of Israel
- * Though slow to be convinced, acted on his convictions

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Feared that his own limitations would prevent God from working
- * Collected Midianite gold and made a symbol which became an evil object of worship
- * Through a concubine, fathered a son who would bring great grief and tragedy to both Gideon's family and the nation of Israel
- * Failed to establish the nation in God's ways; after he died they all went back to idol worship

Lessons from his life:

- * God calls in the middle of our present obedience. As we are faithful, he gives more responsibility
- * God expands and uses the abilities he has already built into us
- * God uses us in spite of our limitations and failures
- * Even those who make great spiritual progress can easily fall into sin if they don't consistently follow God

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Ophrah, valley of Jezreel, well of Harod
- * Occupation: Farmer, warrior, and judge
- * Relatives: Father: Joash. Son: Abimelech
- * Contemporaries: Zebah, Zalmunna

Key verses:

“And he [Gideon] said unto him, Oh my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? Behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house. And the Lord said unto him, Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man” (Judges 6:15, 16).

His story is told in Judges 6-8. He is also mentioned in Hebrews 11:32.

ABIMELECH

People who desire power always outnumber those who are able to use power wisely once they have it. Perhaps this is because power has a way of taking over and controlling the person using it. This is especially true in cases of inherited but unmerited power. Abimelech's life shows us what happens when hunger for power corrupts judgment.

Abimelech's position in Gideon's family as the son of a concubine must have created great tension between him and Gideon's many other sons. One against 70; such odds can either crush a person or make him ruthless. It is obvious which direction Abimelech chose. Gideon's position as warrior and judge had placed Abimelech in an environment of power; Gideon's death provided an opportunity for this son to seize power. Once the process began, the disastrous results were inevitable. A person's thirst for power is not satisfied when he gets power - it only becomes more intense. Abimelech's life was consumed by that thirst. Eventually, he could not tolerate any threat to his power.

By this time, ownership had changed: Abimelech no longer had power - power had him. One lesson we can learn from his life is that our goals control our actions. The amount of control is related to the importance of the goal. Abimelech's most important goal was to have power. His lust for power led him to wipe out not only his brothers, but also whole cities that refused to submit to him. Nothing but death could stop his bloodthirsty drive to conquer. How ironic that he was fatally injured by a woman! The contrast between Abimelech and the great people of the Holy Bible is great. He wanted to control the nation; they were willing to be controlled by God.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * The first self-declared king of Israel
- * Qualified tactical planner and organizer

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Power hungry and ruthless
- * Overconfident
- * Took advantage of his father's position without imitating his character
- * Had 69 of his 70 half brothers killed

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Shechem, Arumah, Thebez
- * Occupation: Self-acclaimed king, judge, political troublemaker
- * Relatives: Father: Gideon. Only surviving brother: Jotham

Key verses:

"Thus God rendered the wickedness of Abimelech, which he did unto his father, in slaying his seventy brethren: and all the evil of the men of Shechem did God render upon their heads: and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal" (Judges 9:56, 57). His story is told in Judges 8:31-9:57. He is also mentioned in 2 Samuel 11:21.

JEPHTHAH

It's hard to admire people whose word can be depended on completely and whose actions are consistent with their words. For such people, talking is not avoiding action; it is the beginning of action. People like this can make excellent negotiators. They approach a conflict with the full intention of settling issues verbally, but they do not hesitate to use other means if verbal attempts fail. Jephthah was the kind of person.

In most of his conflicts, Jephthah's first move was to talk. In the war with the Ammonites, his strategy was negotiation. He clarified the issues so that everyone knew the cause of the conflict. His opponent's response determined his next action.

The fate of Jephthah's daughter is difficult to understand. We are not sure what Jephthah meant by his vow recorded in Judges 11:31. In any case, his vow was unnecessary. We do not know what actually happened to his daughter - whether she was burned as an offering or set apart as a virgin, thus denying Jephthah any hope of descendants since she was his only child. What we do know is that Jephthah was a person of his word, even when it was a word spoken in haste, and even when keeping his word cost him great pain.

How do you approach conflicts? There is a big difference between trying to settle a conflict through words and simply counterattacking someone verbally. How dependable are the statements you make? Do your children, friends, and fellow workers know you to be a person of your word? The measure of your trustworthiness is your willingness to take responsibility, even if you must pay a painful price because of something you said.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Listed in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11
- * Controlled by God's Spirit
- * Brilliant military strategist who negotiated before fighting

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Was bitter over the treatment he received from his half brothers
- * Made a rash and foolish vow that was costly

Lesson from his life:

- * A person's background does not prevent God from working powerfully in his or her life

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Gilead
- * Occupation: Warrior, judge
- * Relatives: Father: Gilead

Key verse:

"So Jephthah passed over unto the children of Ammon to fight against them; and the Lord delivered them into his hands" (Judges 11:32).

His story is told in Judges 11:1-12:7. He is also mentioned in 1 Samuel 12:11 and Hebrews 11:32.

SAMSON

It is said to be remembered for what one might have been. Samson had tremendous potential. Not many people have started life with credentials like his. Born as a result of God's plan in the lives of Manoah and his wife, Samson was to do a great work for God - to "begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines." To help him accomplish God's plan, he was given enormous physical strength.

Because Samson wasted his strength on practical jokes and getting out of scrapes, and because he eventually gave it up altogether to satisfy the woman he loved, we tend to see him as a failure. We remember him as the judge in Israel who spent his last days grinding grain in an enemy prison, and we say, "What wasted potential!"

Yes, Samson wasted his life. He could have strengthened his nation. He could have returned his people to the worship of God. He could have wiped out the Philistines. But even though he did none of those things, Samson still accomplished the purpose announced by the angel who visited his parents before his birth. In his final act, Samson began to rescue Israel from the Philistines.

Interestingly, the New Testament does not mention Samson's failures or his heroic feats of strength. In Hebrews, he is simply listed with others "who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises," and in other ways were given superhuman aid. In the end, Samson recognized his dependence on God. When he died, God turned his failures and defeats into victory. Samson's story teaches us that it is never too late to start over. However badly we may have failed in the past, today is not too late for us to put our complete trust in God.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Dedicated to God from birth as a Nazarite
- * Known for his feats of strength
- * Listed in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11
- * Began to free Israel from Philistine oppression

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Violated his vow and God's laws on many occasions
- * Was controlled by sensuality
- * Confided in the wrong people
- * Used his gifts and abilities unwisely

Lessons from his life:

- * Great strength in one area of life does not make up for great weaknesses in other areas
- * God's presence does not overwhelm a person's will
- * God can use a person of faith in spite of his or her mistakes

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Zorah, Timnah, Ashkelon, Gaza, valley of Sorek
- * Occupation: Judge
- * Relatives: Father: Manoah
- * Contemporaries: Delilah; Samuel, who might have been born while Samson was a judge

Key verse:

“For, lo, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son; and no razor shall come on his head: for the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb: and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines” (Judges 13:5).

His story is told in Judges 13-16. He is also mentioned in Hebrews 11:32.

DELILAH

A person's greatest accomplishment may well be helping others accomplish great things. Likewise, a person's greatest failure may be preventing others from achieving greatness. Delilah played a minor role in Samson's life, but her effect was devastating, for she influenced him to betray his special calling from God. Motivated by greed, Delilah used her persistence to wear down Samson. His infatuation with her made Samson a vulnerable target. For all his physical strength, he was no match for her, and he paid a great price for giving in to her. Delilah is never mentioned again in the Holy Bible. Her unfaithfulness to Samson brought ruin to him and to her people.

Are people helped by knowing you? Do they find that knowing you challenges them to be the best they can be? Even more important, does knowing you help their relationship with God? What do your demands for their time and attention tell them about your real care for them? Are you willing to be God's instrument in the lives of others?

Strength and accomplishment:

- * Persistent when faced with obstacles

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Valued money more than relationships
- * Betrayed the man who trusted her

Lesson from her life:

- * We need to be careful to place our trust only in people who are trustworthy

Vital statistics:

- * Where: valley of Sorek
- * Contemporary: Samson

Key verses:

"And it came to pass, when she pressed him daily with her words, and urged him, so that his soul was vexed unto death; that he told her all his heart" (Judges 16:16, 17).

Her story is told in Judges 16.

RUTH & NAOMI

The stories of several people in the Holy Bible are woven together so closely that they are almost inseparable. We know more about their relationship than we know about them as individuals. And in an age that worships individualism, their stories become helpful models of good relationships. Naomi and Ruth are beautiful examples of this blending of lives. Their cultures, family backgrounds, and ages were very different. As mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, they probably had as many opportunities for tension as for tenderness. And yet they were bound to each other.

They shared deep sorrow, great affection for each other, and an overriding commitment to the God of Israel. And yet as much as they depended on each other, they also gave each other freedom in their commitment to one another. Naomi was willing to let Ruth return to her family. Ruth was willing to leave her homeland to go to Israel. Naomi even helped arrange Ruth's marriage to Boaz although it would change their relationship.

God was at the center of their intimate communication. Ruth came to know the God of Israel through Naomi. The older woman allowed Ruth to see, hear, and feel all the joy and anguish of her relationship to God. How often do you feel that your thoughts and questions about God should be left out of a close relationship? How often do you share your unedited thoughts about God with your spouse or friends? Sharing openly about our relationship with God can bring depth and intimacy to our relationships with others.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * A relationship where the greatest bond was faith in God
- * A relationship of strong mutual commitment
- * A relationship in which each person tried to do what was best for the other

Lesson from their lives:

- * God's living presence in a relationship overcomes differences that might otherwise create division and disharmony

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Moab, Bethlehem
- * Occupation: Wives, widows
- * Relatives: Elimelech, Mahlon, Chilion, Orpah, Boaz

Key verses:

"And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from the following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me" (Ruth 1:16, 17).

This story is told in the book of Ruth. Ruth is also mentioned in Matthew 1:5.

BOAZ

Heroes are easier to admire than to define. They are seldom conscious of their moments of heroism, and others may not recognize their acts as heroic. Heroes simply do the right thing at the right time, whether or not they realize the impact their action will have. Perhaps the one quality they share is a tendency to think of others before they think of themselves. Boaz was a hero.

In his dealings with other people, he was always sensitive to their needs. His words to his employees, relatives, and others were colored with kindness. He offered help openly, not grudgingly. When he discovered who Ruth was, he took several steps to help her because she had been faithful to his relative Naomi. When Naomi advised Ruth to request his protection, he was ready to marry her if the legal complications could be worked out.

Boaz not only did what was right; he also did it right away. Of course he could not foresee all that his actions would accomplish. He could not have known that the child he would have by Ruth would be an ancestor of both David and Jesus. He only met the challenge of taking the right action in the situation facing him.

We are faced with this challenge in our daily choices. Like Naomi's closer relative, we are often more concerned with making the easy choice than with making the right one. Yet more often than not, the right choice is clear. Ask God to give you a special awareness in your choices today, as well as renewed commitment to make the right ones.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * A man of his word
- * Sensitive to those in need, caring for his workers
- * A keen sense of responsibility, integrity
- * A successful and shrewd businessman

Lessons from his life:

- * It can be heroic to do what must be done and to do it right
- * God often uses little decisions to carry out his big plan

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Bethlehem
- * Occupation: Wealthy farmer
- * Relatives: Elimelech, Naomi, Ruth

Key verse:

"Moreover Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, have I purchased to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren, and from the gate of his place: ye are witnesses this day" (Ruth 4:10).

His story is told in the book of Ruth. He is also mentioned in Matthew 1:5.

HANNAH

Hannah's prayer shows us that all we have and receive is on loan from God. Hannah might have had many excuses for being a possessive mother. But when God answered her prayer, she followed through on her promise to dedicate Samuel to God's service.

She discovered that the greatest joy in having a child is to give that child fully and freely back to God. She entered motherhood prepared to do what all mothers must eventually do - let go of their children.

When children are born, they are completely dependent upon their parents for all their basic necessities. This causes some parents to forget that those same children will grow toward independence within the span of a few short years. Being sensitive to the different stages of that healthy process will greatly strengthen family relationships; resisting or denying that process will cause great pain. We must gradually let go of our children in order to allow them to become mature, interdependent adults.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Mother of Samuel, Israel's greatest judge
- * Fervent in worship; effective in prayer
- * Willing to follow through on even a costly commitment

Weakness and mistake:

- * Struggled with her sense of self-worth because she was unable to have children

Lessons from her life:

- * God hears and answers prayer
- * Our children are gifts from God
- * God is concerned for the oppressed and afflicted

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Ephraim
- * Occupation: Homemaker
- * Relatives: Husband: Elkanah. Son: Samuel. Later, three other sons and two daughters
- * Contemporaries: Eli, the priest

Key verses:

"And she said, Oh my lord, as thy soul liveth, my lord, I am the woman that stood by thee here, praying unto the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him: Therefore also I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:26-28).

Her story is told in 1 Samuel 1, 2.

ELI

Eli was one Old Testament person with a very modern problem. The recognition and respect he earned in public did not extend to his handling of his private affairs. He may have been an excellent priest, but he was a poor parent. His sons brought him grief and ruin. He lacked two important qualities needed for effective parental discipline: firm resolve and corrective action.

Eli responded to situations rather than solving them. But even his responses tended to be weak. God pointed out his sons' errors, but Eli did little to correct them. The contrast between God's dealing with Eli and Eli's dealing with his sons is clear - God gave warning, spelled out the consequences of disobedience, and then acted. Eli only warned. Children need to learn that their parent's words and actions go together. Both love and discipline must be spoken as well as acted out.

But Eli had another problem. He was more concerned with the symbols of his religion than with the God they represented. For Eli, the Ark of the Covenant had become a relic to be protected rather than a reminder of the Protector. His faith shifted from the Creator to the created.

It may be easier to worship things we can see, whether buildings, people, or Scripture itself, but such tangible things have no power in themselves. This book you hold is either merely a respectable religious relic or it is the sharp and effective Word of God. Your attitude toward it is largely shaped by your relationship to the God from whom it comes. A relic or antique has to be carefully stored away; God's Word has to be used and obeyed. Which attitude accurately describes your approach to the Word of God?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Judged Israel for 40 years
- * Spoke with Hannah, the mother of Samuel, and assured her of God's blessing
- * Reared and trained Samuel, the greatest judge of Israel

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Failed to discipline his sons or correct them when they sinned
- * Tended to react to situations rather than take decisive action
- * Saw the Ark of the Covenant as a relic to be cherished, rather than as a symbol of God's presence with Israel

Lessons from his life:

- * Parents need to discipline their children responsibly
- * Life is more than simply reacting; it demands action
- * Past victories cannot substitute for present trust

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Shiloh
- * Occupation: High Priest and judge of Israel
- * Relatives: Sons: Hophni and Phinehas
- * Contemporary: Samuel

Key verses:

“And the Lord said to Samuel, Behold, I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle. In that day I will perform against Eli all things which I have spoken concerning his house: when I begin, I will also make an end. For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. And therefore I have sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering for ever” (1 Samuel 3:11-14).

His story is told in 1 Samuel 1-4. He is also mentioned in 1 Kings 2:26, 27.

SAMUEL

We often wonder about the childhoods of great people. We have little information about the early years of most of the people mentioned in the Holy Bible. One delightful exception is Samuel; he came as a result of God's answer to Hannah's fervent prayer for a child.

(In fact, the name Samuel comes from the Hebrew expression, "asked of God.") God shaped Samuel from the start. Like Moses, Samuel was called to fill many different roles: judge, priest, prophet, counselor, and God's man at a turning point in the history of Israel. God worked through Samuel because Samuel was willing to be one thing: God's servant.

Samuel showed that those whom God finds faithful in small things will be trusted with greater things. He grew up assisting the High Priest (Eli) in the tabernacle until God directed him to other responsibilities. God was able to use Samuel because he was genuinely dedicated to God.

