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The Choices We Make

Lessons from Deuteronomy and 1-2 Kings

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Section 1: Lessons from Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy, a farewell speech attributed to Moses, both concludes the story of Israel's origins (the Pentateuch) and opens the story of its life in the Promised Land (Joshua-2 Kings). This great biblical book, one of the most influential in the history of Judaism and Christianity, combines a number of types of literature, including laws, poems, and narratives, all with an aim of inviting the reader to reflect on the nature of Yahweh's work with the elect people whose calling is to be a light to the world. Moses' speech as a whole lays out for Israel the options of life and death, as chapter 30 puts it. All of the types of material of the book fit into the ways the book lays out the way of life.

So, story. The opening chapters reflect on Israel's past story of divine grace and human rebellion and call the people of God to a high standard of personal and group ethics. Because our past profoundly shapes our future, the recovery of the past as a resource for the future is an important theme in the Bible (and in Christianity at large). Our past experiences, encounters with other people, and the rich interplay of ideas and emotions over time all make us who we are and who we can become. This is true of us as individuals, and of groups, however large. Therefore, Deuteronomy pays close attention to how Israel's past as a redeemed people, liberated from Egyptian bondage and led to a Promised Land, because it recognizes that human beings always have a history that shapes our lives and predicts our future. As we will see, a careful attention to that past – hence to identity – profoundly shapes how Deuteronomy thinks about the world. Israel cannot speak of itself, and we as Christians cannot speak of ourselves, without reference to the mighty saving deeds of God.

Then come the laws. While modern Americans, even modern American Christians, often think of "law" as something restrictive, narrow, impersonal, and inhibiting, the Bible does not think of the category in this way. Recall, for example, the first Psalm, which imagines the wise person as one who "meditates on Yahweh's Torah day and night," taking "delight" in it. Because the law of God (or, if you prefer, the norms of God) becomes internalized, and because it is good and for our good, Israel can follow it with one of Deuteronomy's favorite words, "joy." Now, this internalization requires biblical law to address life as a whole, not just the "religious" side of it, because each of us lives one life, not several at once. The great and small aspects of life intertwine to form a whole. And this is why the laws in chapter 5 and again in chapters 12-26 cover many topics, from the sublime to the mundane. As a whole, these laws aim to create a new society in which justice, freedom, and piety will reign. The norms of human existence in which one's economic value triumphs over all else do not apply in Israel.

Following the laws is a second sermon section (chapters 29-31) and two beautiful poems (chapters 32-33) that describe the future of Israel as it lives under the blessing of God. These two sections, both written in a gorgeously elevated way designed to challenge and inspire, invite the book's readers into a deeper relationship with Yahweh and thus each other.

The book's final narrative is the death scene of Moses. The emphasis here is not so much on the death as on the fact that Israel's history goes on, now under Joshua. Moses was merely the first and greatest teacher of the nation, but in passing on the words of God

to Israel, Moses did what all great leaders must do. He insured that his creation (or in this case, God's creation, in which Moses merely collaborated) will continue and grow.

From a theological point of view, Deuteronomy both draws together older legal and narrative traditions and interprets them in light of core theological ideas so as to make them usable for a new day. At one level, the key ideas of the book are clear: Israel, the redeemed people, should serve the one God, Yahweh, and in doing so will enjoy a life of joy and plenty in its own land and thus will witness to other nations of the goodness of the redeemer God. While the book sorts through the actual practices of ancient Israelite religion to identify those that reflect the larger vision of the one God and to reject those that do not, it does so by connecting its sometimes innovative thinking to the deepest beliefs of the people.

At another level, however, it is difficult to reduce Deuteronomy to a set of discrete ideas. Rather, the book offers a total picture of the redeemed people. Thus, for example, law serves to better individuals, families, and the nation because, as Terence Fretheim puts it, "God is concerned about the best possible life for all of God's creatures." The law does not serve its own ends but gives shape to Israel's vocation as a people finishing God's creation.

For Christians, Deuteronomy points to the desire of the God who redeems to be also the God who sanctifies a people. While the Torah does not apply to us in the same way it does to Jews, we recognize in its search for ordered freedom the pursuit we also undertake, for in it we recognize the God who also redeems us.

Deuteronomy marks the conclusion of the Pentateuch, the story of the creation of Israel. It should be understood in the context of everything that precedes it, especially the stories of Exodus.

Outline of the Book

1:1-5	Introduction (the time and place of the book)
1:6-4:40	The first speech, a summary of the origins of Israel with theological commentary
4:41-43	A note on the three cities of refuge
4:44-49	A bridge between the first and second discourses of the book
5:1-11:32	The second speech, the laying out of the laws for Israel
12:1-26:15	The code of laws
26:16-27:26	The founding of Israel before the entry into the promised land
28	Blessings and cursings
29	More on the covenant
30	A promise of return after repentance
31	The charge to Joshua
32:1-43	The "Song of Moses"
32:44-47	An epilogue to the "Song of Moses"
32:48-52	God's Command to Moses to climb the mountain
33:1-29	The blessing of Moses
34	Moses' death

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Lesson 1: “Joy and Peace for the Exodus People”

Deuteronomy as literature takes the form of a sermon by Moses that sets forth the covenant between God and Israel. The covenant depends on God’s gracious action in liberating Israel during the exodus, not on human achievements of any source. The proper human response to this grace, however, is a life of worship, ethical behavior, and concern for the poor and marginalized. Chapter 4 states the major themes of the book and, along the way, sketches a set of options for living a meaningful life in the world God is redeeming.

Lesson 2: “Renewing Ethics” (Deuteronomy 5:6-33)

The Ten Commandments outline basic commitments of Israel’s ethics. First, ethical behavior derives from the character and actions of God, not arbitrary rules. Since God has acted graciously, so do we. Conversely, failure to recognize God as the source of life and hope leads to oppression and neglect. Second, the commandments concern basic human justice, the care of the powerless (strangers, servants, and even animals), and a life of nonviolence and contentment. Third, ethics takes the form of concrete behaviors and rituals, such as Sabbath, that remind us of higher commitments than personal happiness.

Lesson 3: “Coming Before the God of Mercy (Deuteronomy 16)

Deuteronomy 16 focuses on sacred time, that is, those times of the year when Israel commemorated God’s deeds and committed itself to living in ways that extended grace to the community and the world. Since Israel was enslaved in Egypt, it is to live mercifully in Canaan. Worship in Israel, along with its focus on the majesty and generosity of God, expresses charity toward the poor, justice for the oppressed, and a passion for a better world for all. Therefore, the Old Testament’s ideas about worship have profound implications for our own approach to God as we seek to be covenant people too.