Samuel moved ahead because he was listening to God's directions. Too often we ask God to control our lives without making us give up the goals for which we strive. We ask God to help us get where we want to go. The first step in correcting this tendency is to turn over both the control and destination of our lives to him. The second step is to do what we already know God requires of us. The third step is to listen for further direction from his Word - God's map for life.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Used by God to assist Israel's transition from a loosely governed tribal people to a monarchy
- * Anointed the first two kings of Israel
- * Was the last and most effective of Israel's judges
- * Is listed in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11

Weakness and mistake:

- * Was unable to lead his sons into a close relationship with God

Lessons from his Life:

- * The significance of what people accomplish is directly related to their relationship with God
- * The kind of person we are is more important than anything we might do

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Ephraim
- * Occupation: Judge, prophet, priest
- * Relatives: Mother: Hannah. Father: Elkanah. Sons: Joel and Abiah
- * Contemporaries: Eli, Saul, David

Key verses:

“And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him, and did let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan even to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the Lord” (1 Samuel 3:19, 20).

His story is told in 1 Samuel 1-28. He is also mentioned in Psalm 99:6; Jeremiah 15:1; Acts 3:24; 13:20; Hebrews 11:32.

SAUL

First impressions can be deceiving, especially when the image created by a person's appearance is contradicted by his or her qualities and abilities. Saul presented the ideal visual image of a king, but the tendencies of his character often went contrary to God's commands for a king. Saul was God's chosen leader, but this did not mean he was capable of being king on his own.

During his reign, Saul had his greatest successes when he obeyed God. His greatest failures resulted from acting on his own. Saul had the raw materials to be a good leader - appearance, courage, and action. Even his weaknesses could have been used by God if Saul had recognized them and left them in God's hands. His own choices cut him off from God and eventually alienated him from his own people.

From Saul we learn that while our strengths and abilities make us useful, it is our weaknesses that make us usable. Our skills and talents make us tools, but our failures and shortcomings remind us that we need a Craftsman in control of our lives. Whatever we accomplish on our own is only a hint of what God could do through our lives. Does he control your life?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * First God-appointed King of Israel
- * Known for his personal courage and generosity
- * Stood tall, with a striking appearance

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * His leadership abilities did not match the expectations created by his appearance
- * Impulsive by nature, he tended to overstep his bounds
- * Jealous of David, he tried to kill him
- * He specifically disobeyed God on several occasions

Lessons from his life:

- * God wants obedience from the heart, not mere acts of religious ritual
- * Obedience always involves sacrifice; but sacrifice is not always obedience
- * God wants to make use of our strengths and weaknesses
- * Weaknesses should help us remember our need for God's guidance and help

Vital statistics:

- * Where: The land of Benjamin
- * Occupation: King of Israel
- * Relatives: Father: Kish. Sons: Jonathan and Ish-boseth. Wife: Ahinoam
Daughters: Merab and Michal

Key verses:

“And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee before king” (1 Samuel 15:22, 23).

His story is told in 1 Samuel 9-31. He is also mentioned in Acts 13:21.

DAVID

When we think of David, we think: shepherd, poet, giant-killer, king, ancestor of Jesus - in short, one of the greatest men in the Old Testament. But alongside that list stands another: betrayer, liar, adulterer, murderer. The first list gives qualities we all might like to have; the second, qualities that might be true of any one of us. The Holy Bible makes no effort to hide David's failures. Yet he is remembered and respected for his heart for God. Knowing how much more we share in David's failures than in his greatness, we should be curious to find out what made God refer to David as "a man after his own heart."

David, more than anything else, had an unchangeable belief in the faithful and forgiving nature of God. He was a man who lived with great zest. He sinned many times, but he was quick to confess his sins. His confessions were from the heart, and his repentance was genuine. David never took God's forgiveness lightly or his blessing for granted. In return, God never held back from David either his forgiveness or the consequences of his actions. David experienced the joy of forgiveness even when he had to suffer the consequences of his sins.

We tend to get these two reversed. Too often we would rather avoid the consequences than experience forgiveness. Another big difference between us and David is that while he sinned greatly, he did not sin repeatedly. He learned from his mistakes because he accepted the suffering they brought. Often we don't seem to learn from our mistakes or the consequences that result from those mistakes. What changes would it take for God to find this kind of obedience in you?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Greatest king of Israel
- * Ancestor of Jesus Christ
- * Listed in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11
- * A man described by God himself as a man after his own heart (1 Samuel 13:14)

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Committed adultery with Bathsheba
- * Arranged the murder of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband
- * Directly disobeyed God in taking a census of the people
- * Did not deal decisively with the sins of his children

Lessons from his life:

- * Willingness to honestly admit our mistakes is the first step in dealing with them
- * Forgiveness does not remove the consequences of sin
- * God greatly desires our complete trust and worship

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Bethlehem, Jerusalem
- * Occupation: Shepherd, musician, poet, soldier, king
- * Relatives: Father, Jesse. Wives included Michal, Ahinoam, Bathsheba, Abigail.
Sons included Absalom, Amnon, Solomon, Adonijah. Daughters included Tamar.
Seven brothers
- * Contemporaries: Saul, Jonathan, Samuel, Nathan

Key verses:

“And now, O Lord God, thou art that God, and thy words be true, and thou hast promised this goodness unto thy servant: therefore now let it please thee to bless the house of thy servant, that it may continue for ever before thee: for thou, O Lord God, hast spoken it: and with thy blessing let the house of thy servant be blessed for ever” (2 Samuel 7:28, 29).

His story is told in 1 Samuel 16 - 1 Kings 2. He is also mentioned in Amos 6:5; Matthew 1:1; 22:43-45; Luke 1:32; Acts 13:22; Romans 1:3; Hebrews 11:32

JONATHAN

Loyalty is one of life's most costly qualities; it is the most selfless part of love. To be loyal, you cannot live only for yourself. Loyal people not only stand by their commitments, they are willing to suffer for them. Jonathan is a shining example of loyalty. Sometimes he was forced to deal with conflicting loyalties: to his father Saul and to his friend David. His solution to that conflict teaches us both how to be loyal and what must guide loyalty. In Jonathan, truth always guided loyalty.

Jonathan realized that the source of truth was God, who demanded his ultimate loyalty. It was his relationship with God that gave Jonathan the ability to deal effectively with the complicated situations in his life. He was loyal to Saul because Saul was his father and the king. He was loyal to David because David was his friend. His loyalty to God guided him through the conflicting demands of his human relationships:

The conflicting demands of our relationships challenge us as well. If we attempt to settle these conflicts only at the human level, we will be constantly dealing with a sense of betrayal. But if we communicate to our friends that our ultimate loyalty is to God and his truth, many of our choices will be much clearer. The truth in his Word, the Holy Bible, will bring light to our decisions. Do those closest to you know who has your greatest loyalty?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Brave, loyal, and a natural leader
- * The closest friend David ever had
- * Did not put his personal well-being ahead of those he loved
- * Depended on God

Lessons from his life:

- * Loyalty is one of the strongest parts of courage
- * An allegiance to God puts all other relationships in perspective
- * Great friendships are costly

Vital statistics:

- * Occupation: Military leader
- * Relatives: Father: Saul. Mother: Ahinoam. Brothers: Abinadab and Malchishua.
Sisters: Merab and Michal. Son: Mephibosheth

Key verse:

"I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women" (2 Samuel 1:26).

His story is told in 1 Samuel 13-31. He is also mentioned in 2 Samuel 9.

ABIGAIL

Some men don't deserve their wives. Abigail was probably the best woman Nabal could afford, and he got even more than he bargained for when he arranged to marry her. She was beautiful and more suited than he was to manage his wealth. But Nabal took this wife for granted.

In spite of his shortcomings, Nabal's household did what they could to keep him out of trouble. This loyalty must have been inspired by Abigail. Although her culture and her husband placed a low value on her, she made the most of her skills and opportunities. David was impressed with her abilities, and when Nabal died, he married her.

Abigail was an effective counselor to both of the men in her life, working hard to prevent them from making rash moves. By her swift action and skillful negotiation, she kept David from taking vengeance upon Nabal. She saw the big picture and left plenty of room for God to get involved.

Do you, like Abigail, look beyond the present crisis to the big picture? Do you use your skills to promote peace? Are you loyal without being blind? What challenge or responsibility do you face today that needs a person under God's control?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Sensible and capable manager of a large estate
- * A persuasive speaker, able to see beyond herself

Lessons from her life:

- * Life's tough situations can bring out the best in people
- * One does not need a prestigious title to play a significant role

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Carmel
- * Occupation: Homemaker, estate manager
- * Relatives: First husband: Nabal. Second husband: David. Son: Chileab (Daniel)
- * Contemporaries: Saul, Michal, Ahinoam

Key verses:

“And David said to Abigail, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, which sent thee this day to meet me: and blessed be thy advice, and blessed be thou, which has kept me this day from coming to shed blood, and from avenging myself with mine own hand” (1 Samuel 25:32, 33).

Her story is told in 1 Samuel 25 - 2 Samuel 2 and also in 1 Chronicles 3:1.

ABNER

The honest compliments of an opponent are often the best measure of someone's greatness. Although Abner and David frequently saw each other across battle lines, the Bible gives a glimpse of the respect they had for each other. As a young man, David had served under Abner. But later, Saul's campaign to kill David was carried out by Abner. After Saul's death, Abner temporarily upheld the power of the king's family. But the struggle between Abner and Saul's heir, Ish-bosheth, brought about Abner's decision to support David's claim to the throne. It was during his efforts to unite the kingdom that Abner was murdered by Joab.

Several years earlier, in a battle between Ish-bosheth's army under Abner and David's forces under Joab, Abner fled and was pursued by Joab's brother, Asahel. Abner told Asahel twice to stop following him. But the eager young soldier refused, so Abner killed him. Joab was determined to avenge his brother.

Abner realized Saul's family was doomed to defeat and that David would be the next king, so he decided to change sides. He hoped that in exchange for his delivering Saul's kingdom, David would make him commander-in-chief of his army. David's willingness to accept this proposal was probably another reason for Joab's action.

Abner lived by his wits and his will. To him, God was someone with whom he would cooperate if it suited his plans. Otherwise he did what seemed best for him at the time. We can identify with Abner's tendency to give God conditional cooperation. Obedience is easy when the instructions in God's Word fit in with our plans. But our allegiance to God is tested when his plans are contrary to ours. What action should you take today in obedience to God's Word?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Commander-in-chief of Saul's army and a capable military leader
- * Held Israel together for several years under the weak king Ish-bosheth
- * Recognized and accepted God's plan to make David king over all Israel and Judah

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * He had selfish motives in his effort to reunite Judah and Israel rather than godly conviction
- * He slept with one of the royal concubines after Saul's death

Lesson from his life:

- * God requires more than conditional, half-hearted cooperation

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Territory of Benjamin
- * Occupation: Commander of the armies under Saul, Ish-bosheth, and David
- * Relatives: Father: Ner. Cousin: Saul. Son: Jaasiel
- * Contemporaries: David, Asahel, Joab, Abishai

Key verse:

“And the king said unto his servants, know ye not that there is a prince and a great man fallen this day in Israel?” (2 Samuel 3:38).

Abner’s story is told in 1 Samuel 14:50-2 Samuel 4:12. He is also mentioned in 1 Kings 2:5, 32; 1 Chronicles 26:28; 27:16-22.

MICHAL

Sometimes love is not enough - especially if that love is little more than the strong emotional attraction that grows between a hero and an admirer. To Michal, Saul's daughter, the courageous young David must have seemed like a dream come true. Her feelings about this hero gradually became obvious to others, and eventually, her father heard about her love for David. He saw this as an opportunity to get rid of his rival for the people's loyalty. He promised Michal's hand in marriage in exchange for David's success in the impossible task of killing 100 Philistines. But David was victorious, and so Saul lost a daughter and saw his rival become even more popular with the people.

Michal's love for David did not have time to be tested by the realities of marriage. Instead, she became involved in saving David's life. Her quick thinking helped him escape, but it cost her Saul's anger and her separation from David. Her father gave her to another man, Phalti, but David eventually took her back.

Unlike her brother, Jonathan, Michal did not have the kind of deep relationship with God that would have helped her through the difficulties in her life. Instead she became bitter. She could not share David's joyful worship of God, so she hated it. As a result, she never bore David any children.

Beyond feeling sorry for her, we need to see Michal as a person mirroring our own tendencies. How quickly and easily we become bitter with life's unexpected turns. But bitterness cannot remove or change the bad things that have happened. Often bitterness only makes a bad situation worse. On the other hand, a willingness to respond to God gives him the opportunity to bring good out of the difficult situations. That willingness has two parts: asking God for his guidance and looking for that guidance in his Word.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Loved David and became his first wife
- * Saved David's life
- * Could think and act quickly when it was needed

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Lied under pressure
- * Allowed herself to become bitter over her circumstances
- * In her unhappiness, she hated David for loving God

Lessons from her life:

- * We are responsible for what happens to us as we are for how we respond to our circumstances
- * Disobedience to God almost always harms us as well as others

Vital statistics:

- * Occupation: Daughter of one king, Saul, and wife of another, David
- * Relatives: Parents: Saul and Ahinoam. Brothers: Abinadab, Jonathan, Malchi-shua.
Sister: Merab. Husbands: David and Phalti

Key verse:

“And as the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal Saul’s daughter looked through a window, and saw king David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart” (2 Samuel 6:16).

Michal’s story is told in 1 Samuel 14 - 2 Samuel 6. She is also mentioned in 1 Chronicles 15:29.

NATHAN

This prophet lived up to the meaning of his name, "God has given." He was a necessary and helpful gift from God to David. He served as God's spokesman to David and proved himself a fearless friend and counselor, always willing to speak the truth, even when he knew great pain would result.

In confronting David's multiple sin of coveting, theft, adultery, and murder in his affair with Bath-sheba, Nathan was able to help David see his own wrongdoing by showing that he would not have tolerated such actions from anyone else. David's repentance allowed Nathan to comfort him with the reality of God's forgiveness, and at the same time remind him of the painful consequences his sin would bring.

Nathan's approach helps us judge our actions. How often do we make choices that we would condemn others for making? It is helpful to ask ourselves how God and others see our actions. Unfortunately, we have a huge capacity to lie to ourselves. God still provides two safeguards against self-deception: his Word and true friends. In each case, we get a view beyond ourselves. You are holding God's Word. Let it speak to you about yourself, even if the truth is painful. If you don't have a friend like Nathan, ask God for one. And ask God to use you as a suitable Nathan for someone else.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * A trusted adviser to David
- * A prophet of God
- * A fearless, but careful confronter
- * One of God's controls in David's life

Weakness and mistake:

- * His eagerness to see David build a Temple for God in Jerusalem made him speak without God's instruction

Lessons from his life:

- * We should not be afraid to tell the truth to those we care about
- * A trustworthy companion is one of God's greatest gifts
- * God cares enough to find a way to communicate to us when we are in the wrong

Vital statistics:

- * Occupation: Prophet, royal adviser
- * Contemporaries: David, Bath-sheba, Solomon, Zadok, Adonijah

Key verse:

"According to all these words, and according to all this vision, so did Nathan speak unto David" (2 Samuel 7:17).

Nathan's story is told in 2 Samuel 7 - 1 Kings 1. He is also mentioned in 1 Chronicles 17:15; 2 Chronicles 9:29; 29:25.

ABSALOM

A father's mistakes are often reflected in the lives of his children. In Absalom, David saw a bitter replay and amplification of many of his own past sins. God had predicted that David's family would suffer because of his sin against Bathsheba and Uriah. David's heart was broken as he realized that God's predictions were coming true. God forgave David, but he did not cancel the consequences of his sin. David was horrified as he saw his son's strengths run wild without the controls God had built into his own life.

By most casual evaluations, Absalom would have made an excellent king, and the people loved him. But he lacked the inner character and control needed in a good leader. His appearance, skill, and position did not make up for his lack of integrity.

David's sins took him away from God, but repentance brought him back. In contrast, Absalom sinned and kept on sinning. Although he relied heavily on the advice of others, he was not wise enough to evaluate the counsel he received.

Can you identify with Absalom? Do you find yourself on a fast track toward self-destruction? Absalom wasn't able to say, "I was wrong. I need forgiveness." God offers forgiveness, but we will not experience that forgiveness until we genuinely admit our sins and confess them to God. Absalom rejected his father's love and ultimately God's love. How often do you miss entering back into God's love through the door of forgiveness?

Strength and accomplishment:

- * Was handsome and charismatic like his father, David

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Avenged the rape of his sister Tamar by killing his half brother Amnon
- * Plotted against his father to take away the throne
- * Consistently listened to the wrong advice

Lessons from his life:

- * The sins of parents are often repeated and amplified in the children
- * A smart man gets a lot of advice; a wise man evaluates the advice he gets
- * Actions against God's plans will fail, sooner or later

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Hebron
- * Occupation: Prince
- * Relatives: Father: David. Mother: Maacah. Brothers: Amnon, Chileab, Solomon, and others. Sister: Tamar
- * Contemporaries: Nathan, Jonadab, Joab, Ahitophel, Hushai

Key verse:

"But Absalom sent spies throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, As soon as ye hear the sound of the trumpet, then ye shall say, Absalom reigneth in Hebron"
(2 Samuel 15:10).

Absalom's story is told in 2 Samuel 3:3; 13-19.

JOAB

Joab, the great military leader, had two brothers who were also famous soldiers: Abishai and Asahel. Joab proves to be the greatest leader of the three and was the commander of David's army throughout most of David's reign. There is no record that his troops ever lost a battle.

Joab was a fearless fighter like his brothers. Unlike them, he was also a brilliant and ruthless strategist. His plans usually worked, but he was seldom concerned about those hurt or killed by them. He did not hesitate to use treachery or murder to achieve his goals. His career is a story of great accomplishments and shameful acts. He conquered Jerusalem and the surrounding nations, defeated Abner, and reconciled Absalom and David. But he also murdered Abner, Amasa, and Absalom, took part in Uriah's murder, and plotted with Adonijah against Solomon. That plot led to execution.

Joab set his own standards - he lived by them, and died because of them. There is little evidence that Joab ever acknowledged God's standards. On one occasion he confronted David about the danger of taking a census without God's command, but this may have been little more than a move to protect himself. Joab's self-centeredness eventually destroyed him. He was loyal only to himself, even willing to betray his lifelong relationship with David to preserve his power.

Joab's life illustrates the disastrous results of having no source of direction outside oneself. Brilliance and power are self-destructive without God's guidance. Only God can give the direction we need. For that reason, he has made available his Word, the Holy Bible, and he is willing to be personally present in the lives of those who admit their need for him.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Brilliant planner and strategist
- * Fearless fighter and resourceful commander
- * Confident leader who did not hesitate to confront even the king
- * Helped reconcile David and Absalom
- * Masterminded the conquest of Jerusalem

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Was repeatedly ruthless, violent, and vengeful
- * Carried out David's scheme to have Uriah, Bath-sheba's husband, killed
- * Avenged his brother's murder by murdering Abner
- * Killed Absalom against David's orders
- * Plotted with Adonijah against David and Solomon

Lessons from his life:

- * Those who live by violence often die by violence
- * Even brilliant leaders need guidance

Vital statistics:

- * Occupation: Commander-in-chief of David's army
- * Relatives: Mother: Zeruah. Brothers: Abishai, Asahel. Uncle: David
- * Contemporaries: Saul, Abner, Absalom

Key verse:

“And the king said unto him, Do as he hath said, and fall upon him, and bury him; that thou mayest take away the innocent blood, which Joab shed, from me, and from the house of my father” (1 Kings 2:31).

Joab's story is told in 1 Samuel 22 - 1 Kings 2. He is also mentioned in 1 Chronicles 2:16; 11:5-9, 20, 26; 19:8-15; 20:1; 21:2-6; 26:28; and in the title of psalm 60.

ABISHAI

Most great leaders struggle with a few followers who try too hard. For David, Abishai was that kind of follower. His fierce loyalty to David had to be kept from becoming destructive - he was too willing to leap to his leader's defense. David never put down Abishai's eager loyalty. Instead, he patiently tried to direct it's powerful energy. This approach, while not completely successful, saved David's life on at least one occasion. At three other times, however, Abishai would have killed for the king if David had not stopped him.

Abishai was an excellent soldier, but he was better at taking orders than giving them. When he wasn't carrying out David's orders, Abishai was usually under the command of his younger brother Joab. The two brothers helped each other accomplish great military feats as well as shameful acts of violence - Abishai helped Joab murder Abner and Amasa. When he was effective as a leader, he led mostly by example. But all too often he did not think before he acted.

We should be challenged by Abishai's admirable qualities of fearlessness and loyalty, but we should be warned by his tendency to act without thinking. It is not enough to be strong and effective; we must also have the self-control and wisdom that God can give us. We are to follow and obey with our hearts and our minds.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Known as one of the heroes among David's fighting men
- * A fearless and willing volunteer, fiercely loyal to David
- * Saved David's life

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Tended to act without thinking
- * Helped Joab murder Abner and Amasa

Lessons from his life:

- * The most effective followers combine careful thought and action
- * Blind loyalty can cause great evil

Vital statistics:

- * Occupation: Soldier
- * Relatives: Mother: Zeruah. Brothers: Joab and Asahel. Uncle: David

Key verses:

"And Abishai, the brother of Joab, the son of Zeruah, was chief among thee. And he lifted up his spear against three hundred, and slew them, and had the name among three. Was he not most honorable of three? Therefore he was their captain: howbeit he attained not unto the first three" (2 Samuel 23:18, 19).

Abishai's story is told in 2 Samuel 2:18-23:19. He is also mentioned in 1 Samuel 26:1-13; 1 Chronicles 2:16; 11:20; 18:12; 19:11, 15.

DAVID'S MIGHTY MEN

One way to understand David's success is to notice the kind of men who followed him. During the time he was being hunted by Saul, David gradually built a fighting force of several hundred men. Some were relatives, others were outcasts of society, many were in trouble with the law. They all had at least one trait in common - complete devotion to David. Their achievements made them famous. Among these men were elite military groups like "the three" and "the thirty." They were true heroes.

Scripture gives the impression that these men were motivated to greatness by the personal qualities of their leader. David inspired them to achieve beyond their goals and meet their true potential. Likewise, the leaders we follow and the causes to which we commit ourselves will affect our lives. David's effectiveness was clearly connected with his awareness of God's leading. He was a good leader when he was following his Leader. Do you know whom the people you respect most are following? Your answer should help you decide whether they deserve your loyalty. Do you also recognize God's leading in your life? No one can lead you to excellence as your Creator can.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Able soldiers and military leaders
- * Shared many special skills
- * Though frequently outnumbered, were consistently victorious
- * Loyal to David

Weakness and mistake:

- * Often had little in common beyond their loyalty to David and their military expertise

Lessons from their lives:

- * Greatness is often inspired by the quality and character of leadership
- * Even a small force of able and loyal men can accomplish great feats

Vital statistics:

- * Where: They came from all over Israel (primarily Judah and Benjamin), and from some of the other surrounding nations as well
- * Occupations: Various backgrounds - almost all were fugitives

Key verses:

"David therefore departed thence, and escaped to the cave Adullam: and when his brethren and all his father's house heard it, they went down thither to him. And every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented, gathered themselves unto him; and he became a captain over them: and there were with him about four hundred men" (1 Samuel 22:1, 2).

Their stories are told in 1 Samuel 22 - 2 Samuel 23:39. They are also mentioned in 1 Chronicles 11, 12.

BATH-SHEBA

Bath-sheba was the unlikely link between Israel's two most famous kings - David and Solomon. She was lover and wife to one, mother to the other. Her adultery with David almost brought an end to the family through which God planned to physically enter his world. Out of the ashes of that sin, however, God brought good. Eventually Jesus Christ, the salvation of mankind, was born to a descendant of David and Bath-sheba.

David and Bath-sheba's story shows that little wrong decisions often lead to big mistakes. It is likely that neither was where he or she should have been. Bath-sheba may have been rash in bathing where she might be seen; David should have been at war with his army. Each decision contributed to the beginning of a very sad series of events.

Bath-sheba must have been devastated by the chain of events - unfaithfulness to her husband, discovery of pregnancy, death of her husband, death of her child. We are told that David comforted her (2 Samuel 12:24), and she lived to see another son, Solomon, sit on the throne.

From her life we see that the little, day-to-day choices we make are very important. They prepare us to make the right choices when the big decisions come. The wisdom to make right choices in small and large matters is a gift from God. Understanding this should make us more conscious of the decisions we make and more willing to include God in our decision making. Have you asked for his help with today's decisions?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Became influential in the palace alongside her son, Solomon
- * Was the mother of Israel's wisest king and an ancestor of Jesus Christ

Weakness and mistake:

- * Committed adultery

Lessons from her life:

- * Although we may feel caught up in a chain of events, we are still responsible for the way we participate in those events
- * A sin may seem like one small seed, but the harvest of consequences is beyond measure
- * In the worst possible situations, God is still able to bring about good when people truly turn to him
- * While we must live with the natural consequences of our sins, God's forgiveness of sin is total

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Jerusalem
- * Occupation: Queen and queen mother
- * Relatives: Father: Elim. Husbands: Uriah and David. Son: Solomon
- * Contemporaries: Nathan, Joab, Adonijah

Key verses:

“And when the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she mourned for her husband. And when the mourning was past, David sent and fetched her to his house, and she became his wife, and bare him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord” (2 Samuel 11:26, 27).

Her story is told in 2 Samuel 11, 12 and 1 Kings 1, 2. A related passage is Psalm 51.

SOLOMON

Wisdom is only effective when it is put into action. Early in his life, Solomon had the sense to recognize his need for wisdom. But by the time Solomon asked for wisdom to rule his kingdom, he had already started a habit which would make his wisdom ineffective for his own life - he sealed a pact with Egypt by marrying Pharaoh's daughter. She was the first of hundreds of wives married for political reasons. In doing this, Solomon went against not only his father's last words, but also God's direct commands. His action reminds us how easy it is to know what is right and yet not do it.

It is clear that God's gift of wisdom to Solomon did not mean that he couldn't make mistakes. He had been given great possibilities as the king of God's chosen people, but with them came great responsibilities; unfortunately, he tended to pursue the former and neglect the latter. While becoming famous as the builder of the Temple and the palace, he became infamous as a leader who excessively taxed and worked his people. Visitors from distant lands come to admire this wise king, while his own people were gradually alienated from him.

Little is mentioned in the Holy Bible about the last decade of Solomon's reign. Ecclesiastes probably records his last reflections on life. In that book we find a man proving through bitter experience that finding meaning in life apart from God is a vain pursuit. Security and contentment are found only in a personal relationship with God. The contentment we find in the opportunities and successes of this life is temporary. The more we expect our successes to be permanent, the more quickly they are gone. Be sure to balance your pursuit of life's possibilities with reliable fulfillment of your responsibilities.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Third king of Israel, David's chosen heir
- * The wisest man who ever lived
- * Author of Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, as well as many of the Proverbs and some of the Psalms
- * Built God's Temple in Jerusalem
- * Diplomat, trader, collector, patron of the arts

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Sealed many foreign agreements by marrying heathen women
- * Allowed his wives to affect his loyalty to God
- * Excessively taxed his people and drafted them into a labor force

Lessons from his life:

- * Effective leadership can be nullified by an ineffective personal life
- * Solomon failed to obey God, but did not learn the lesson of repentance until late in life
- * Knowing what actions are required of us means little without the will to do those actions

Vital statistics:

* Where: Jerusalem

* Occupation: King of Israel

* Relatives: Father: David. Mother: Bath-sheba. Brothers: Absalom, Adonijah.
Sister: Tamar. Son: Rehoboam

Key verse:

“Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin” (Nehemiah 13:26).

Solomon’s story is told in 2 Samuel 12:24 - 1 Kings 11:43. He is also mentioned in 1 Chronicles 28, 29; 2 Chronicles 1-10; Nehemiah 13:26; Psalm 72; and Matthew 6:29; 12:42.

JEROBOAM

Even clear warnings are hard to obey. The Holy Bible is filled with stories of people who had direction from God and yet chose their own way. Their disobedience was rarely due to ignorance of what God wanted; rather, it grew out of stubborn selfishness. Jeroboam was a consistent example of this all-too-human trait.

During the construction of Fort Millo, Solomon noticed young Jeroboam's natural leadership skills and made him a special project foreman. Shortly after this, God contacted Jeroboam through the prophet Ahijah. He told Jeroboam that God would punish David's dynasty by tearing the kingdom from Solomon's son and that Jeroboam would rule the ten northern tribes. And God made it clear that the same fate would destroy Jeroboam's family if they refused to obey God. Apparently Solomon heard about these events and tried to have Jeroboam killed. The future king escaped to Egypt, where he stayed until Solomon died.

When Rehoboam, Solomon's heir, took the throne, Jeroboam returned. He represented the people in demanding that the new king be more lenient than his father. Rehoboam's unwise choice to reject the people's request led to their rejecting him as king. Only Judah and the annexed tribe of Benjamin remained loyal to David's dynasty. The other ten tribes made Jeroboam king.

Rather than seeing this fulfillment of God's promise as motivation to obey God, Jeroboam decided to do whatever he could to secure his position. He led his kingdom away from the God who had allowed him to reign. God had already warned him of the consequences of this action - his family was eventually wiped out. And Jeroboam set into motion events that would lead to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom.

Sin's consequences are guaranteed in God's Word, but the timing of those consequences is hard to predict. When we do something directly opposed to God's commands and there isn't immediate disaster, we are often fooled into believing we got away with disobedience. But that is a dangerous assumption. Jeroboam's life should make us recognize our need to admit our disobedience and ask God to forgive us.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * An effective leader and organizer
- * First king of the ten tribes of Israel in the divided kingdom
- * A charismatic leader with much popular support

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Erected idols in Israel to keep people away from the Temple in Jerusalem
- * Appointed priests from outside the tribe of Levi
- * Depended more on his own cunning than on God's promises

Lessons from his life:

- * Great opportunities are often destroyed by small decisions
- * Careless efforts to correct another's errors often lead to the same errors
- * Mistakes always occur when we attempt to take over God's role in a situation

Vital statistics:

- * Where: The Northern Kingdom of Israel
- * Occupation: Project foreman, king of Israel
- * Relatives: Father: Nebat. Mother: Zeruah. Sons: Abijah, Nadab
- * Contemporaries: Solomon, Nathan, Ahijah, Rehoboam

Key verses:

“After this thing Jeroboam returned not from his evil way, but made again of the lowest of the people priests of the high places: whosoever would, he consecrated him, and he became one of the priests of the high places. And this thing became sin unto the house of Jeroboam, even to cut it off, and to destroy it from the face of the earth”
(1 Kings 13:33, 34).

Jeroboam’s story is told in 1 Kings 11:26 - 14:20. He is also mentioned in 2 Chronicles 10 - 13.

ELIJAH

Elijah's single-minded commitment to God shocks and challenges us. He was sent to confront, not comfort, and he spoke God's words to a king who often rejected his message just because he brought it. Elijah chose to carry out his ministry for God alone and paid for that decision by experiencing isolation from others who were also faithful to God.