Lesson 4: “Leaders for a renewing people” (Deuteronomy 16:18-18:22)

Given Israel’s high calling to be in covenant with God, the choice of leaders who will share the values and commitments of the covenant seems imperative. These chapters examine the duties, character, and goals of prophets, priests, and kings, as well as the responsibilities of followers toward such leaders. Since the need for quality leadership has not abated, today’s Christians must continue to ask what sorts of leaders they need and how they are to select, affirm, and support them. Leaders need to ask how they are to serve the church in its mission of living out God’s grace in the present world.

Lesson 5: “Now Choose Life! Or, on the Freedom of Obedience and the Commitment of Choice” (Deuteronomy 30-31)

The call to follow the God who redeems a people is fundamentally a call to a life of freedom and meaning. Deuteronomy 30-31 stakes out the behaviors, emotions, values, and knowledge required to live fully into the beauties of the call of God. As this lesson shows, Israel’s call is also ours because their God is also ours. Living in a deep and abiding relationship with this God makes us into the sorts of individuals and communities that can be forces for the ongoing redemption of God’s world as justice and peace dawn about us.

Lesson 1: “Joy and Peace for the Exodus People”

Deuteronomy as literature takes the form of a sermon by Moses that sets forth the covenant between God and Israel. The covenant depends on God’s gracious action in liberating Israel during the exodus, not on human achievements of any source. The proper human response to this grace, however, is a life of worship, ethical behavior, and concern for the poor and marginalized. Chapter 4 states the major themes of the book and, along the way, sketches a set of options for living a meaningful life in the world God is redeeming.

The book of Deuteronomy opens with a long recitation of Israel’s story, told from the point of view of Moses as leader of an exasperating people whose grip on reality was always tenuous, and whose ability to distinguish the good gifts of God from the evils of the world was always weaker than it should have been. It is curious that the book should begin this way, for the beginning reflects a profound awareness of human sinfulness and its source in the ingratitude and self-promoting attitude that always haunts us all.

Deuteronomy 4:1-43 concludes the opening section of the book and states most of the book’s major themes:

- (1) The memory of Yahweh’s majestic deeds;
- (2) The central importance of obedience to God (the Hebrew expression involves the word *shamar* [“to keep”] and *‘asah* [“to do”], often combined in the awkward phrase “to keep to do,” or perhaps in better English, “to be sure to do”). Such obedience never appears here as a burden or something done with difficulty, but rather as a gifted way of living, an easier way of life because it conforms more closely to our true human nature and to Israel’s story with God;
- (3) The role of “hearing” (Hebrew: *shama*). Though often translated “obey,” the verb has a slightly different connotation than *shamar* (“to keep”). Since God speaks, reveals, communicates with Israel, Israel does well to listen carefully so that it can understand and act upon that understanding;
- (4) The importance of teaching the ways of God to our children – just as Moses was the wise teacher of his spiritual children, so also must parents and other members of the older generation model the faith for those who follow them;
- (5) The prohibition of idolatry. While worship of beings other than Yahweh is understandable for Gentiles – though not necessarily defensible (see 4:19) – it is not appropriate, or even rational, for Israel given its experiences with the sovereign Lord of all, who redeems all;
- (6) The consequences of idolatry – exile (see 4:27-29); and
- (7) The beauty of repentance that leads to recognition of God’s mercy.

God is the merciful one who keeps commitments. By inviting Israel into a committed relationship, Deuteronomy asks the redeemed people to reflect God’s nature in their own lives and thus to grow as human beings ought.

To understand Deuteronomy’s view of the world, it is necessary to recognize that the book is trying to foster in its readers not just a mindless adherence to laws, much less one based in fear, but a loving attitude toward a God who seeks the best for humankind. To do so, it seeks a comprehensive approach to human life that embraced both the individual

and the group, both a sense of history and a trust in the future, and both attention to the grand ideas of God and the most mundane elements of human life. Deuteronomy recognizes that life is never about just knocking things off a checklist, but about fashioning a strong character that can survive the difficulties of life.

This approach to religion permeates not only Deuteronomy and the historical works that follow (Joshua-2 Kings), but all of the books of the Bible. Because God is revealed to Israel as a being with deep concerns for both the beauty of the entire created world and the integrity of its human inhabitants, the concern for a whole life pervades Scripture. Attention to past and future, to the interior life of the heart and the exterior life of the community, to place and time and things and people – all this works together to form a coherent view of reality in which human beings have the opportunity to flourish. Deuteronomy is a major contributor to this overall vision.

There is a final element to chapter 4 that must be taken seriously. That is the freedom of the redeemed people to choose repeatedly whether it will keep its commitments to the covenant. Memory, prayer, ritual, and prophecy are all tools for helping us exercise freedom for good or ill. Yet Deuteronomy's view of freedom, unlike that of contemporary American consumerism, does not reduce itself to the maximization of choice, as though good would inevitably follow from having all the choices imaginable. Rather, Deuteronomy recognizes that choices always have consequences and that life is most profoundly about the commitments we make. By freeing ourselves from commitments that destroy our capacity to be our true selves, men and women in relationship to a gracious God and thus to each other as well, we actually expand our freedom of action.

Deuteronomy does not, of course, try to work out what this sort of life would look like in a modern, pluralist society. Other biblical books do reflect on what it means to be a minority alternative community in a larger world, and they take various points of view (see Esther or Jeremiah 29 for one set of approaches, Revelation for a very different one). Yet the book of Deuteronomy does offer some basic clues for how one could be a counter-culture in service of the God of all the earth. This and other lessons in this series will take up the question of how those principles could be worked out in our own day.

For Further Reflection

1. In your experience, how does the collective memory of your church work? When the group tells its story, what things are remembered, forgotten, disagreed upon? What does this tell you about the group's understanding of itself?
2. Deuteronomy 4 introduces the rest of the book and, in doing so, it frames the norms (laws) that follow as part of an overarching story of redemption and the quest for faithfulness. In your experience, does this approach make sense? How do grace and law fit together, if they do? What tensions are involved?
3. Most studies of the question show that Christians spend very little time passing on the faith to their own children. How can we do this better? What would we need to change to insure that this happens?
4. Deuteronomy speaks often of "hearing" God. How does this happen in your experience? How do you test what you think you hear against Scripture and the church's experience?

Lesson 2: “Renewing Ethics” (Deuteronomy 5:6-33)

The Ten Commandments outline basic commitments of Israel’s ethics. First, ethical behavior derives from the character and actions of God, not arbitrary rules. Since God has acted graciously, so do we. Conversely, failure to recognize God as the source of life and hope leads to oppression and neglect. Second, the commandments concern basic human justice, the care of the powerless (strangers, servants, and even animals), and a life of nonviolence and contentment. Third, ethics takes the form of concrete behaviors and rituals, such as Sabbath, that remind us of higher commitments than personal happiness.

The Ten Commandments are familiar territory for most Christians. We learn them in childhood. This is appropriate, because they originally were arranged for easy memorization by beginners. Ten fingers, ten commandments! They offer a basic orientation to fundamental behaviors that make a decent society possible. Their very familiarity, however, may make us underestimate their significance. Though they do not cover every imaginable area of human existence, they do provide a starting point for moral reflection.

To understand them, we should pay attention to several elements:

- (1) **Structure.** The Ten Commandments break into two recognizable sections, with a bridge linking them. Commandments 1-4 (worship God, make no idols, avoid false oaths, and keep the Sabbath) orient us to God. Commandments 6-10 (do not murder, commit adultery, steal, lie in court, or covet) focus on human relationships and processes. Commandment 5 (honor parents) links the two because reverence for those who give us life relates closely to reverence for the ultimate source of life.
- (2) **Content and Character.** Commandments against violence, sexual infidelity, theft, and abuse of judicial process would hardly seem to need explanation or defense, and they receive none in this text. A society that tolerates such behaviors will have many problems. On the other hand, some of the other commandments seem less than obvious. Take the last one first. How does one enforce a command against covetousness? Answer: the commandment is trying to form character, not merely to create external rules. This commandment directly concerns justice because it instructs us to allow to each person what is rightfully his or hers. It assumes that humans need certain things to exist and that God’s people should make sure that persons receive that much.

Extend this point further to other commandments. For example, the rule of the Sabbath, because it concentrates on how a community regards itself in the presence of God, reveals two important aspects of justice. (a) Justice involves every person in the community, not just those with power. (b) Justice is rooted in God’s creative act. We treat others justly because doing so helps return us to the state God intended for us in the first place.

Moreover, the Commandments’ attempt to connect human behavior with the nature and actions of God operates in the foundational commandments against idolatry and “taking God’s name in vain” (involving God in our plans when we do not intend to be godly). The God of Israel does not resemble the unjust, fickle, cruel gods of the nations, but rather seeks the wholeness and happiness of human beings. To please God, to live

as God intended humans to live, and thus to become God's people, we must treat each other well.

(3) **Stories, laws, and spiritual formation.** Behind the Ten Commandments lies a story, as the introduction makes clear. The story is that God has rescued slaves from bondage and led them to a land in which they can flourish as free people. No longer must they be subject to the cruel whims of others. Now they must act as moral agents on their own. This story of faith creates the context in which the laws make sense.

We can draw two further lessons from this observation. The first is that many of the biblical stories make sense as ways of reflecting on the norms of behavior set forth in the Ten Commandments and other biblical law. Think of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39; adultery), or the murder of Naboth (1 Kings 21; bearing false witness), or the failed siege of Jericho (Joshua 7; involving God and the things of God in one's own nefarious plans), or the many stories of idolatry. The moral reflection that goes on in storytelling assumes a set of basic orientations like those of the Ten Commandments. The second lesson is that the story of the people of God constantly returns to a consideration of the norms guiding us. Or, to put it another way, the commandments get lived out in the lives of men, women, and children. Committing to the practices of justice in the Ten Commandments will allow the story of our lives to work itself out in a godly direction.

(4) **So it may go well for you, and you may live long.** The commandment concerning parents states a goal that applies at some level to all the commandments. God's desire for humans is that we should flourish as fully as possible. This happens when we show sustained concern for the welfare of all those around us. Responsibility is the name of the game.

(5) **Education.** Remember that the Ten Commandments are easy to learn and very suitable for children. This is no accident. We want to raise just people from childhood on, not allow them to discover this major part of their discipleship late in life.

Important Lessons

The Ten Commandments rest on some assumptions that we do well to recover.

- ☼ The people of God are a community in which the welfare of each is the concern of all. We cannot view each other as objects to be used, but as fellow heirs of the saving acts of God.
- ☼ God works to establish justice in the world. God does not validate the power structures as we see them. Therefore, we must question those same power structures so that we can work for their eventual demise and their replacement by a world of peace. At the very least, we must make sure that they do not become characteristic of the church.
- ☼ Justice operates in the family (honor father and mother), in the economy (let everyone rest), in friendships (do not covet or lie), and so, in short, in every human relationship. Our work for justice is, at its core, work to build relationships with as many as possible.
- ☼ Worship of one God leads us to see the people of God as one people. We cannot truly worship God while allowing our brothers and sisters to remain in want.
- ☼ The story of redemption is an ongoing story initiated by God but lived out by us all. In practicing justice in our own lives, we imitate God's acts of deliverance and so become more faithful to our own calling.

Exodus 20:1-6 and Deuteronomy 5:1-10 contain the prologue to the Ten Commandments and the first commandments proper. Deuteronomy is an expanded version of Exodus. We should notice the elements of each text

Exodus

God's name (the Lord your God)
 God's action: deliverance from Egypt
 Command: do not have other gods
 Command: do not make an image
 Qualification: no image fitting any habitat
 or appearance known to people
 (compare Genesis 1)
 Repeat command: do not serve them
 Reason: "I am the Lord"
 Qualifications of God: "jealous/loyal,"
 Attentive to sin but merciful

Deuteronomy

Charge: love and keep God's words
 Reminder: God made a covenant with
 Israel
 Reminder: God spoke face to face with
 Israel
 Reminder (and qualification of previous
 one): Moses is the mediator
 God's name
 God's action: deliverance from Egypt
 Command: do not have other gods
 Command: do not make an image
 Qualification: no image fitting any habitat
 or appearance known to people
 Repeat command: do not bow to or serve
 them
 Reason: "I am the Lord"
 Qualifications of God: same as Exodus

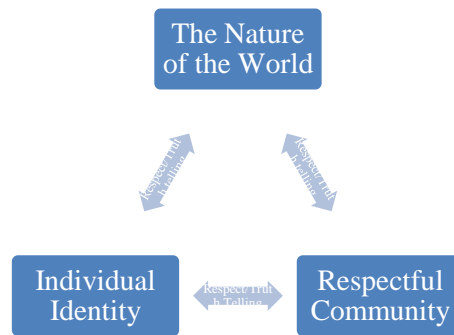
The basic ideas here are clear enough, but to understand the text's theological aims, we must notice how it portrays God acting and how humans should respond to those actions. (1) The texts wish to portray God as separate from the creation yet profoundly involved in it. Unlike other ancient and modern religious texts, which either risk making God simply a feature of the natural world or isolating God so fully from the world as to leave us out of touch with the divine realm, the biblical account seeks to maintain a balance. (2) Worship risks idolatry whenever it confuses the creature with the creator, no matter how blessed or perfect the creature may be. (3) Worship of God derives from the story of God's people. Worship does not happen in a historical vacuum, but rather in a continuum of past, present, and future experience.

The Bible portrays its chief character, God, in many ways. Some of the descriptors include promise-keeper (Genesis 12, 22); inspiration for human goodness (Leviticus 18-19; Deuteronomy 5); cohabitor with people (1 Kings 8; John 1:1-18); the rescuer of the perishing (Psalm 80); the source of justice (Amos 6; Micah 6); the One who cares for all humanity (Isaiah 49, 56; Acts 8-11); the companion of the lowly (1 Samuel 1; Luke 1); the king (Matthew 5-7); the bringer of freedom (Exodus 14-15; Romans 8); the self-emptying One (Philippians 2:5-11); the One who calls us to ministry (2 Corinthians 4); and the One to whom we go (Revelation 21-22). These and many other attributes or actions of God appear in Scripture because they remind us of who we are and whose world we live in.