It is interesting to think about the amazing miracles God accomplished through Elijah, but we would do well to focus on the relationships they shared. All that happened in Elijah's life began with the same miracle that is available to us - he responded to the miracle of being able to know God.

For example, after God worked an overwhelming miracle through Elijah in defeating the prophets of Baal, Queen Jezebel retaliated by threatening Elijah's life. And Elijah ran. He felt afraid, depressed, and abandoned. Despite God's provision of food and shelter in the desert, Elijah wanted to die. So God presented Elijah with an "audio-visual display" and a message he needed to hear. Elijah witnessed a windstorm, an earthquake, and fire. But the Lord was not in any of those powerful things. Instead, God displayed his presence in a soft whisper.

Elijah, like us, struggled with his feelings even after this comforting message from God. So God confronted Elijah's emotions and commanded action. He told Elijah what to do next and informed him that part of his loneliness was based on ignorance: 7,000 others in Israel were still faithful to God.

Even today, God often speaks through the quiet and obvious rather than the spectacular and unusual. God has work for us to do even when we feel fear and failure. And God always has more resources and people than we know about. Although we might wish to do amazing miracles for God, we should instead focus on developing a relationship with him. The real miracle of Elijah's life was his very personal relationship with God. And that miracle is available to us.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was the most famous and dramatic of Israel's prophets
- * Predicted the beginning and end of a three-year drought
- * Was used by God to restore a dead child to his mother
- * Represented God in a showdown with priests of Baal and Asherah
- * Appeared with Moses and Jesus in the New Testament transfiguration scene

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Chose to work alone and paid for it with isolation and loneliness
- * Fled in fear from Jezebel when she threatened his life

Lessons from his life:

- * We are never closer to defeat than in our moments of greatest victory
- * We are never as alone as we may feel; God is always there
- * God speaks more frequently in persistent whispers than in shouts

Vital statistics:

* Where: Gilead

* Occupation: Prophet

* Contemporaries: Ahab, Jezebel, Ahaziah, Obadiah, Jehu, Hazael

Key verses:

“And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the Lord God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again. Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench” (1 Kings 18:36-38).

Elijah’s story is told in 1 Kings 17:1 - 2 Kings 2:11. He is also mentioned in 2 Chronicles 21:12-15; Malachi 4:5, 6; Matthew 11:14; 16:14; 17:3-13; 27:47-49; Luke 1:17; 4:25, 26; John 1:19-25; Romans 11:2-4; James 5:17, 18.

AHAB

The kings of Israel and Judah, both good and evil, had prophets sent by God to advise, confront, and aid them. King David had a faithful friend in God's prophet, Nathan; Ahab could have had an equally faithful friend in Elijah, But while David listened to Nathan and was willing to repent of his sins, Ahab saw Elijah as his enemy. Why? Because Elijah always brought bad news to Ahab, and Ahab refused to acknowledge that it was his own constant disobedience to God and persistent idol worship, not Elijah's prophecies, that brought the evil on his nation. He blamed Elijah for bringing the prophecies of judgment, rather than taking his advice and changing his evil ways.

Ahab was trapped by his own choices, and he was unwilling to take the right action. As king, he was responsible to God and his prophet Elijah, but he was married to an evil woman who drew him into idol worship. He was a childish man who brooded for days if unable to get his own way. He took his evil wife's advice, listened only to the "prophets" who gave good news, and surrounded himself with people who encouraged him to do whatever he wanted. But the value of advice cannot be judged by the number of people for or against it. Ahab consistently chose to follow the majority opinion of those who surrounded him, and that led to his death.

It may seem nice to have someone encourage us to do whatever we want, because advice that goes against our wishes is difficult to accept. However, our decisions must be based on the quality of the advice, not its attractiveness or the majority opinion of our peers. God encourages us to get advice from wise counselors, but how can we test the advice we receive? Advice that agrees with the principles in God's Word is reliable. We must always separate advice from our own desires, the majority opinion, or whatever seems best in our limited perspective, and weigh it against God's commands. He will never lead us to do what he has forbidden in his Word - even in principle. Unlike Ahab, we should trust godly counselors and have the courage to stand against those who would have us do otherwise.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Seventh king of Israel
- * Capable leader and military strategist

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Was the most evil king of Israel
- * Married Jezebel, a heathen woman, and allowed her to promote Baal worship
- * Brooded about not being able to get a piece of land, and so his wife had it's owner, Naboth, killed
- * Was used to getting his own way, and got depressed when he didn't

Lessons from his life:

- * The choice of a mate will have a significant effect on life-physically, spiritually, and emotionally
- * Selfishness, left unchecked, can lead to great evil

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Northern Kingdom of Israel
- * Occupation: King
- * Relatives: Wife: Jezebel. Father: Omri. Sons: Ahaziah, Jehoram
- * Contemporaries: Elijah, Naboth, Jehu, Ben-hadad, Jehoshaphat

Key verses:

“And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him. And it came to pass... that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, which he had built in Samaria. And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him” (1 Kings 16:30-33).

Ahab's story is told in 1 Kings 16:28 - 22:40. He is also mentioned in 2 Chronicles 18 - 22; Micah 6:16.

JEZEBEL

The Holy Bible is as honest about the lives of its heroes as it is about those who rejected God. Some Bible characters found out what God can do with failures when they turned to him. Many, however, neither admitted their failures nor turned to God.

Jezebel ranks as the most evil woman in the Holy Bible. The Holy Bible even uses her name as an example of people who completely reject God (Revelation 2:20, 21).

Many heathen women married into Israel without acknowledging the God their husbands worshiped. They brought their religions with them. But no one was as determined as Jezebel to make all Israel worship her gods. To the prophet Elijah, she seemed to have succeeded. He felt he was the only one still faithful to God until God told him there were still 7,000 who had not turned from the faith.

Jezebel's one outstanding success was in contributing to the cause of the eventual downfall of the Northern Kingdom - idolatry. God punished the northern tribes for their idolatry by having them carried off into captivity.

Jezebel held great power. She not only managed her husband, Ahab, but she also had 850 assorted pagan priests under her control. She was committed to her gods and to getting what she wanted. She believed that the king had the right to possess anything he wanted. When Naboth refused to sell Ahab his vineyard, Jezebel ruthlessly had Naboth killed and took ownership of the land. Jezebel's plan to wipe out worship of God in Israel led to painful consequences. Before she died, Jezebel suffered the loss of her husband in combat and her son at the hand of Jehu, who took the throne by force. She died in the defiant and scornful way she had lived.

When comparing Jezebel and Elijah, we have to admire each one's strength of commitment. The big difference was to whom they were committed. Jezebel was committed to herself and her false gods; Elijah was totally committed to the one true God. In the end, God proved Elijah right. To what or to whom are you most committed? How would God evaluate your commitment?

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Systematically eliminated the representatives of God in Israel
- * Promoted and funded Baal worship
- * Threatened to have Elijah killed
- * Believed kings could rightfully do or have anything they wanted
- * Used her strong convictions to get her own way

Lessons from her life:

- * It is not enough to be committed or sincere. Where our commitment lies makes a great difference
- * Rejecting God always lead to disaster

Vital statistics:

* Where: Sidon, Samaria

* Occupation: Queen of Israel

* Relatives: Husband: Ahab. Father: Ethbaal. Sons: Jehoram, Ahaziah

* Contemporaries: Elijah, Jehu

Key verse:

“But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up” (1 Kings 21:25).

Jezebel’s story is told in 1 Kings 16:31 - 2 Kings 9:37. Her name is used as a synonym for great evil in Revelation 2:20.

ELISHA

Few “replacements” in Scripture were as effective as Elisha, who was Elijah’s replacement as God’s prophet to Israel. But Elisha had a great example to follow in the prophet Elijah. He remained with Elijah until the last moments of his teacher’s life on earth. He was willing to follow and learn in order to gain power to do the work to which God had called him.

Both Elijah and Elisha concentrated their efforts on the particular needs of the people around them. The fiery Elijah confronted and exposed idolatry, helping to create an atmosphere where people could freely and publicly worship God. Elisha then moved in to demonstrate God’s powerful, yet caring, nature to all who came to him for help. He spent less time in conflict with evil and more in compassionate care of people. The Holy Bible records 18 encounters between Elisha and needy people.

Elisha saw more in life than most people because he recognized that with God there was more to life. He knew that all we are and have comes to us from God. The miracles that occurred during Elisha’s ministry put people in touch with the personal and all-powerful God. Elijah would have been proud of his replacement’s work.

We too have great examples to follow - both people in Scripture and those who have positively influenced our lives. We must resist the tendency to think about the limitations that our family background or environment create for us. Instead, we should ask God to use us for his purposes - perhaps, like Elijah, to take a stand against great wrongs or, like Elisha, to show compassion for the daily needs of those around us. Ask him to use you as only he can.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was Elijah’s successor as a prophet of God
- * Had a ministry that lasted over 50 years
- * Had a major impact on four nations: Israel, Judah, Moab, and Syria
- * Was a man of integrity who did not try to enrich himself at others’ expense
- * Did many miracles to help those in need

Lessons from his life:

- * In God’s eyes, one measure of greatness is the willingness to serve the poor as well as the powerful
- * An effective replacement not only learns from his master, but also builds upon his master’s achievements

Vital statistics:

- * Where: From the tribe of Issachar, prophesied to the Northern Kingdom
- * Occupation: Farmer, prophet
- * Relatives: Father: Shaphat
- * Contemporaries: Elijah, Ahab, Jezebel, Jehu

Key verse:

“And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha,
Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee.

And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me” (2 Kings 2:9).

Elisha’s story is told in 1 Kings 19:16 - 2 Kings 13:20. He is also mentioned
in Luke 4:27.

JEHU

Jehu had the basic qualities that could have made him a great success. From a human perspective, in fact, he was a successful king. His family ruled the Northern Kingdom longer than any other. He was used by God as an instrument of punishment to Ahab's evil dynasty, and he fiercely attacked Baal worship. He came close to being God's kind of king, but he recklessly went beyond God's commands and failed to follow through on the obedient actions that began his reign. Within sight of victory, he settled for mediocrity.

Jehu was a man of immediate action but without ultimate purpose. His kingdom moved, but its destination was unclear. He eliminated one form of idolatry, Baal worship, only to uphold another by continuing to worship the calves Jeroboam had set up. He could have accomplished much for God if he had been obedient to the One who made him king. Even when he was carrying out God's directions, Jehu's style showed he was not fully aware of who was directing him.

As he did with Jehu, God gives each person strengths and abilities that will find their greatest usefulness only under his control. Outside that control, however, they don't accomplish what they could, and often become tools for evil. One way to make sure this does not happen is to tell God of your willingness to be under his control. With his presence in your life, your natural strengths and abilities will be used to their greatest potential for the greatest good.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Took the throne from Ahab's family and destroyed his evil influence
- * Founded the longest-lived dynasty of the Northern Kingdom
- * Was anointed by Elijah and confirmed by Elisha
- * Destroyed Baal worship

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Had a reckless outlook on life that made him bold and prone to error
- * Worshiped Jeroboam's golden calves
- * Was devoted to God only to the point that obedience served his own interests

Lessons from his life:

- * Fierce commitment needs control because it can result in recklessness
- * Obedience involves both action and direction

Vital statistics:

- * Where: The Northern Kingdom of Israel
- * Occupation: Commander in the army of Jehoram, king of Israel
- * Relatives: Grandfather: Nimshi. Father: Jehoshaphat. Son: Jehoahaz
- * Contemporaries: Elijah, Elisha, Ahab, Jezebel, Jehoram, Ahaziah

Key verse:

“But Jehu took no heed to walk in the law of the Lord God of Israel with all his heart: for he departed not from the sins of Jeroboam, which made Israel to sin” (2 Kings 10:31).

Jehu’s story is told in 1 Kings 19:16 - 2 Kings 10:36. He is also mentioned in 2 Kings 15:12; 2 Chronicles 22:7-9; Hosea 1:4, 5.

HEZEKIAH

The past is an important part of today's actions and tomorrow's plans. The people and kings of Judah had a rich past, filled with God's action, guidance, and commands. But with each passing generation, they also had a growing list of tragedies that occurred when the people forgot that their God, who had cared for them in the past, also cared about the present and the future - and demanded their continued obedience. Hezekiah was one of the few kings of Judah who was constantly aware of God's acts in the past and his interest in the events of every day. The Holy Bible describes him as a king who had a close relationship with God.

As a reformer, Hezekiah was most concerned with present obedience. Judah was filled with visual reminders of the people's lack of trust in God, and Hezekiah boldly cleaned house. Altars, idols, and pagan temples were destroyed. Even the bronze serpent Moses had made in the wilderness was not spared because it had ceased to point the people to God and had also become an idol. The Temple in Jerusalem, whose doors had been nailed shut by Hezekiah's own father, was cleaned out and reopened. The Passover was reinstated as a national holiday, and there was revival in Judah.

Although he had a natural inclination to respond to present problems, Hezekiah's life shows little evidence of concern about the future. He took few actions to preserve the effects of his sweeping reforms. His successful efforts made him proud. His unwise display of wealth to the Babylonian delegation got Judah included on Babylon's "Nations to Conquer" list. When Isaiah informed Hezekiah of the foolishness of his act, the king's answer displayed his persistent lack of foresight - he was thankful that any evil consequences would be delayed until after he died. And the lives of three kings who followed him - Manasseh, Amon, and Josiah - were deeply affected by both Hezekiah's accomplishments and his weaknesses.

The past affects your decisions and actions today, and these, in turn, affect the future. There are lessons to learn and errors to avoid repeating. Remember that part of the success of your past will be measured by what you do with it now and how well you use it to prepare for the future.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was the king of Judah who instigated civil and religious reforms
- * Had a personal, growing relationship with God
- * Developed a powerful prayer life
- * Noted as the patron of several chapters in the book of Proverbs (Proverbs 25:1)

Weaknesses and mistakes

- * Showed little interest or wisdom in planning for the future and protecting for others the spiritual heritage he enjoyed
- * Rashly showed all his wealth to messengers from Babylon

Lessons from his life:

- * Sweeping reforms are short-lived when little action is taken to preserve them for the future
- * Past obedience to God does not remove the possibility of present disobedience
- * Complete dependence on God yields amazing results

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Jerusalem
- * Occupation: 15th king of Judah, the Southern Kingdom
- * Relatives: Father: Ahaz. Mother: Abi. Son: Manasseh
- * Contemporaries: Isaiah, Hoshea, Micah, Sennacherib

Key verses:

“He trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him. For he clave to the Lord, and departed not from following him, but kept his commandments, which the Lord commanded Moses” (2 Kings 18:5, 6).

Hezekiah's story is told in 2 Kings 16:20 - 20:21; 2 Chronicles 28:27 - 32:33; Isaiah 36:1 - 39:8. He is also mentioned in Proverbs 25:1; Isaiah 1:1; Jeremiah 15:4; 26:18, 19; Hosea 1:1; Micah 1:1.

JOSIAH

Josiah never knew his great-grandfather, Hezekiah, but they were alike in many ways. Both had close, personal relationships with God. Both were passionate reformers, making valiant efforts to lead their people back to God. Both were bright flashes of obedience to God among kings with darkened consciences, who seemed bent on outdoing each other in disobedience and evil.

Although Josiah's father and grandfather were exceptionally wicked, his life is an example of God's willingness to provide ongoing guidance to those who set out to be obedient. At a young age, Josiah already understood that there was spiritual sickness in his land. Idols were sprouting in the countryside faster than crops. In a sense, Josiah began his search for God by destroying and cleaning up whatever he recognized as not belonging to the worship of the true God. In the process, God's Word was rediscovered. The king's intentions and the power of God's written revelation were brought together.