In describing God, then, the Bible also describes the human search for God in many ways. Without being overly simplistic, we could say that, in some respects, the Bible is a how-to book for approaching God. Human beings come to God through prayer, moral lives, humility and sacrifice, and, in general, a recognition of our status as creatures. We bring to God only ourselves, as the hymn says, “Just as I am, without one plea, but that Christ’s blood was shed for me.” The search for God involves the whole of our lives, and it will never finish until we die, or rather, until we are united with God in the final time.

How do Christians help build a culture of respect? The charge not to take God’s name “in vain” offers us a starting point for answering that question. Reverencing the name of God leads to a culture of respect because we recognize that everyone is made in God’s image, just as we are, and that we cannot assume God’s responsibilities of evaluating the world or deciding who is good and who is evil. Our tasks are much more humble.

The following graph illustrates the levels of reality with which we must interact in building a respectful world. We must honor God and the world God has made. We must see in ourselves the image of God, covered by sin, to be sure, but still intact and still capable of goodness. We must treat others justly and graciously and insure that the ways in which we all interact promote the same ends.



When the commandment enjoins Israel not to take God’s name lightly, it means primarily that human beings should not try to involve God in our sinful activities. We should not presume that God will endorse what we do simply because we want coverage for our actions. Rather, we should submit our will to God’s will. The commandment primarily forbids false oaths, but by extension, it also applies to any form of communication that involves God under false pretenses.

In his detailed book, *The Ten Commandments* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009], 82-90), Patrick Miller notes five features of the Old Testament’s use of God’s name.

- Revering God’s name is the same as worshiping God alone. Monotheism is respectful.
- The primary place for the use of God’s name is in worship.
- The name of God is what makes worship true and proper.
- The proclamation of the name distinguishes true worship from whatever comes from outside the story of faith or opposes God’s self-revelation.
- Speaking God’s name in worship leads to the blessing of God’s presence.

In short, the discussion about taking God's name in vain is not just about what we do not say. It is more about what we do say. We use God's name in honoring, world-creating ways rather than dishonoring, life-destroying ones.

The law of the Sabbath rests on the assumption that we can trust God enough to lay aside our habits of acquisitiveness and our desires to reduce others to the level of things. The law also creates a way for free people to preserve their freedom by creating a community of respect and dignity involving all its members. The Bible roots the practice of observing Sabbath in creation (Genesis 1:1-2:4; Exodus 20) and in Exodus (Deuteronomy 5), events that it often sees as two of a kind. Both events and the stories reporting them point to a deep feature of reality, the status of everything and everyone as a creature of God.

Hence some of the details of the story in Exodus 16, which we might well consider this week. In this story, Yahweh feeds Israel with "bread from heaven," instructing them to gather just enough manna each day for solid meals, but twice as much on Friday so as to allow them to rest on the Sabbath. None would be available that day. The story of the miracle of the manna reveals a God anxious not just to feed slaves, but to bring them dignity through rest, planning, and commitment. Israel's deep need to learn trust explains several details of the story, including the unexpected rotting of the surplus manna (except on the Sabbath), the attention to the special nature of the Sabbath itself, the emphasis on the vision of God's glory (Exodus 16:7-8), the strange manner of winning the battle with the Amalekites (Exodus 17:8-16), and so on. These unanticipated behaviors teach Israel to think in new ways. Also, the narrator helps us think in new terms by introducing several words or phrases that point us to these new ways of thinking, such as "all the community/assembly," "bread from heaven," and "Sabbath." The stories thus paint a strong contrast between Israel's confusion and complaining, on the one hand, and Yahweh's patience and mercy, on the other. Israel becomes a people when its suffering becomes an occasion for learning, rather than a source of despair or infighting.

This last point is most clear whenever God speaks in these chapters. Consider two examples, Exodus 16:4-5 and 16:28-29.

And Yahweh said to Moses, "I am going to rain down bread from heaven on you. The people should go and gather a day's worth each day so that I can test whether they will go by my instructions or not. But on the sixth day they should make sure to come and there will be twice the normal amount to gather." And Yahweh said to Moses, "How long will you [plural] refuse to observe my commands and my instructions?" Recognize that Yahweh has given you the Sabbath. Therefore, he is giving to you on the sixth day enough bread for two days. Each person should stay put and not go about from his or her place on the seventh day.

In the first speech, God responds to the cry for food by promising to give human beings angelic food (whatever that is, hence the Israelites' word *manna* or "thingamajig") and thus to provide for them the best possible sustenance, signaling the deepest possible care for their fate. God gives manna as both a gift and a test to see if Israel can obey a single instruction (Hebrew: *torah*). Thus at some level the story foreshadows the giving of the law at Sinai, and it shows that that law reflects God's generosity.

Similarly, the second speech, which shifts from words of God (Exodus 16:28) to words of Moses speaking for God (Exodus 16:29), states God's frustration at Israel's foolish

refusal to follow instructions that are for their own good (and are, in any case, easier to follow than to break). The speech also returns to the theme of “my Torah and my commandments,” again foreshadowing what is to come.

The point is that the first law of God that Israel learns is the law of the Sabbath. Unlike their lives in Egypt, in which every day offered the same drudgery and utter vulnerability, their new life with God will be one in which they can afford to rest from their labors in the confidence that they will be provided for. They can cease being animals and become human beings, just as God originally intended them to be. The lesson of trust could hardly be clearer.

The commandment to honor parents forms a bridge between those commandments that have to do primarily with God and those that have to do primarily with neighbor. It leads us from the encounter with God, through the encounter with family, to the encounter with the neighbor. However, the shift from God to people does not leave God behind. Not at all. Rather, we come to understand respect and love for those closest to us – and those responsible for our upbringing and faith development – as a window onto our love for God. If we cannot honor those closest to us, then how can we honor either other people or God?

The commandment has several elements:

- It protects the well-being and good of other members of the community;
- It helps us understand our own identity, as well as the identity of others in our family, our community, and our world;
- It promises a positive outcome for those who honor their father and mother. What is heard and obeyed brings long life and good for the one who obeys. Obedience has good results, so obeying makes sense;
- It creates communion between generations and thus makes broader community possible;
- It highlights the responsibility that each of us bears to those older and younger than we are;
- It connects to other texts, such as Deuteronomy 6:4-9, which require passing on the commandments of God to the next generation and gives a mechanism and a context for doing so;
- It reminds us that respect for authority is not a bad thing when that authority is used to honor God and bless people;
- It fosters in us an attitude of reverence.