As the book of God's Law was read to Josiah, he was shocked, frightened, and humbled. He realized what a great gap existed between his efforts to lead his people to God and God's expectations for his chosen nation. He was overwhelmed by God's holiness and immediately tried to expose his people to that holiness. The people did respond, but the Holy Bible makes it clear that their renewed worship of God was much more out of respect for Josiah than out of personal understanding of their own guilt before God.

How would you describe your relationship with God? Are your feeble efforts at holiness based mostly on a desire to "go along" with a well-liked leader or popular opinion? Or are you, like Josiah, deeply humbled by God's Word, realizing that great gap between your life and the kind of life God expects, realizing your deep need to be cleansed and renewed by him? Humble obedience pleases God. Good intentions, even reforms, are not enough. You must allow God's Word to truly humble you and change your life.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was king of Judah
- * Sought after God and was open to him
- * Was a reformer like his great-grandfather, Hezekiah
- * Cleaned out the Temple and revived obedience to God's Law

Weakness and mistake:

- * Became involved in a military conflict that he had been warned against

Lessons from his life:

- * God consistently responds to those with repentant and humble hearts
- * Even sweeping outward reforms are of little lasting value if there are no changes in people's lives

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Jerusalem
- * Occupation: 18th king of Judah, the Southern Kingdom
- * Relatives: Father: Amon. Mother: Jedidah. Son: Jehoahaz
- * Contemporaries: Jeremiah, Huldah, Hilkiyah, Zephaniah

Key verse:

“And like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him” (2 Kings 23:25).

Josiah's story is told in 2 Kings 21:24 - 23:30; 2 Chronicles 33:25 - 35:26. He is also mentioned in Jeremiah 1:1-3; 22:11, 17.

REHOBAM

Settling for cheap imitations in exchange for the real thing is a poor way to live. In every area of his life, Rehoboam consistently traded away what was real for what was counterfeit. Given wise and unwise counsel by his advisers at his coronation, he chose to grab for power and control rather than to take patiently the counsel of those older and wiser than he and treat his people with kindness. Although his position came from God, he chose to abandon God. These unwise decisions made him weaker rather than stronger. As a result, he was invaded by the Egyptians and stripped of the riches he inherited from David and Solomon. To replace them, he had cheap bronze copies made.

Throughout the early part of his reign, Rehoboam fluctuated between obeying God and going his own way. Outward appearances were kept up, but his inward attitudes were evil. Following in the tradition of David gave Rehoboam many opportunities for real greatness. Instead, he ended up with a divided and broken kingdom.

How much of real living have we traded away for the things that do not last? We trade healthy bodies for momentary excitement, personal integrity for fast-fading wealth, honesty for lies, God's wise guidance for our selfish ways. We sin when we willingly give little value to "the real thing" God has already given us.

Our counterfeit lives may fool some people, but they never fool God. Yet in spite of what he sees in us, God offers mercy. Are you a self-managed enterprise, counterfeit at best? Or have you placed yourself in God's care? Do the decisions you must make today need a second consideration in light of Rehoboam's example?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Third and last king of the united nation of Israel, but only for a short time
- * Fortified his kingdom and achieved a measure of popularity

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Followed unwise advice and divided his kingdom
- * Married heathen women, as his father Solomon had done
- * Abandoned the worship of God and allowed idolatry to flourish

Lessons from his life:

- * Thoughtless decisions often lead to exchanging what is most valuable for something of far less value
- * Every choice we make has real and long-lasting consequences

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Jerusalem
- * Occupation: King of the united kingdom of Israel, and later of the Southern Kingdom of Judah
- * Relatives: Father: Solomon. Mother: Naamah. Son: Abijah. Wife: Maachah
- * Contemporaries: Jeroboam, Shishak, Shemaiah

Key verse:

“And it came to pass, when Rehoboam had established the kingdom,
and had strengthened himself, he forsook the law of the Lord, and all Israel with him”
(2 Chronicles 12:1).

Rehoboam's story is told in 1 Kings 11:43-14:31 and 2 Chronicles 9:31-13:7.
He is also mentioned in Matthew 1:7.

ASA

God has never accepted the idea that “the ends justify the means.” He is just and perfect in all his ways. People, on the other hand, are far from perfect. That a bond can exist between a loving and merciful Creator and a resisting and rebellious creation is as great a miracle as creation itself! As a king, Asa came very close to being good. He traveled a long way with God before getting off track. His sin was not so much deliberate disobedience as choosing the easy way rather than the right way.

When the odds seemed impossible in the battle with the Ethiopians, Asa recognized his need to depend on God. Following that victory, God’s promise of peace based on obedience spurred the king and people to many years of right living. But Asa was to face a tougher test.

Years of animosity between Asa and Israel’s king Baasha took an ugly turn. Baasha, king of the rival Northern Kingdom, was building a fort that threatened both the peace and the economy of Judah. Asa thought he saw a way out - he bribed King Ben-hadad of Syria to break his alliance with King Baasha. The plan worked brilliantly, but it wasn’t God’s way. When Asa was confronted by God’s prophet Hanani, he flew into a rage, jailed Hanani, and took out his anger on his people. Asa rejected correction and refused to admit his error to God. His greatest failure was missing what God could have done with his life if he had been willing to be humble. His pride ruined the health of his reign. He stubbornly held on to his failure until his death.

Does this attitude sound familiar? Can you identify failures in your life that you have continued to rationalize rather than admit them to God and accept his forgiveness? The ends do not justify the means. Such a belief leads to sin and failure. The stubborn refusal to admit a failure due to sin can become a big problem because it makes you spend time rationalizing rather than learning from your mistakes and moving on.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Obeyed God during the first ten years of his reign
- * Carried out a partially successful effort to abolish idolatry
- * Deposed his idolatrous mother Maachah
- * Defeated Ethiopia’s mighty army

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Responded with rage when confronted about his sin
- * Made alliances with heathen nations and evil people

Lessons from his life:

- * God not only reinforces good, he confronts evil
- * Efforts to follow God’s plans and rules yield positive results
- * How well a plan works is no measure of it’s rightness or approval by God

Vital statistics:

* Where: Jerusalem

* Occupation: King of Judah

* Relatives: Mother: Maachah. Father: Abijah. Son: Jehoshaphat

* Contemporaries: Hanani, Ben-hadad, Zerah, Baasha

Key verse:

“For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him. Herein thou hast done foolishly: therefore from henceforth thou shalt have wars” (2 Chronicles 16:9).

Asa’s story is told in 1 Kings 15:8-24 and 2 Chronicles 14-16.

He is also mentioned in Jeremiah 41:9; Matthew 1:7.

JEHOSHAPHAT

Are children more likely to learn from their parents' mistakes or simply to repeat them? In the lives of the people in the Holy Bible, we find that the effects of parental examples are powerful and long-lasting. For much of his life, Jehoshaphat seems to have been a son who learned from his father Asa's mistakes and followed his positive actions. But on several occasions, his decisions reveal the negative aspects of his father's example.

When the challenges were obvious, like the need for religious education of the people or the threat of war with a vast army, Jehoshaphat turned to God for guidance and made the right choices. His dependence on God was consistent when the odds were clearly against him. It was in depending on God for the day-to-day plans and actions that Jehoshaphat was weak. He allowed his son to marry Athaliah, the daughter of the wicked Ahab and Jezebel of Israel, who did her best to be as evil as her parents. Jehoshaphat was almost killed when, without asking God, he made an alliance with Ahab. Later, he got involved in an unwise shipbuilding venture with Ahab's son, Ahaziah - a venture that was shipwrecked by God.

God's faithfulness when the issues are clear and the enemy overwhelming is more than enough reason to seek his guidance when the issues are unclear and the enemy unseen. Jehoshaphat knew this, yet he made little use of that knowledge.

We repeat Jehoshaphat's error when we relegate God to the background in the "easy" decisions of life. Then, when things get out of hand, we want him to get us out of the mess we got ourselves into. God wants us to give him not only the major decisions, but also our daily lives - the things we are most often fooled into believing we can control. Perhaps there is nothing major facing you today. Have you paused long enough to give your day to God anyway?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * A bold follower of God, he reminded the people of the early years of his father, Asa
- * Carried out a national program of religious education
- * Had many military victories
- * Developed an extensive legal structure throughout the kingdom

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Failed to recognize the long-term results of his decisions
- * Did not completely destroy idolatry in the land
- * Became entangled with evil King Ahab through alliances
- * Allowed his son Jehoram to marry Athaliah, Ahab's daughter
- * Became Ahaziah's business partner in an ill-fated shipping venture

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Jerusalem
- * Occupation: King of Judah
- * Relatives: Father: Asa. Mother: Azubah. Son: Jehoram. Daughter-in-law: Athaliah
- * Contemporaries: Ahab, Jezebel, Micaiah, Ahaziah, Jehu

Key verses:

“And he walked in the way of Asa his father, and departed not from it, doing that which was right in the sight of the Lord. Howbeit the high places were not taken away: for as yet the people had not prepared their hearts unto the God of their fathers” (2 Chronicles 20:32, 33).

Jehoshaphat’s story is told in 1 Kings 15:24-22:50 and 2 Chronicles 17:1-21:1. He is also mentioned in 2 Kings 3:1-14 and Joel 3:2, 12.

JOASH

All parents want their children to make the right decisions. But to do this, children must first learn to make their own decisions. Making bad ones helps them learn to make good ones. If parents make all the decisions for their children, they leave their children without the skills for wise decision making when they are on their own. This problem seriously affected Joash. He had great advice, but he never grew up. He became so dependent on what he was told that his effectiveness was limited to the quality of his advisers.

When Joash was one year old, his grandmother Athaliah decided to slaughter all her descendants in a desperate bid for power. Joash was the only survivor, rescued and hidden by his aunt and uncle, Jehosheba and Jehoiada. Jehoiada's work as a priest made it possible to keep Joash hidden in the Temple for six years. At that point, Jehoiada arranged for the overthrow of Athaliah and the crowning of Joash. For many years following, Jehoiada made most of the kingdom's decisions for Joash. When the old priest died, he was buried in the royal cemetery as a tribute to his role.

But after Jehoiada's death, Joash didn't know what to do. He listened to counsel that carried him into evil. Within a short time he even ordered the death of Jehoiada's son Zechariah. After a few months, Joash's army had been soundly defeated by the Syrians. Jerusalem was saved only because Joash stripped the Temple of its treasures as a bribe. Finally, the king's own officials assassinated him. In contrast to Jehoiada, Joash was not buried among the kings; he is not even listed in Jesus' genealogy in the New Testament.

As dependent as Joash was on Jehoiada, there is little evidence that he ever established a real dependence on the God Jehoiada obeyed. Like many children, Joash's knowledge of God was secondhand. It was a start, but the king needed his own relationship with God that would outlast and overrule the changes in the advice he received.

It would be easy to criticize Joash's failure were it not for the fact that we often fall into the same traps. How often have we acted on poor advice without considering God's Word?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Carried out extensive repairs on the Temple
- * Was faithful to God as long as Jehoiada lived

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Allowed idolatry to continue among his people
- * Used the Temple treasures to bribe King Hazael of Syria
- * Killed Jehoiada's son Zechariah
- * Allowed his advisers to lead the people away from God

Lessons from his life:

- * A good and hopeful start can be ruined by an evil end
- * Even the best counsel is ineffective if it does not help us make wise decisions
- * As helpful or hurtful as others may be, we are individually responsible for what we do

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Jerusalem
- * Occupation: King of Judah
- * Relatives: Father: Ahaziah. Mother: Zibiah. Grandmother: Athaliah. Aunt: Jehosheba. Uncle: Jehoiada. Son: Amaziah. Cousin: Zechariah
- * Contemporaries: Jehu, Hazael

Key verses:

“Now after the death of Jehoiada came the princes of Judah, and made obeisance to the king. Then the king hearkened unto them. And they left the house of the Lord God of their fathers, and served groves and idols: and wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for their trespass” (2 Chronicles 24:17, 18).

Joash's story is told in 2 Kings 11:1-14:23 and 2 Chronicles 22:11-24:27.

UZZIAH

We are never closer to failure than during our greatest successes. If we fail to recognize God's part in our achievements, they are no better than failures. Uzziah was a remarkably successful king. His achievements brought him fame. He was successful in war and peace, in planning and execution, in building and planting.

Uzziah overestimated his own importance in bringing about the great achievements he experienced. He did so many things well that a consuming pride gradually invaded his life like the leprous disease that finally destroyed his body. In trying to act as a priest, he took on a role that God did not mean for him to have. He had forgotten not only how much God had given him, but also that God had certain roles for others that he needed to respect.

Uzziah's pride was rooted in his lack of thankfulness. We have no accounts of this king's ever showing appreciation to God for the marvelous gifts he received. Our accomplishments may not compare with Uzziah's, but we still owe a debt of thanksgiving to God for our very lives. If God is not getting the credit for your successes, shouldn't you start looking at your life differently?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Pleased God during his early years as king
- * Successful warrior and city-builder
- * Skillful in organizing and delegating
- * Reigned for 52 years

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Developed a prideful attitude due to his great success
- * Tried to perform the priests' duties, in direct disobedience to God
- * Failed to remove many of the symbols of idolatry in the land

Lessons from his life:

- * Lack of thankfulness to God can lead to pride
- * Even successful people must acknowledge the role God has for others in their lives

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Jerusalem
- * Occupation: King of Judah
- * Relatives: Father: Amaziah. Mother: Jecoliah. Son: Jotham
- * Contemporaries: Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Jeroboam, Zechariah, Azariah

Key verses:

“ And he made in Jerusalem engines, invented by cunning men, to be on the towers and upon the bulwarks, to shoot arrows and great stones withal. And his name spread for abroad; for he was marvellously helped, till he was strong. But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction: for he transgressed against the Lord his God, and went into the Temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense”
(2 Chronicles 26:15, 16).

Uzziah's story is told in 2 Kings 15:1-7 (where he is called Azariah), and in 2 Chronicles 26:1-23. He is also mentioned in Isaiah 1:1; 6:1; 7:1; Hosea 1:1; Amos 1:1; Zechariah 14:5.

MANASSEH

Even a brief outline of King Manasseh's evil sickens us, and we wonder how God could ever forgive him. Not only did he intentionally offend God by desecrating Solomon's Temple with idols, but he also worshiped pagan gods and even sacrificed his children to them! Child sacrifice is a vile act of pagan idolatry, an act against both God and people. Such blatant sins require severe correction.

God showed justice to Manasseh in warning and punishing him. He showed mercy in responding to Manasseh's heartfelt repentance by forgiving and restoring him. Given the nature of Manasseh's rebellion, we are not surprised by God's punishment - defeat and exile at the hands of the Assyrians. But Manasseh's repentance and God's forgiveness are unexpected. Manasseh's life was changed. He was given a new start.

How far has God gone to get your attention? Have you ever, like Manasseh, come to your senses and cried out to God for help? Only your repentance and a prayer for a new attitude stand between you and God's complete forgiveness.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Despite the bitter consequences of his sins, he learned from them
- * Humbly repented of his sins before God

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Challenged God's authority and was defeated
- * Reversed many of the positive effects of his father Hezekiah's rule
- * Sacrificed his children to idols

Lessons from his life:

- * God will go a long way to get someone's attention
- * Forgiveness is limited not by the amount of sin, but by our willingness to repent

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Jerusalem
- * Occupation: King of Judah
- * Relatives: Father: Hezekiah. Mother: Hephzibah. Son: Amon

Key verses:

"And when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed unto him: and he was intreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord he was God" (2 Chronicles 33:12, 13).

Manasseh's story is told in 2 Kings 21:1-18 and 2 Chronicles 32:33-33:20. He is also mentioned in Jeremiah 15:4.

ZERUBBABEL

Sometimes God's ownership of a project is only recognized after our best efforts have failed. It is dangerous to think of God as responsible for the insignificant details while we take charge of the larger aspects of a project. Instead, it is God who is in control, and we only play a part in his overall plan. When God gives us important jobs to do, it isn't because he needs our help. Zerubbabel learned this lesson.

God's people had been exiled in Babylon for many years. Many had settled into comfortable life-styles there and wanted to stay. There were, however, almost 60,000 who had not forgotten Judah. When Babylon was defeated in 539 B.C., the Persian ruler, Cyrus, allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple. Zerubbabel led the first and largest group back to the Promised Land.

Zerubbabel's leadership was by right and recognition. Not only was he a descendant of David, he also had personal leadership qualities. When the people arrived in Judah, they were given time to establish living quarters, and then were called to begin the work. They began not by laying the city walls or constructing government buildings, but by rebuilding the altar, worshiping God together, and celebrating a feast. Under Zerubbabel's leadership, they established a spiritual foundation for their building efforts.

The Temple foundation was then quickly completed, and another round of celebration followed. But soon, two problems arose. A few old men remembered Solomon's glorious Temple and were saddened at how much smaller and less glorious this one was. Also, some enemies of the Jews tried to infiltrate the work force and stop the building with political pressure. Fear caused the work to grind to a halt. The people went to their homes, and 16 years passed.

We do not know what Zerubbabel did during this time. His discouragement, following those first months of excitement and accomplishment, must have been deep. Those feelings eventually hardened into hopelessness. So God sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to be Zerubbabel's encouraging companions. They confronted the people's reluctance and comforted their fears. The work began once again with renewed energy and was completed in four years.

Zerubbabel, like many of us, knew how to start well but found it hard to keep going. His successes depended on the quality of encouragement he received. Zerubbabel let discouragement get the better of him. But when he let God take control, the work was finished. God is always in control. We must not let circumstances or lack of encouragement slow us from doing the tasks God has given us.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Led the first group of Jewish exiles back to Jerusalem from Babylon
- * Completed the rebuilding of God's Temple
- * Demonstrated wisdom in the help he accepted and refused
- * Started his building project with worship as the focal point

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Needed constant encouragement
- * Allowed problems and resistance to stop the rebuilding work

Lessons from his life:

- * A leader needs to provide not only the initial motivation for a project, but the continued encouragement necessary to keep the project going
- * A leader must find his/her own dependable source of encouragement
- * God's faithfulness is shown in the way he preserved David's line

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Babylon, Jerusalem
- * Occupation: Recognized leader of the exiles
- * Relatives: Father: Shealtiel. Grandfather: Jehoiachin
- * Contemporaries: Cyrus, Darius, Zechariah, Haggai

Key verses:

"Then he answered and spake unto me, saying, This is the word of the Lord unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts. Who art thou, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain and he shall bring forth the headstone thereof with shoutings, crying, Grace, grace unto it" (Zechariah 4:6, 7).

Zerubbabel's story is told in Ezra 2:2-5:2. He is also mentioned in 1 Chronicles 3:19; Nehemiah 7:7; 12:1, 47; Haggai 1:1, 12, 14; 2:4, 21, 23; Zechariah 4:6-10; Matthew 1:12, 13; Luke 3:27.

EZRA

It is not personal achievement, but personal commitment to live for God, that is important. Achievements are simply examples of what God can do through someone's life. The most effective leaders spoken of in the Holy Bible had little awareness of the impact their lives had on others. They were too busy obeying God to keep track of their successes. Ezra fits that description.

About 80 years after the rebuilding of the Temple under Zerubbabel, Ezra returned to Judah, with about 2,000 men and their families, to carry out a program of religious education. But long before Ezra's mission began, God had shaped him in three important ways so that he would use the power well. First, as a scribe, Ezra dedicated himself to carefully studying God's Word. Second, he intended to apply and obey personally the commands he discovered in God's Word. Third, he was committed to teaching others both God's Word and its application to life.

Knowing Ezra's priorities, it is not surprising to note his actions when he arrived in Jerusalem. The people had disobeyed God's command not to marry women of foreign nations. On a cold and rainy day, Ezra addressed the people and made it clear they had sinned. Because of the sins of many, all were under God's condemnation. Confession, repentance, and action were needed. The people admitted their sin and devised a plan to deal with the problem.

This initial effort on Ezra's part set the stage for what Nehemiah would later accomplish. Ezra continued his ministry under Nehemiah, and the two were used by God to start a spiritual movement that swept the nation.

Ezra achieved great things and made a significant impact because he had the right starting place for his actions and his life: God's Word. He studied it seriously and applied it faithfully. He taught others what he learned. He is, therefore, a great model for anyone who wants to live for God.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Committed to study, follow, and teach God's Word
- * Led the second group of exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem
- * May have written 1 and 2 Chronicles
- * Concerned about keeping the details of God's commands
- * Sent by King Artaxerxes to Jerusalem to evaluate the situation, set up a religious education system, and return with a firsthand report
- * Worked alongside Nehemiah during the last spiritual awakening recorded in the Old Testament

Lessons from his life:

- * A person's willingness to know and practice God's Word will have a direct effect on how God uses his/her life
- * The starting place for serving God is a personal commitment to serve him today, even before knowing what that service will be

Vital statistics:

* Where: Babylon, Jerusalem

* Occupation: scribe among the exiles in Babylon, king's envoy, teacher

* Relative: Father: Seriah

* Contemporaries: Nehemiah, Artaxerxes

Key verse:

“For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments” (Ezra 7:10).

Ezra's story is told in Ezra 7:1-10:16 and Nehemiah 8:1-12:36.

NEHEMIAH

God is in the business of working through his people to accomplish seemingly impossible tasks. God often shapes people with personality characteristics, experiences, and training that prepare them for his purpose, and usually the people have no idea what God has in store for them. God prepared and positioned Nehemiah to accomplish one of the Holy Bible's "impossible" tasks.

Nehemiah was a common man in a unique position. He was secure and successful as cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah had little power, but he had great influence. He was trusted by the king. He was also a man of God, concerned about the fate of Jerusalem.

Seventy years earlier, Zerubbabel had managed to rebuild God's Temple. Thirteen years had passed since Ezra had returned to Jerusalem and helped the people with their spiritual needs. Now Nehemiah was needed. Jerusalem's wall was still in ruins, and the news broke his heart. As he talked to God, a plan began to take form in Nehemiah's mind about his own role in the rebuilding of the city walls. He willingly left the security of his home and job in Persia to follow God on an "impossible" mission. And the rest is history.

From beginning to end, Nehemiah prayed for God's help. He never hesitated to ask God to remember him, closing his autobiography with these words: "Remember me, O my God, for good." Throughout the "impossible" task, Nehemiah displayed unusual leadership. The wall around Jerusalem was rebuilt in record time, despite resistance. Even Israel's enemies grudgingly and fearfully admitted that God was with these builders. Not only that, but God worked through Nehemiah to bring about a spiritual awakening among the people of Judah.

You may not have Nehemiah's unique abilities or feel that you are in a position where you can do anything great for God, but there are two ways you can become useful to God. First, be a person who talks to God. Welcome him into your thoughts and share yourself with him - your concerns, feelings, and dreams. Second, be a person who walks with God. Put what you learn from his Word into action. God may have an "impossible" mission that he wants to do through you.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * A man of character, persistence, and prayer
- * Brilliant planner, organizer, and motivator
- * Under his leadership, the wall around Jerusalem was rebuilt in 52 days
- * As political leader, led the nation to religious reform and spiritual awakening
- * Was calm under opposition
- * Was capable of being bluntly honest with his people when they were sinning

Lessons from his life:

- * The first step in any venture is to pray
- * People under God's direction can accomplish impossible tasks
- * There are two parts to real service for God: talking with him and walking with him

Vital statistics:

* Where: Persia, Jerusalem

* Occupation: king's cupbearer, city builder, governor of Judah

* Relative: Father: Hachaliah

* Contemporaries: Ezra, Artaxerxes, Tobiah, Sanballat

Key verse:

"Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me; also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work" (Nehemiah 2:18).

Nehemiah's story is told in the book of Nehemiah.

MORDECAI

Following Jerusalem's last stand against Nebuchadnezzar, Mordecai's family was deported to the Babylonian Empire. He was probably born in Shushan, a city that became one of Persia's capitals after Cyrus conquered Babylon, and inherited an official position among the Jewish captives that kept him around the palace even after the Babylonians were driven out. At one time, when he overheard plans to assassinate Ahasuerus, he reported the plot and saved the king's life.

Mordecai's life was filled with challenges that he turned into opportunities. When his aunt and uncle died, he adopted Esther, their daughter and his young cousin, probably because his own parents were dead and he felt responsible for her. Later, when she was drafted into Ahasuerus's harem and chosen to be queen, Mordecai continued to advise her. Shortly after this he found himself in conflict with Ahasuerus's recently appointed Prime Minister, Haman. Although willing to serve the king, Mordecai refused to worship the king's representative. Haman was furious with Mordecai. So he planned to have Mordecai and all the Jews killed. His plan became a law of the Medes and Persians, and it looked as though the Jews were doomed.

Mordecai, willing to be God's servant wherever he was, responded by contacting Esther and telling her that one reason God had allowed her to be queen might well be to save her people from this threat. But God had also placed him in the right place years earlier. God revealed to the king through his nighttime reading of historical documents that Mordecai had once saved his life, and the king realized he had never thanked Mordecai. The great honor then given to Mordecai ruined Haman's plan to hang him on the gallows. God had woven an effective counter-strategy against which Haman's plan could not stand.

Later, Mordecai instituted the Jewish Feast of Purim. He had a lengthy career of service to the king on behalf of the Jews. In Mordecai's life, God blended both character and circumstances to accomplish great things. He has not changed the way he works. God is using the situations you face each day to weave a pattern of godliness into your character. Pause and ask God to help you respond appropriately to the situations you find yourself in today.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Exposed an assassination plot against the king
- * Cared enough to adopt his cousin
- * Refused to bow to anyone except God
- * Took Haman's place as Prime Minister

Lessons from his life:

- * The opportunities we have are more important than the ones we wish we had
- * We can trust God to weave together the events of life for our best, even though we may not be able to see the overall pattern
- * The rewards for doing right are sometimes delayed, but they are guaranteed by God himself

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Shushan, one of several capital cities in Persia
- * Occupation: Jewish official who became Prime Minister under Ahasuerus
- * Relatives: Adopted daughter: Esther. Father: Jair
- * Contemporaries: Ahasuerus, Haman

Key verse:

“For Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren, seeking the wealth of his people, and speaking peace in all his seed” (Esther 10:3).

Mordecai’s story is told in the book of Esther.

ESTHER

We treasure security, even though we know that security in this life carries no guarantees - possessions can be destroyed, beauty fades, relationships can be broken, death is inevitable. Real security, then, must be found beyond this life. Only when our security rests on God and his unchanging nature can we face the challenges that life is sure to bring our way.

Esther's beauty and character won Ahasuerus's heart, and he made her his queen. Even in her favored position, however, she would risk her life by attempting to see the king when he had not requested her presence. There was no guarantee that the king would even see her. Although she was queen, she was still not secure. But, cautiously and courageously, Esther decided to risk her life by approaching the king on behalf of her people.

She made her plans carefully. The Jews were asked to fast and pray with her before she went to the king. Then on the chosen day she went before him, and he did ask her to come forward and speak. But instead of issuing her request directly, she invited him and Haman to a banquet. He was astute enough to realize she had something on her mind, yet she conveyed the importance of the matter by insisting on a second banquet.

In the meantime, God was working behind the scenes. He caused Ahasuerus to read the historical records of the kingdom late one night, and the king discovered that Mordecai had once saved his life. Ahasuerus lost no time in honoring Mordecai for that act. During the second banquet, Esther told the king of Haman's plot against the Jews, and Haman was doomed. There is grim justice in Haman's death on the gallows he had built for Mordecai, and it seems fitting that the day on which the Jews were to be slaughtered became the day their enemies died. Esther's risk confirmed that God was the source of her security.

How much of your security lies in your possessions, position, or reputation? God has not placed you in your present position for your own benefit. He put you there to serve him. As in Esther's case, this may involve risking your security. Are you willing to let God be your ultimate security?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Her beauty and character won the heart of Persia's king
- * She combined courage with careful planning
- * She was open to advice and willing to act
- * She was more concerned for others than for her own security

Lessons from her life:

- * Serving God often demands that we risk our own security
- * God has a purpose for the situations in which he places us
- * Courage, while often vital, does not replace careful planning

Vital statistics:

* Where: Persian Empire

* Occupation: Ahasuerus's wife, queen of Persia

* Relatives: Cousin: Mordecai. Husband: Ahasuerus. Father: Abihail

Key verse:

“Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16).

Esther's story is told in the book of Esther.

HAMAN

The most arrogant people are often those who must measure their self-worth by the power or influence they think they have over others. Haman was an extremely arrogant leader. He recognized the king as his superior, but could not accept anyone as an equal. When one man, Mordecai refused to bow in submission to him, Haman wanted to destroy him. He became consumed with hatred for Mordecai and, in turn, for all the Jewish people. Mordecai's dedication to God and his refusal to give homage to any human person challenged Haman's self-centered religion. Haman saw the Jews as a threat to his power, and he decided to kill them all.

God was preparing Haman's downfall and the protection of his people long before Haman became Prime Minister under Ahasuerus. Esther, a Jew, became queen, and Mordecai's role in exposing an assassination plot indebted the king to him. Not only was Haman prevented from killing Mordecai, he also had to suffer the humiliation of publicly honoring him. Within hours, Haman died on the gallows he had built to hang Mordecai, and his plan to wipe out the Jews was thwarted. In contrast to Esther, who risked everything for God and won, Haman risked everything for an evil purpose and lost.

Our initial response to the story about Haman is to say that he got what he deserved. But the Holy Bible leads us to ask deeper questions, "How much of Haman is in me?" "Do I desire to control others?" "Am I threatened when others don't appreciate me as I think they should?" "Do I want revenge when my pride is attacked?" Confess these attitudes to God and ask him to replace them with an attitude of forgiveness. Otherwise, God's justice will settle the matter.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Achieved great power, second in command to Persia's King Ahasuerus

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * The desire to control others and receive honor was his highest goal
- * Was blinded by arrogance and self-importance
- * Planned to murder Mordecai and built a gallows for him
- * Orchestrated the plan to slaughter God's people throughout the empire

Lessons from his life:

- * Hatred will be punished
- * God has an amazing record for making evil plans backfire on the planners
- * Pride and self-importance will be punished
- * An insatiable thirst for power and prestige is self-destructive

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Shushan, the capital of Persia
- * Occupation: Prime Minister
- * Relatives: Wife: Zeresh
- * Contemporaries: Ahasuerus, Mordecai, Esther

Key verses:

“And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath. And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had showed him the people of Mordecai; wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai” (Esther 3:5, 6).

Haman’s story is told in the book of Esther.

JOB

Children never tire of asking “Why?” Yet the question produces a bitter taste the older we get. Children wonder about everything; adults wonder about suffering. We notice that the world seems to run by a system of cause and effect, yet there are some effects for which we can’t find a clear cause, and some causes that don’t lead to the expected effects. We would expect Job’s wealth and family to give him a very happy life, and, for a while, they did. But the loss and pain he experienced shock us. The first two chapters of his story are more than we can bear. To those so quick to ask “Why?” at the smallest misfortune, Job’s faithfulness seems incredible. But even Job had something to learn. We can learn with him.

Our age of “instant” everything has caused us to lose the ability to wait. We expect to learn patience instantly, and in our hurry, we miss the contradiction. Of all that we want now, relief from pain is at the top of our list. We want an instant cure for everything from toothaches to heartbreaks.

Although some pains have been cured, we still live in a world where many people suffer. Job was not expecting instant answers for the intense emotional and physical pain he endured. But in the end, what broke Job’s patience was not the suffering, but not knowing why he suffered.