These features of the commandment, or rather the assumptions behind it and goals to which it points, paint a complete picture of an ideal according to which human relations function harmoniously. How do we make that ideal a reality?

For Further Reflection

1. The Ten Commandments root worship in the nature of God. How does our worship reflect the nature of God? When does it fail to do so?
2. How do you understand the relationship between moral accountability and God’s mercy? What does a text like Hosea 11 say to you?

3. The law of Sabbath assumes a rhythm to life centered on a time of quiet. Eventually the day takes on an explicitly religious quality. How do we find a religious rhythm to our lives? What helps us do so? What hinders us?
4. The law of Sabbath also has a social justice aspect: no one can be treated as a tool for the use of others. How do our own religious practices help free people from being reduced to the status of property (or at least a lower status)? What do we need to change for this reality to exist?
5. What specific practices of worship do you use to shape your life? What would you like to grow in?
6. What do words like honor, respect, and obligation mean to you? How do you show them? Receive them?
7. How could hospitality toward our elders be a way of doing justice? How could we grow in our relationships to those older than we are?
8. In a recent study, 40% of women and 26% of men caregivers reported “very high levels of emotional stress.” How can we recognize their duty to support and honor the work of these caregivers in our midst?
9. Elder abuse or neglect often occur in situations of family stress and economic hardship. How can we help the victims of such abuse? Other than profanity, what are ways in which God’s name is abused? Can religious people have their own ways of doing so?
10. Miller claims that the use of God’s name is an avenue to blessing. What does that mean to you? When and how do you invite God to be present in your life?
11. How can we Christians contribute to a culture of respect among ourselves and toward others? What would we need to change to make such a reality possible?

Lesson 3: “Coming Before the God of Mercy (Deuteronomy 16)”

Deuteronomy 16 focuses on sacred time, that is, those times of the year when Israel commemorated God’s deeds and committed itself to living in ways that extended grace to the community and the world. Since Israel was enslaved in Egypt, it is to live mercifully in Canaan. Worship in Israel, along with its focus on the majesty and generosity of God, expresses charity toward the poor, justice for the oppressed, and a passion for a better world for all. Therefore, the Old Testament’s ideas about worship have profound implications for our own approach to God as we seek to be covenant people too.

The worship of Yahweh in Deuteronomy centers on Israel’s memory of God’s mighty deeds in the period of the exodus and the wilderness wanderings as well as a lively anticipation of support in the future. Such worship does not rest on fear of punishment or a need to appease a threatening deity, but on a deep sense of gratitude and solidarity. Perhaps the most succinct statement of this attitude comes in the famous call to a relationship with God in Deuteronomy 6:4-5

Hear O Israel, as for Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one! And you shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your life and with all your strength.

This credo, called the Shema after the Hebrew word for “hear,” is the central confession of Judaism. One God creates one people, and this God deserves all the love and honor human beings can muster. Worship originates, as far as Israel is concerned, in a profound awareness of the benevolence and justice of God. Worship is a response to God’s action, not a humanly originated activity, or merely our search for something beyond ourselves.

Deuteronomy discusses worship in detail in two contexts. Chapter 12, the opening of the book’s law code properly speaking (chapters 12-26), takes up the question of the central sanctuary. Rather than having temples or open-air holy sites all over the land, which was the practice throughout much of Israel’s history, Deuteronomy calls for one central site, which God would “choose” (Hebrew: *bachar*). Just as Yahweh “chose” a people, and the people “choose” to follow Yahweh, so now a central site for worship would be “chosen.” Deuteronomy never names this place, but it is clear from 1 Kings, that Jerusalem is the location in question. (Though, interestingly, because their Bible contains only the books of Moses, Samaritans do not agree that Jerusalem is the site and place it instead further north on Mount Gerizim, near modern Nablus, which is still the location of that community’s annual sacrifices.) However, centralizing the sanctuary raises an immediate problem, namely, it makes it impossible to connect the eating of meat with a sacrifice in every case, which was the practice everywhere else in the ancient world. What to do? Deuteronomy 12 makes it clear that Israel may eat any clean animal anywhere as long as they pour out the blood (much as in a real sacrifice) and eat with thankfulness and generosity toward others. This discussion may seem obscure to us (as ours would to ancient Israelites!), but it raises real issues about where God was present and how one acknowledged God’s presence. There may be something for us to learn even in our world of highly industrialized food production, distribution, and consumption.

In any case, the main discussion of worship appears in chapter 16. The chapter expands the discussion in Exodus 23:14-17. Notice the parallels between the two texts:

Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me. You shall keep the feast of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days

at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. None shall appear before me empty-handed. You shall keep the feast of the harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the feast of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord your God. (Exodus 23:14-17)

Notice that Deuteronomy clarifies the Exodus law in several respects. (1) It specifies the timing of each festival (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, or in Hebrew, Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot). (2) It explains who can eat the festivals (strangers as well as Israelites). (3) It insists that the vulnerable members of the community (the poor, children, Levites) will participate fully in the festivals. And (4) it expands Exodus's explanations for the festival by reflecting theologically on Israel's experience of life with the God who redeemed them.

Let me develop this point further. Exodus refers in its law about festivals to God's liberation at the exodus ("for in it you came out of Egypt"). Deuteronomy refers to God's ongoing care of the people (16:7, 11, 15, 17), and clarifies the reference to the Exodus with the bold statement of orientation, "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt..." (16:12). This line is actually reminiscent of Exodus 23:9, which commands Israel to treat resident aliens well because "you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Both texts remind Israel that their experiences of suffering in Egypt should call them to fulfill their moral obligation not to inflict suffering on others. In other words, God's work on their behalf created a pattern of life in which they now had obligations to other human beings. This was true of everyday ethics (in Exodus) and of worship (in Deuteronomy) because ethics and worship are two sides of the same coin in the Old Testament. Both morality and religion come from the same attitude of respect toward the other, whether the other is God or my neighbor.

Commentary

Deuteronomy 16 describes a yearly cycle of festivals that gives a rhythm to Israel's life. In part, the cycle coincides with the agricultural year, but these are not merely harvest festivals. They are also tied to Israel's remembrance of its own history.

- 16:1-8 is about Passover (in March-April). Notice the theological rationale for the festival: liberation from Egyptian slavery. Notice also the rhythm of the festival itself.
- 16:9-12 is about Pentecost (in May-June), again emphasizing the concern for the vulnerable in the community.
- 16:13-15 is about Tabernacles/Sukkot (in September). This is a time, coinciding with the final harvest, of public celebration.
- 16:16-17 summarizes the section, emphasizing the human response to worship.

Application

Again, this text emphasizes the theological motivations for worship. We come to God because he is praiseworthy, because He hears our pleas, because we are in covenant

with Him. One might ask: how does a cycle of worship, perhaps even a yearly cycle, shape the life of a community? How important is the creation of such festivals for us now? To what degree and in what ways does the basic Christian story inform our worship? How much room for creativity should we exercise in worship?