When Job expressed his frustration, his friends were ready with their answers. They believed that the law of cause and effect applied to all people’s experiences. Their view of life boiled down to this: good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people. Because of this, they felt their role was to help Job admit to whatever sin was causing his suffering.

Job actually looked at life almost the same way as his friends. What he couldn’t understand was why he was suffering so much when he was sure he had done nothing to deserve such punishment. The last friend, Elihu, did offer another explanation for the pain by pointing out that God might be allowing it to purify Job. But this was only partly helpful. When God finally spoke, he didn’t offer Job an answer. Instead, he drove home the point that it is better to know God than to know answers.

Often we suffer consequences for bad decisions and actions. Job’s willingness to repent and confess known wrongs is a good guideline for us. Sometimes suffering shapes us for special service to others. Sometimes suffering is an attack by Satan on our lives. And sometimes we don’t know why we suffer. At those times, we are willing to trust God in spite of unanswered questions?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was a man of faith, patience, and endurance
- * Was known as a generous and caring person
- * Was very wealthy

Weakness and mistake:

- * Allowed his desire to understand why he was suffering to overwhelm him and make him question God

Lessons from his life:

- * Knowing God is better than knowing answers
- * God is not arbitrary or uncaring
- * Pain is not always punishment

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Land of Uz
- * Occupation: Wealthy land and livestock owner
- * Relatives: Wife and first ten children not named. Daughters from the second set of children: Jemima, Kezia, Kerenhappuch
- * Contemporaries: Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, Elihu

Key verses:

“Take my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy” (James 5:10, 11).

Job’s story is told in the book of Job. He is also referred to in Ezekiel 14:14, 20 and James 5:11.

ISAIAH

Trees and prophets share at least one important characteristic - both are planted for the future. Yet seedlings are often overlooked and prophets often ignored. Isaiah is one of the best examples of this. The people of his time could have been rescued by his words. Instead, they refused to believe him. With the passing of centuries, however, Isaiah's words have cast a shadow on all of history.

Isaiah was active as a prophet during the reigns of five kings, but he did not set out to be a prophet. By the time King Uzziah died, Isaiah was established as a scribe in the royal palace in Jerusalem. It was a respectable career, but God had other plans for his servant. Isaiah's account of God's call leaves little doubt about what motivated the prophet for the next half century. His vision of God was unforgettable.

The encounter with God permanently affected Isaiah's character. He reflected the God he represented. Isaiah's messages - some comforting, some confronting - are so distinct that some have guessed they came from different authors. Isaiah's testimony is that the messages came from the only one capable of being perfect in justice as well as in mercy - God himself.

When he called Isaiah as a prophet, God did not encourage him with predictions of great success. God told Isaiah that the people would not listen. But he was to speak and write his messages anyway because eventually some would listen. God compared his people to a tree that would have to be cut down so that a new tree could grow from the old roots (Isaiah 6:13).

We, who are part of that future, can see that many of the promises God gave through Isaiah have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. We also gain the hope of knowing that God is active in all of history, including our own.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Considered the greatest Old Testament prophet
- * Quoted at least 50 times in the New Testament
- * Had powerful messages of both judgment and hope
- * Carried out a consistent ministry even though there was little positive response from his listeners
- * His ministry spanned the reigns of five kings of Judah

Lessons from his life:

- * God's help is needed in order to effectively confront sin while comforting people
- * One result of experiencing forgiveness is the desire to share that forgiveness with others
- * God is purely and perfectly holy, just, and loving

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Jerusalem
- * Occupation: Scribe, prophet
- * Relatives: Father: Amoz. Sons: Shear-jashub, Maher-shalal-hash-baz
- * Contemporaries: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh, Micah

Key verse:

“Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me” (Isaiah 6:8).

Isaiah’s story is told in 2 Kings 19:2-20:19. He is also mentioned in 2 Chronicles 26:22; 32:20, 32; Matthew 3:3; 8:17; 12:17-21; John 12:38; Romans 10:16, 20.

JEREMIAH

Endurance is not a common quality. Many people lack the long-term commitment, care, and willingness that are vital to sticking with a task despite all odds. But Jeremiah was a prophet who endured.

Jeremiah's call by God teaches how intimately God knows us. He valued us before anyone else knew we would exist. He cared for us while we were in our mother's womb. He planned our lives while our bodies were still being formed. He values us more highly than we value ourselves.

Jeremiah had to depend on God's love as he developed endurance. His audiences were usually antagonistic or apathetic to his messages. He was ignored; his life was often threatened. He saw both the excitement of a spiritual awakening and the sorrow of a national return to idolatry. With the exception of the good King Josiah, Jeremiah watched king after king ignore his warnings and lead the people away from God. He saw fellow prophets murdered. He himself was severely persecuted. Finally, he watched Judah's defeat at the hands of the Babylonians.

Jeremiah responded to all this with God's Word and human tears. He felt firsthand God's love for his people and the people's rejection of that love. But even when he was angry with God and tempted to give up, Jeremiah knew he had to keep going. God had called him to endure. He expressed intense feelings, but he also saw beyond the feelings to the God who was soon to execute justice, but who afterward would administer mercy.

It may be easy for us to identify with Jeremiah's frustrations and discouragement, but we need to realize that this prophet's life is also an encouragement to faithfulness.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Wrote two Old Testament books, Jeremiah and Lamentations
- * Ministered during the reigns of the last five kings of Judah
- * Was a catalyst for the great spiritual reformation under King Josiah
- * Acted as God's faithful messenger in spite of many attempts on his life
- * Was so deeply sorrowful for the fallen condition of Israel that he earned the title "weeping prophet"

Lessons from his life:

- * The majority opinion is not necessarily God's will
- * Although punishment for sin is severe, there is hope in God's mercy
- * God will not accept empty or insincere worship
- * Serving God does not guarantee earthly security

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Anathoth
- * Occupation: Prophet
- * Relatives: Father: Hilkiah
- * Contemporaries: Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah, Baruch

Key verses:

“Then said I, Ah, Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child. But the Lord said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord” (Jeremiah 1:6-8).

Jeremiah’s story is told in the book of Jeremiah. He is also mentioned in Ezra 1:1; Daniel 9:2; Matthew 2:17; 16:14; 27:9. See also 2 Chronicles 34, 35 for the story of the spiritual revival under Josiah.

EZEKIEL

Although Ezekiel's visions and prophecies were clear and vivid, very little is known about the prophet's personal life. He was among the thousands of young men deported from Judah to Babylon when King Jehoiakim surrendered. Until those tragic days, Ezekiel was being trained for the priesthood. But during the exile in Babylon, God called Ezekiel to be his prophet during one of Israel's darkest times.

Ezekiel experienced the same kind of shocking encounter with God that Isaiah had reported 150 years earlier. Like Isaiah, Ezekiel was never the same after his personal encounter with God. Although God's messages through both these prophets had many points in common, the conditions in which they lived were very different. Isaiah warned of the coming storm; Ezekiel spoke in the midst of the storm of national defeat that devastated his people. He announced that even Jerusalem would not escape destruction. In addition, during this time Ezekiel had to endure the pain of his wife's death.

God's description of Ezekiel as a watchman on the walls of the city captures the personal nature of his ministry. A watchman's job was dangerous. If he failed at his post, he and the entire city might be destroyed. His own safety depended on the quality of his work. The importance of each person's accountability before God was a central part of Ezekiel's message. He taught the exiles that God expected personal obedience and worship from each of them.

As in Ezekiel's day, it is easy for us today to forget that God has a personal interest in each one of us. We may feel insignificant or out of control when we look at world events. But knowing that God is ultimately in control, that he cares, and that he is willing to be known by us can bring a new sense of purpose to our lives. How do you measure your worth? Are you valuable because of your achievements and potential, or because God, your Creator and Designer, declares you valuable?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was a priest by training, a prophet by God's call
- * Received vivid visions and delivered powerful messages
- * Served as God's messenger during Israel's captivity in Babylon
- * God shaped his character to fit his mission - a tough and stalwart man to reach a hard and stubborn people (Ezekiel 3:8)

Lessons from his life:

- * Even the repeated failures of his people will not prevent God's plan for the world from being fulfilled
- * Each person's response to God determines his or her eternal destiny
- * In seemingly hopeless situations God still has people through whom he can work

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Babylon
- * Occupation: Prophet to the captives in Babylon
- * Relatives: Father: Buzi. Wife: Unknown
- * Contemporaries: Jehoiachin, Jeremiah, Jehoiakim, Nebuchadnezzar

Key verses:

“Moreover he said unto me, Son of man, all my words that I shall speak unto thee receive in thine heart, and hear with thine ears. And go, get thee to them of the captivity, unto the children of thy people, and speak unto them, and tell them, Thus saith the Lord God; whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear” (Ezekiel 3:10, 11).

Ezekiel’s story is told in the book of Ezekiel and 2 Kings 24:14-17.

DANIEL

Daniel's early life demonstrates that there is more to being young than making mistakes. No characteristic wins the hearts of adults more quickly than wisdom in the words and actions of a young person. Daniel and his friends had been taken from their homes in Judah and exiled. Their futures were in doubt, but they all had personal traits that qualified them for jobs as servants in the king's palace. They took advantage of the opportunity without letting the opportunity take advantage of them.

Our first hint of Daniel's greatness comes in his quiet refusal to give up his convictions. He had applied God's Word to his own life, and he resisted changing the habits he had formed from that application. Both his physical and spiritual diets were an important part of his relationship with God. He ate carefully and lived prayerfully. One of the benefits of being in training for royal service was eating food from the king's table. Daniel tactfully chose a simpler menu and proved it was a healthy choice. As with Daniel, mealtimes are obvious and regular tests of our efforts to control our appetites.

While Daniel limited his food intake, he indulged in prayer. He was able to communicate with God because he made it a habit. He put into practice his convictions, even when that meant being thrown into a den of hungry lions. His life proved he made the right choice.

Do you hold so strongly to your faith in God that whatever happens you will do what God says? Such conviction keeps you a step ahead of temptation; such conviction gives you wisdom and stability in changing circumstances. Prayerfully live out your convictions in everyday life and trust God for the results.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Although young when deported, remained true to his faith
- * Served as a counselor to two Babylonian kings and two Medo-Persian kings
- * Was a man of prayer and a statesman with the gift of prophecy
- * Survived the lions' den

Lessons from his life:

- * Quiet convictions often earn long-term respect
- * Don't wait until you are in a tough situation to learn about prayer
- * God can use people wherever they are

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Judah and the courts of Both Babylon and Persia
- * Occupation: A captive from Israel who became a counselor of kings
- * Contemporaries: Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius, Cyrus

Key verse:

“Forasmuch as an excellent spirit, and knowledge, and understanding, interpreting of dreams, and shewing of hard sentences, and dissolving of doubts, were found in the same Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar; now let Daniel be called, and he will shew the interpretation” (Daniel 5:12).

Daniel’s story is told in the book of Daniel. He is also mentioned in Matthew 24:15.

SHADRACH / MESHACH / ABEDNEGO

Friendships make life enjoyable and difficult times bearable. They are tested and strengthened by hardships. Such was the relationship between three young Jewish men deported to Babylon along with Daniel. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego help us think about the real meaning of friendship. As much as these friends meant to each other, they never allowed their friendship to usurp God's place in their lives - not even in the face of death.

Together they silently defied King Nebuchadnezzar's order to bow to and worship the idol he made of himself. They shared a courageous act, while others, eager to get rid of them, told the king that the three Jews were being disloyal. While this was not true, Nebuchadnezzar could not spare them without shaming himself.

This was the moment of truth. Death was about to end their friendship. A small compromise would have allowed them to live and go on enjoying each other, serving God, and serving their people while in this foreign land. But they were wise enough to see that compromise would have poisoned the very conviction that bound them so closely - each had a higher allegiance to God. So they did not hesitate to place their lives in the hands of God. The rest was victory!

When we leave God out of our most important relationships, we tend to expect those relationships to meet needs in us that only God can meet. Friends are helpful, but they cannot meet our deepest spiritual needs. Leaving God out of our relationships indicates how unimportant he really is in our own lives. Our relationship with God should be important enough to touch our other relationships - especially our closest friendships.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Stood with Daniel against eating food from the king's table
- * Shared a friendship that stood the tests of hardship, success, wealth, and possible death
- * Unwilling to compromise their convictions even in the face of death
- * Survived the fiery furnace

Lessons from their lives:

- * There is great strength in real friendship
- * It is important to stand with others with whom we share convictions
- * God can be trusted even when we can't predict the outcome

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Babylon
- * Occupations: King's servants and counselors
- * Contemporaries: Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar

Key verses:

“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou has set up” (Daniel 3:16-18).

The story of Shadrach (Hananiah), Meshach (Mishael), and Abednego (Azariah) is told in the book of Daniel.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR

Nebuchadnezzar was one world leader who decided he could get more cooperation from the people he conquered by letting them keep their gods. Their lands he took, their riches he looted, their lives he controlled, but their idols he allowed them to worship, sometimes even worshipping them himself. Nebuchadnezzar's plan worked well, with one glaring exception. When he conquered the little nation of Judah, he met a God who demanded exclusive worship - not just his share among many gods. In a sense, Nebuchadnezzar had always been able to rule the gods. This new God was different; this God dared to claim that he had made Nebuchadnezzar all that he was. One of the great conquerors in history was himself conquered by his Creator.

The Holy Bible allows us to note the ways in which God worked on Nebuchadnezzar. God allowed him victories but he was accomplishing God's purposes. God allowed him to deport the best young Jewish leaders as his palace servants, while placing close to him a young man named Daniel who would change the king's life. God allowed Nebuchadnezzar to attempt to kill three of his servants to teach the king that he did not really have power over life and death. God warned him of the dangers in his pride, then allowed Nebuchadnezzar to live through seven years of mental illness before restoring him to the throne. God showed the king who was really in control!

These lessons are clear to us today because of our place in history. When our attention shifts to our own lives, we find ourselves unable to see how God is working today. But we do have the advantage of God's Word as our guide for today's challenges. We are commanded to obey God; we are also commanded to trust him. Trusting him covers those times when we are not sure about the outcome. God has entrusted us with this day; have we trusted him with our lives?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Greatest of the Babylonian kings
- * Known as a builder of cities
- * Described in the Holy Bible as one of the foreign rulers God used for his purposes

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Thought of himself as a god and was persuaded to build a statue of himself that all were to worship
- * Became extremely proud, which led to a bout of mental illness
- * Tended to forget the demonstrations of God's power he had witnessed

Lessons from his life:

- * History records the actions of God's willing servants and those who were his unwitting tools
- * A leader's greatness is affected by the quality of his counselors
- * Uncontrolled pride is self-destructive

Vital statistics:

* Where: Babylon

* Relatives: Father: Nabopolassar. Son: Evil-Merodach. Grandson: Belshazzar

* Contemporaries: Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Jehoiachin

Key verse:

“Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honor the King of heaven,
all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride
he is able to abase” (Daniel 4:37).

Nebuchadnezzar’s story is told in 2 Kings 24, 25; 2 Chronicles 36; Jeremiah 21-52;
Daniel 1-4.

JOSEPH

The strength of what we believe is measured by how much we are willing to suffer for those beliefs. Joseph was a man with strong beliefs. He was prepared to do what was right despite the pain he knew it would cause. But Joseph had another trait - he not only tried to do what was right, he tried to do it in the right way.

When Mary told Joseph about her pregnancy, Joseph knew the child was not his. His respect for Mary's character and the story she told him, as well as her attitude toward the expected child, must have made it hard to think his bride had done something wrong. Still, someone else was the child's father - and it was difficult to accept that the "someone else" was God.

Joseph decided he had to break the engagement, but he was determined to do it in a way that would not cause public shame to Mary. He intended to act with justice and love.

At this point, God sent a messenger to Joseph to confirm Mary's story and open another way of obedience for Joseph - to take Mary as his wife. Joseph obeyed God, married Mary, and honored her virginity until the baby was born.

We do not know how long Joseph lived his role as Jesus' earthly father - he is last mentioned when Jesus was 12 years old. But Joseph trained his son in the trade of carpentry, made sure he had good spiritual training in Nazareth, and took the whole family on the yearly trip to Jerusalem for the Passover, which Jesus continued to observe during his adult years.

Joseph knew Jesus was someone special from the moment he heard the angel's words. His strong belief in that fact, and his willingness to follow God's leading, enabled him to be Jesus' chosen earthly father.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * A man of integrity
- * A descendant of King David
- * Jesus' legal and earthly father
- * A person sensitive to God's guidance and willing to do God's will no matter what the consequence

Lessons from his life:

- * God honors integrity
- * Social position is of little importance when God chooses to use us
- * Being obedient to the guidance we have from God leads to more guidance from him
- * Feelings are not accurate measures of the rightness or wrongness of an action

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Nazareth, Bethlehem
- * Occupation: Carpenter
- * Relatives: Wife: Mary. Children: Jesus, James, Joses, Judas, Simon, and daughters
- * Contemporaries: Herod the Great, John the Baptist, Simeon, Anna

Key verses:

“Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife; for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 1:19, 20).

Joseph’s story is told in Matthew 1:16-2:23; Luke 1:26-2:52.

HEROD

The Holy Bible records history. It has proven itself an accurate and reliable record of people, events, and places. Independent historical accounts back up the Holy Bible's descriptions and details of many famous lives. One of these was Herod the Great.

Herod is remembered as a builder of cities and lavish rebuilders of the Temple in Jerusalem. But he also destroyed people. He showed little greatness in either his personal actions or his character. He was ruthless in ruling his territory. His suspicions and jealousy led to the murder of several of his children and the death of his wife Mariamne.

Herod's title, king of the Jews, was granted by Rome but never accepted by the Jewish people. He was part of the Davidic family line, and he was only partly Jewish. Although Israel benefited from Herod's lavish efforts to repair the Temple in Jerusalem, he won little admiration because he also rebuilt various pagan temples. Herod's costly attempt to gain the loyalty of the people failed because it was superficial. His only loyalty was to himself.

Because his royal title was not genuine, Herod was constantly worried about losing his position. His actions when hearing from the wise men about their search for the new king are consistent with all that we know about Herod. He planned to locate and kill the child before he could become a threat. The murder of innocent children that followed is a tragic lesson in what can happen when actions are motivated by selfishness. Herod's suspicions did not spare even his own family. His life was self-destructive.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was given the title king of the Jews by the Romans
- * Held onto his power for more than 30 years
- * Was an effective, though ruthless, ruler
- * Sponsored a great variety of large building projects

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Tended to treat those around him with fear, suspicion, and jealousy
- * Had several of his own children and at least one wife killed
- * Ordered the killing of the infants in Bethlehem
- * Although claiming to be Jewish, he was still involved in many pagan religions

Lessons from his life:

- * Great power brings neither peace nor security
- * No one can prevent God's plans from being carried out
- * Superficial loyalty does not impress people or God

Vital statistics:

- * Occupation: King of Judea from 37 to 4 B.C.
- * Relatives: Father: Antipater. Sons: Archelaus, Antipater, Antipas, Philip, and others.
Wives: Doris, Mariamne, and others
- * Contemporaries: Zacharias, Elisabeth, Mary, Joseph, Mark Antony, Augustus

Notes about Herod the Great are found in Matthew 2:1-22 and Luke 1:5.

MATTHEW

More than any other disciple, Matthew had a clear idea of how much it would cost to follow Jesus, yet he did not hesitate a moment. When he left his tax-collecting booth, he guaranteed himself unemployment. For several of the other disciples, there was always fishing to return to, but for Matthew, there was no turning back.

Two changes happened to Matthew when he decided to follow Jesus. First, Jesus gave him a new life. He not only belonged to a new group; he belonged to the Son of God. He was not just accepting a different way of life; he was now an accepted person. For a despised tax collector, that change must have been wonderful! Second, Jesus gave Matthew a new purpose for his skills. When he followed Jesus, the only tool from his past job that he carried with him was his pen. From the beginning, God had made him a record-keeper. Jesus' call eventually allowed him to put his skills to their finest work. Matthew was a keen observer, and he must have recorded what he saw going on around him. The gospel that bears his name came as a result.

Matthew's experience points out that each of us, from the beginning, is one of God's works in progress. Much of what God has for us he gives long before we are able to respond to him consciously. He trusts us with skills and abilities ahead of schedule. He has made us each capable of being his servant. When we trust him with what he has given us, we begin a life of real adventure. Matthew couldn't have known that God would use the very skills he had sharpened as a tax collector to record the greatest story ever lived. And God has no less meaningful a purpose for each one of us. Have you recognized Jesus saying to you, "Come be my disciple"? What has been your response?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Was one of Jesus' 12 disciples
- * Responded immediately to Jesus' call
- * Invited many friends to his home to meet Jesus
- * Compiled the Gospel of Matthew
- * Clarified for his Jewish audiences Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies

Lessons from his life:

- * Jesus consistently accepted people from every level of society
- * Matthew was given a new life, and his God-given skills of record-keeping and attention to detail were given new purpose
- * Having been accepted by Jesus, Matthew immediately tried to bring others into contact with Jesus

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Capernaum
- * Occupation: Tax Collector, disciple of Jesus
- * Relatives: Father: Alphaeus
- * Contemporaries: Jesus, Pilate, Herod, other disciples

Key verse:

“And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the receipt of custom, and said unto him, Follow me. And he arose and followed him” (Mark 2:14).

Matthew’s story is told in the Gospels. He is also mentioned in Acts 1:13.

MARY - (LAZARUS'S SISTER)

Hospitality is an art. Making sure a guest is welcomed, warmed, and well fed requires creativity, organization, and teamwork. Their ability to accomplish these makes Mary and her sister Martha one of the best hospitality teams in the Bible. Their frequent guest was Jesus Christ.

For Mary, hospitality meant giving more attention to the guest himself than to the needs he might have. She would rather talk than cook. She was more interested in her guest's words than in the cleanliness of her home or the timeliness of her meals. She let her older sister Martha take care of those details. Mary's approach to events shows her to be mainly a "responder." She did little preparation - her role was participation. Unlike her sister, who had to learn to stop and listen, Mary needed to learn that action is often appropriate and necessary.

We first met Mary during a visit Jesus paid to her home. She simply sat at his feet and listened. When Martha became irritated at her sister's lack of help, Jesus stated that Mary's choice to enjoy his company was the most appropriate response at the time. Our last glimpse of Mary shows her to have become a woman of thoughtful and worshipful action. Again she was at Jesus' feet, washing them with perfume and wiping them with her hair. She seemed to understand, better even than the disciples, why Jesus was going to die. Jesus said her act of worship would be told everywhere, along with the Gospel, as an example of costly service.

What kind of hospitality does Jesus receive in your life? Are you so busy planning and running your life that you neglect precious time with him? Or do you respond to him by listening to his Word, then finding ways to worship him with your life? It is that kind of hospitality he longs for from each of us.

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Perhaps the only person who understood and accepted Jesus' coming death, taking time to anoint his body while he was still living
- * Learned when to listen and when to act

Lessons from her life:

- * The busy-ness of serving God can become a barrier to knowing him personally
- * Small acts of obedience and service have widespread effects

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Bethany
- * Relatives: Sister: Martha. Brother: Lazarus

Key verses:

"For in that she hath poured this ointment on my body, she did it for my burial. Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her"
(Matthew 26:12, 13).

Mary's story is told in Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 10:38-42; John 11:17-45; 12:1-11.

PETER

Jesus' first words to Simon Peter were "Come ye after me" (Mark 1:17). His last words to him were "Follow thou me" (John 21:22). Every step of the way between those two challenges, Peter never failed to follow - even though he often stumbled.

When Jesus entered Peter's life, this plain fisherman became a new person with new goals and new priorities. He did not become a perfect person, however, and he never stopped being Simon Peter. We may wonder what Jesus saw in Simon that made him greet this potential disciple with a new name, Peter - "the Rock," Impulsive Peter certainly didn't act like a rock much of the time. But when Jesus chose his followers, he wasn't looking for models, he was looking for men. He chose people who could be changed by his love, and then he sent them out to communicate that his acceptance was available to anyone - even to those who often fail.

We may wonder what Jesus sees in us when he calls us to follow him. But we know Jesus accepted Peter, and, in spite of his failures, Peter went on to do great things for God. Are you willing to keep following Jesus, even when you fail?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Became the recognized leader among Jesus' disciples - one of the inner group of three
- * Was the first great voice of the Gospel during and after Pentecost
- * Probably knew Mark and gave him information for the Gospel of Mark
- * Wrote 1 and 2 Peter

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Often spoke without thinking; was brash and impulsive
- * During Jesus' trial, denied three times that he even knew Jesus
- * Later, found it hard to treat Gentile Christians as equals

Lessons from his life:

- * Enthusiasm has to be backed up by faith and understanding or it fails
- * God's faithfulness can compensate for our greatest unfaithfulness
- * It is better to be a follower who fails than one who fails to follow

Vital statistics:

- * Occupation: Fisherman, disciple
- * Relatives: Father: Jona. Brother: Andrew
- * Contemporaries: Jesus, Pilate, Herod

Key verse:

"Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

Peter's story is told in the Gospels and the book of Acts. He is mentioned in Galatians 1:18 and 2:7-14; and he wrote the books of 1 and 2 Peter.

HEROD ANTIPAS

Most people dislike having their sins pointed out, especially in public. The shame of being exposed is often stronger than the guilt brought on by the wrongdoing. Herod Antipas was a man experiencing both guilt and shame.

Herod's ruthless ambition was public knowledge, as was his illegal marriage to his brother's wife, Herodias. One man made Herod's sin a public issue. That man was John the Baptist. John had been preaching in the wilderness, and thousands flocked to hear him. Apparently it was no secret that John had rebuked Herod for his adulterous marriage. Herodias was particularly anxious to have John silenced. As a solution, Herod imprisoned John.

Herod liked John. John was probably one of the few people he met who spoke only the truth to him. But the truth about his sin was a bitter pill to swallow, and Herod wavered at the point of conflict: he couldn't afford to have John constantly reminding the people of their leader's sinfulness, but he was afraid to have John killed. He put off the choice. Eventually Herodias forced his hand, and John was executed. Of course, this only served to increase Herod's guilt.

Upon hearing Jesus, Herod immediately identified him with John. He couldn't decide what to do about Jesus. He didn't want to repeat the mistake he had made with John, so he tried to threaten Jesus just before his final journey to Jerusalem. When the two met briefly during Jesus' trial, Jesus would not speak to Herod. Herod had proved himself a poor listener to John, and Jesus had nothing to add to John's words. Herod responded with spite and mocking. Having rejected the messenger, he found it easy to reject the Messiah.

For each person, God chooses the best possible ways to reveal himself. He uses his Word, circumstances, our minds, or other people to get our attention. He is persuasive and persistent, but never forces himself on us. To miss or resist God's message, as did Herod, is tragedy. How aware are you of God's attempts to enter your life? Have you welcomed him?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * Built the city of Tiberias and other architectural projects
- * Ruled the region of Galilee for the Romans

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * Consumed with his quest for power
- * Put off decisions or made wrong ones under pressure
- * Divorced his wife to marry the wife of his half brother, Philip
- * Imprisoned John the Baptist and later ordered his execution
- * Had a minor part in the execution of Jesus

Lessons from his life:

- * A life motivated by ambition is usually characterized by self-destruction
- * Opportunities to do good usually come to us in the form of choices to be made

Vital statistics:

* Where: Jerusalem

* Occupation: Roman tetrarch of the region of Galilee and Peraea

* Relatives: Father: Herod the Great. Mother: Malthace. First wife: daughter of Aretas IV.
second wife: Herodias

* Contemporaries: John the Baptist, Jesus, Pilate

Key verse:

“For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly” (Mark 6:20).

Herod Antipas’s story is told in the Gospels. He is also mentioned in Acts 4:27; 13:1.

JUDAS ISCARIOT

It is easy to overlook the fact that Jesus chose Judas to be his disciple. We may also forget that while Judas betrayed Jesus, all the disciples abandoned him. With the other disciples, Judas shared a persistent misunderstanding of Jesus' mission. They all expected Jesus to make the right political moves. When he kept talking about dying, they all felt varying degrees of anger, fear, and disappointment. They didn't understand why they had been chosen if Jesus' mission was doomed to fail.

We do not know the exact motivation behind Judas's betrayal. What is clear is that Judas allowed his desires to place him in a position where Satan could manipulate him. He accepted payment to set Jesus up for the religious leaders. He identified Jesus for the guards in the dimly lit garden of Gethsemane. It is possible that he was trying to force Jesus' hand - would he or would he not rebel against Rome and set up a new political government?

Whatever his plan, though, at some point Judas realized he didn't like the way things were turning out. He tried to undo the evil he had done by returning the money to the priests, but it was too late. The wheels of God's sovereign plan had been set into motion. How sad that Judas ended his life in despair without ever experiencing the gift of reconciliation God could give even to him through Jesus Christ.

Human feelings toward Judas have always been mixed. Some have fervently hated him for his betrayal. Others have pitied him for not realizing what he was doing. A few have tried to make him a hero for his part in ending Jesus' earthly mission. Some have questioned God's fairness in allowing one man to bear such guilt. While there are many feelings about Judas, there are some facts to consider as well. He, by his own choice, betrayed God's Son into the hands of soldiers (Luke 22:48). He was a thief (John 12:6). Jesus knew that Judas's life of evil would not change (John 6:70). Judas's betrayal of Jesus was part of God's sovereign plan (Psalm 41:9; Zechariah 11:12, 13; Matthew 20:18; 26:20-25; Acts 1:16, 20).

In betraying Jesus, Judas made the greatest mistake in history. But the fact that Jesus knew Judas would betray him doesn't mean that Judas was a puppet of God's will. Judas made the choice. God knew what the choice would be and confirmed it. Judas didn't lose his relationship with Jesus; rather, he never found Jesus in the first place. He is called the "son of perdition" (John 17:12) because he was never saved.

Judas does us a favor if he makes us think a second time about our commitment to God and the presence of his Spirit within us. Are we true disciples and followers, or uncommitted pretenders? We can choose despair and death, or we can choose repentance, forgiveness, hope, and eternal life. Judas's betrayal sent Jesus to the cross to guarantee that second choice, our only chance. Will we accept his free gift, or, like Judas, betray him?

Strengths and accomplishments:

- * He was chosen as one of the 12 disciples; the only non-Galilean
- * He kept the money bag for the expenses of the group
- * He was able to recognize the evil in his betrayal of Jesus

Weaknesses and mistakes:

- * He was greedy (John 12:6)
- * He betrayed Jesus
- * He committed suicide instead of seeking forgiveness

Lessons from his life:

- * Evil plans and motives leave us open to being used by Satan for even greater evil
- * The consequences of evil are so devastating that even small lies and little wrongdoings have serious results
- * God's plan and his purposes are worked out even in the worst possible events

Vital statistics:

- * Where: Probably from the town of Kerioth
- * Occupation: disciple of Jesus
- * Relatives: Father: Simon
- * Contemporaries: Jesus, Pilate, Herod, the other 11 disciples

Key verses:

"Then entered Satan into Judas surnamed Iscariot, being of the number of the twelve. And he went his way, and communed with the chief priests and captains, how he might betray him unto them" (Luke 22:3, 4).

Judas's story is told in the Gospels. He is also mentioned in Acts 1:18, 19.