For Further Reflection

1. In what ways have your experiences of worship been about the presence of God and God's continuing saving work? Why are such considerations sometimes absent from worship in your experience?
2. What can we do to help outsiders and our own children grow as worshipers of God? How can we practice together the presence of God? How important is intergenerational ministry in this connection?
3. What have been some meaningful one-time experiences of worship for you? Also, what ongoing patterns of worship do you find helpful?
4. Passover is about memory. What do you believe it is important for Christians to remember as we worship? What should we learn from worship?
5. In what ways does the structure of worship matter? What meaning does that structure have?

Lesson 4: “Leaders for a renewing people” (Deuteronomy 16:18-18:22)

Given Israel’s high calling to be in covenant with God, the choice of leaders who will share the values and commitments of the covenant seems imperative. These chapters examine the duties, character, and goals of prophets, priests, and kings, as well as the responsibilities of followers toward such leaders. Since the need for quality leadership has not abated, today’s Christians must continue to ask what sorts of leaders they need and how they are to select, affirm, and support them. Leaders need to ask how they are to serve the church in its mission of living out God’s grace in the present world.

Leadership. All of us have strong opinions about it, and all of us are afraid to take it on. Good leadership requires self-sacrifice, commitment, and care for the others because the good leader is the good person who leads well. Leadership is not simply a bag of tricks or techniques we pull out to use in order to get our way. It is, instead, a way of shaping one’s life toward worthwhile goals so that we draw others toward those goals.

Now the previous paragraph used the word “leadership” three times in a brief space because it is difficult to find a single synonym that does the idea justice. Because our American culture is obsessed with self-promotion and learning the skills for getting ahead, we are very fond of talking about taking charge or mastering our circumstances or developing the key habits of highly effective people. Yet thinking about leadership from a theological point of view requires some extra considerations. For example, I should ask how my character is being formed to fit the character of the God I worship. Am I just and fair to others? Do I love as Christ loved? Does my agenda – and as a leader, I must have one – fit within the larger agendas of the redeemed community as articulated in the Bible?

In the Pentateuch, many texts address the questions surrounding leadership in its various forms. The stories of Moses, for example, concentrate on his roles as spokesperson, celebrator of divine mercies, lawgiver, and so on. And Deuteronomy in particular concentrates on his role as leader, though it admits that, in some respects, he failed because his people did not always follow him. And then comes our text.

Deuteronomy 16:18-18:22 discusses the multiple forms of leadership that Israel must have in the post-Mosaic period. Obviously, the text does not address every aspect of the roles it names, but it does give basic orientations (values, practices, and structures). Let us consider some of them.

16:18-17:13 focused on the judiciary. Each town is to have its own judges who sit in the plaza outside the city gate (or if the city is large enough, in the gate house itself, a sort of small castle). They should handle cases large and small, and especially cases of known idolatry (the most radical sort of crime in Deuteronomy’s worldview), unless the case is too complex or the evidence is unclear. These more complex cases should go to Jerusalem, where the high priest or his designees – interestingly, not the king, whose power Deuteronomy wishes to reduce – will settle it. (The parallel text to this is Exodus 18, which also sets up a tiered judiciary with Moses as the final court of appeals.)

17:14-20 is the “Law of the King.” It accepts the reality of monarchy but tries to check its power by limiting (1) tax-collecting and wealth preservation; (2) the size of the military; and (3) diplomatic relations (which is what the limit on harem size is about). Moreover, the king must submit to the instruction of the Levitical priests, who provide checks and balances to his power.

18:1-8 describes the role of the priests, and in particular the need for the community to take care of them. Since Levites do not hold land, the community must care for them. Verses 6-8 insure that all priests have the same rights to offer sacrifice (and thus to receive part of them), regardless of where they live.

18:9-22 explores the question of the nature of revelation, and in particular the role of the prophet. In contrast to Canaanite practices of divination, the Israelite prophet could not manipulate God but could only wait divine inspiration of whatever form. The expectation of a prophet like Moses reminds one of Jeremiah's self-image (see for example Jeremiah 28). All prophets are to be like Moses in that all receive the divine word with a sense of awe and wonder. Prophets do not serve their own purposes, but those of God. They function as mediators, internalizing the viewpoints and objectives of both God and the people, attempting to bridge the gaps between the two parties so as to reinforce the covenantal relationship between God and Israel.

Stepping back from the details of these texts makes it clear that certain underlying principles are in play here, and that these principles have significance for all of us who take the Bible seriously.

- (1) Power is not absolute. Leaders are accountable to higher principles and to their people.
- (2) Checks and balances are absolutely necessary. No matter how virtuous a given leader is, he or she needs others to offer correction, advice, or even opposition.
- (3) The goal of leadership is to preserve and enhance the core values of the community. In the case of Israel (and the church) these values include honoring the true God, caring for the most vulnerable among us, and building individual and communal lives of integrity.
- (4) Leaders should not line their own pockets or use their power for personal gain of any sort.
- (5) Leaders should attend to their own spiritual health (just as the king must do in consultation with the priests).

In conclusion, these texts paint a picture of a well-ordered community in which oppressive behaviors are kept to a bare minimum and in which individuals, families, and communities can flourish. Fashioning such a culture seems a high priority in our world of disintegrating communities and lone individuals.

Points for Reflection

1. What principles of leadership underlie this text? How do we translate them into action in our own time?
2. What gifts must Christian leaders have? How do we help each other acquire them?
3. How can we better support our leaders? How do we prevent burnout, cynicism, and defeatist attitudes in leaders?
4. Name some leaders (with or without formal titles) whose example and work have helped you grow spiritually. What made them effective? What made you want to follow them?
5. The strong prohibition of idolatry seems important in these texts. What is the role of Christian leaders in helping us focus more intently on God? How can we do that better?

Lesson 5: “Now Choose Life! Or, on the Freedom of Obedience and the Commitment of Choice” (Deuteronomy 30-31)

The call to follow the God who redeems a people is fundamentally a call to a life of freedom and meaning. Deuteronomy 30-31 stakes out the behaviors, emotions, values, and knowledge required to live fully into the beauties of the call of God. As this lesson shows, Israel’s call is also ours because their God is also ours. Living in a deep and abiding relationship with this God makes us into the sorts of individuals and communities that can be forces for the ongoing redemption of God’s world as justice and peace dawn about us.

Deuteronomy follows its law code (chapters 12-26) with a call to decision along with promises and threats (chapter 27-28). As the book reflects on Israel’s history, it recognizes the fatefulness of the decisions made in each generation regarding whether the community would adhere to the ethical and religious standards of the God of Israel, or not. Chapter 28, for this reason, offers dire warnings of the catastrophe awaiting any people who threw away such advantages as Israel had received. The warnings proved all too true, as the rest of this series, focusing on 1-2 Kings, will make clear.

Chapter 30, in any case, asks a simple question. What happens if the people of God abandon their faith and fall into the terrible situations that the covenantal curses in chapter 28 envision? Is there life after death? Can Israel be saved?

Chapter 30 works toward a positive answer to the question in three moves. Each builds on the previous idea to construct one of the most beautiful pictures of repentance, reconciliation, and hope in all of Scripture.

Verses 1-10 make an offer of reconciliation. While acknowledging the tragedy of Israel’s failure of nerve in pursuing the life of Torah, the text asserts that all can be forgiven. Yahweh has already set up the conditions under which reconciliation can occur, and all Israel needs to do is to respond penitently.

To clarify: unlike our modern tendency to think of repentance as the act of an individual (because we tend to think of sin in strictly individual terms), Deuteronomy envisions a whole group of people changing. The difference between us and Israel lies in part in our conception of human nature: the Bible assumes that humans naturally exist in association with one another and thus it is impossible to understand the individual without thinking of the group at some level. Sin also is communal, and so turning away from sin is communal, as is the reconciliation that follows the turning away. While this ancient view of things seems alien to many contemporary people, it certainly fits better with what we know from the social sciences about the behaviors of humans. The extreme individualism on which many of us base our thinking simply has no foundation in the real world. It is an ideology, and like all ideologies, it must be examined.

Verses 11-14 expand the idea of reconciliation by describing what is on offer. The choices facing Israel are “life” and “death,” perhaps literally in many cases, but certainly in a deep way. By describing the way of Torah as life and the opposite as death, and by emphasizing that no heroism is required of the life of faith, Deuteronomy makes clear its assumption that the laws of chapters 12-26 are easier to keep than not doing them would be. True, this assumption is highly counter-intuitive to American Protestants. Yet if we focus upon the content of the laws, we recognize the validity, or at least defensibility, of

the book's assumptions. Avoiding violence, theft, greed, power mongering, and other corruptions of the soul certainly makes for a better life.

At the same time, this section also emphasizes the nearness of God even to the nation in its state of punishment. Distance from the redeeming God is never a matter of physical space. It is always a question of moral and spiritual disposition. The redeemed people, no matter how much they have lost their way, can return because God stands ready to call them to their best selves.

Verses 15-20 summarize the preceding offer, and as in Joshua 24 and 1 Samuel 8, state clearly the choices confronting the nation. Although this section does not describe a specific mechanism for accepting the covenant, much less maintaining it, we do see here a deep awareness that each generation of Israelites must accept the consequences of their actions and commitments.

The chapter ends with one of the most telling lines in the Bible, inviting its audience "to love Yahweh your God, to hear his voice, and to cling to him – for he is your life...." It then promises the restoration of the land as a token of God's generous love. Notice that the relationship is not simply one of trading goods for respect, as though one party could buy the loyalty of the other. Rather, it is a relationship of love and longing, of clinging and communicating face to face. No empty religiosity here. Neither quid pro quo nor tit for tat, but just a simple mutual acceptance of God and God's people.

To conclude, recall the old Latin phrase often used to describe the church, *semper reformanda*, "always to be reformed." The idea did not start with the church's view of itself, though it is appropriate there. It started with Deuteronomy, which was designed to articulate a view of Israel's past, present, and future that would make room for ongoing reform in the interest of ongoing life. By acknowledging that Israel's sin was inevitable – avoidable because humans choose sin and so could choose virtue, but inevitable because we always often choose virtue and are strongly influenced to do so by our environment – Deuteronomy gives great freedom to its readers to choose something different. Rather than being consumed by shame or despair, they can move to something better.

For Further Reflection

1. In your experience, what are the conditions necessary for significant change in individuals or groups? How can we do a better job of creating or enhancing those conditions?
2. Deuteronomy 30 describes following Torah as "life." In what ways do you find Christian commitments to worship and ethics to be life-giving? Give examples from your personal experience.
3. Repentance requires the courage to admit wrongdoing, to change patterns of behavior and relationships with others, and to let go of self-interest (as we perceive it, at least). Give examples of times you have either had or not had such courage. In what areas do you need it again?
4. Repentance here is communal. In what areas of its life does the church need to repent? Where are our blind spots, in your view? How are you personally implicated in the church's need to repent (since it can't just be for the "other people")?
5. In what sense is God the source of our life? Give examples from personal experience or observation of others.

Section 2: Lessons from 1-2 Kings

The books of 1-2 Kings are part of a larger work that traced Israel's history from the exodus to the departure from the land under Babylonian coercion. This work, which modern scholars often call the Deuteronomistic History, spanned Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings. Written in several stages from the seventh century onward (and using older sources in many cases), the work tries to answer the basic question of why Israel lost its way, or, to use the language of Deuteronomy (especially chapter 28), why God carried out the punishments for violation of the covenant between Heaven and the chosen people.

This larger work is not an obituary, however, because it envisions not just exile, but return. Texts such as Deuteronomy 30 and 1 Kings 8 hope for a renewal of the covenant, this time for good. Just as Jeremiah 31 envisions a new covenant written in Israel's heart and not just on stone, so the Deuteronomistic History opens the door to a renewal of the dreams of faith.

In this series, we examine a number of stories in 1-2 Kings from the point of view of the overall work, which knows the end of the story and holds out hope for its re-commencement in a new, bolder, more beautiful way. The stories we consider do not stand on their own. They fit together in an integrated picture of good and bad leadership, values honored or not, relationships treasured or not. They serve those who composed, preserved, and heard them as warnings and invitations, as models of what to do and what not to do. And most of all, they witness to the surprising activity of God in the midst of the untidiness of human history.

Several major themes will surface in this study because they play major roles in the biblical texts themselves. These include

- Kingship
- The unity of Israel (two kingdoms but one people)
- The temple in Jerusalem as God's meeting place with the covenant people
- Prayer and piety
- God's graciousness to the Gentiles
- Torah as a gift and a promise
- The prophets as intermediaries between God and humankind

These themes intertwine in many of the stories we will consider. Students of 1-2 Kings should always keep them in mind.

Some Thoughts on Biblical Stories

Biblical narrative consists primarily of very short vignettes woven together to form a comprehensive story. Unlike other literatures, Israel's does not emphasize the interior state of the character, but rather reveals the character through action and brief speech. Little is wasted in the Bible's tightly drawn stories. The question, then, is how do we read these stories?

J. P. Fokkelman suggests ten productive questions to ask of any narrative texts:

1. Who is the hero?
2. What is the quest in which the hero engages?
3. Who are the helpers and opponents?
4. Where does the narrator intrude in the text?
5. Does the narrator keep to the chronology of events or alter it in some way?
6. Where is time skipped?
7. Is there a plot?
8. Where are the speeches, and what do they say?
9. What surprising choice of words appear in the text?
10. Where does the unit start and stop, and how are the divisions indicated?

(*Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999]).

I would add a few more questions:

1. What are the moral values of the characters? Of the narrator?
2. What vision of God is in play? Are there several visions? How do these cohere with other views within Scripture?
3. Where does the narrator challenge our own views of reality? How do we respond to that challenge?
4. How does the interplay of values within a text shape our own conversation about values?

In reading 1-2 Kings, we do well to keep these sorts of questions near the front of our minds.

Finally, we must ask how the stories of the Bible intersect with our stories. There are different ways to think about the answer to this question. Some people, following the literary critic Hans Frei, argue that the Bible offers a complete, self-contained narrative that creates its own world within the hearer. We do not try to correlate our story with that of the Bible. This approach has the great merit of not subordinating the story of Scripture to the ever-changing human story. As David Lose has argued, however, this view overstates the gap between the Bible's story and our story and overestimates the stability of the biblical story itself. In fact, story by its very nature can produce several reactions in the hearer, even when the "hearer" is a community sharing many values, ideas, and experiences.

In reading biblical narrative, we realize that the ancient stories both differ radically from our own lives and resemble them embarrassingly closely. We engage the biblical text at the same time with trust and with suspicion. Trust because we know that the Holy Spirit uses precisely these texts to quicken our souls in obedience to Jesus Christ. Suspicion because we know that obedience will lead us down paths we do not necessarily wish to tread. In their ruggedness, the biblical narratives invite us to be more fully human, and therefore more deeply connected to the God who creates and sustains us.

Dangers confront the reader of biblical narrative, mostly arising from our desire to rub off the rough edges of the text. We live in a sitcom world, in which all problems must be neatly solved in 30 minutes. The sitcom mentality has infected even our reading of the Bible. The major dangers are:

- ✚ **Moralizing.** Although the biblical texts raise profound moral issues, they are never moralizing. They never offer pat answers. They never paint in black and white, but in myriad shades of gray. In that sense, they resemble life itself.
- ✚ **Over-theologizing.** Some biblical narratives are conspicuous for their apparent absence of God. We should not pretend this absence away, but should note in our preaching that God often seems absent.
- ✚ **Under-theologizing.** Reading the Bible is a theological act because it always draws us back into the confession of the church.
- ✚ **Jumping too soon to Jesus.** “Jesus is the answer” is true, of course, but often it comes too soon in our sermons, so that it is not an answer, but a way of sweeping the problem under the rug. Timing is everything. We need to recognize that human life did not suddenly become less messy on the Sunday morning of the Resurrection.
- ✚ **Failing to appreciate the ruggedness of human life.** The biblical stories unflinchingly look at human life.

Welcome, then, to this study of 1-2 Kings. May you grow from it, and may it lead you closer to a deeper understanding of the work of God in the world.

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Lesson 1: The Pursuit of Wisdom (1 Kings 3, 10)

The Bible remembers Solomon as a man of great wisdom, a temple-builder, and a consolidator of his father's warlike enterprises. Much of his record in 1 Kings seems regrettable, marked by political oppression, sexual excess, and idolatry. Yet a few stories remain to speak of what might have been, and these stories of wisdom serve as models for future leaders.

Lesson 2: The Leader and Prayer (1 Kings 8)

First Kings 8 records one of the longest prayers in the Bible. This prayer, which draws heavily on Deuteronomy's ideas of covenant-keeping and divine mercy, lays out a wide and majestic view of Israel's faith. Marked by trust in God and a willingness to find a place for human integrity and hopefulness amid the vicissitudes of history.

Lesson 3: Dividing a Kingdom and a People (1 Kings 12)

The division of the kingdom comes because of God's discontent with the abusive policies of the Davidic rulers. However, the results of divine intervention prove to be less than hoped for, because Jeroboam, the chosen ruler of the northern tribes, plays pragmatic politics. The text explores the relationships between power and piety, and between practicality and ideals.

Lesson 4: Ahab and Elijah (1 Kings 17-18)

Israelite prophets often assumed the role of culture critic, and especially the critic of kingly power. Among the most dramatic confrontations were those between Elijah and Ahab, the great ninth-century ruler and creator of Israelite power. Demonstrations of courage amid tyranny, these stories reflect some of the main themes in the prophetic critique of abusive power.

Lesson 5: Leaders in the World of Miracle (2 Kings 4-5)

Unlike the prophets whose names grace books of the Bible, the prophets of the ninth century, especially Elijah and Elisha come down to us as wonderworkers, purveyors of miracle whose interactions with the world challenged easy assumptions about human ability to control their surroundings, whether through religion or any other method. The Elisha stories, in particular, show him as a dramatic figure whose actions point to the surpassing power and goodness of Israel's God.

Lesson 6: Hezekiah in Sickness and in Health (2 Kings 18-20)

The illness of a major leader always poses problems for the group he or she leads, especially during times of extreme external crisis. All these pressures marked the reign of Hezekiah, who had to face Assyrian invasion, movements of refugees, domestic intrigue, and a range of related problems. He led in such a time by calling for reform, and this is why Israel remembers him as one of its greatest leaders.

Lesson 7: Josiah and His Reforms (2 Kings 22-23)

Like Hezekiah, Josiah came to the throne during a time of turmoil. Before his death, he saw the Assyrian overlord humbled and then destroyed. The Bible remembers him chiefly,

however, not for his politics, but for his religious reforms. Inspired by the book of Deuteronomy, he led the people of Judah back to a worship of the One God in one temple, Jerusalem. The changes of his time continue to have enormous impact on our lives even today.

Lesson 8: When Leadership is Not Enough (2 Kings 17, 21, 25)

While 1-2 Kings is not an obituary for Israel and Judah, but a record of what went wrong and a call to learn from the past, its most poignant reflections center upon the death of the two kingdoms. Avoiding a merely materialist explanation of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests, the book argues that Israel and Judah fell because of specific religious and moral failings, which it calls upon readers not to repeat. These summary reflections reveal some of the deepest insights that the book has to offer into what it means for a group to call itself the people of God.

Lesson 1: The Pursuit of Wisdom (1 Kings 3, 10)

The Bible remembers Solomon as a man of great wisdom, a temple-builder, and a consolidator of his father's warlike enterprises. Much of his record in 1 Kings seems regrettable, marked by political oppression, sexual excess, and idolatry. Yet a few stories remain to speak of what might have been, and these stories of wisdom serve as models for future leaders.

The stories of Solomon include a range of materials that work together to portray him as an exceedingly complex figure. Capable of brutality in his ascent to power (1 Kings 1-2), he also showed evidence of deep piety and moral probity. First Kings remembers him as, among other things, a great model of wisdom, a theme that the later traditions both in the Bible and beyond expanded at length. (Hence his connection to the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and later still, the Wisdom of Solomon.) Yet what is wisdom? How does one acquire it and use it?

The Hebrew word translated “wisdom” is *hokmah*, and it appears 152 times in the Bible. It can mean either technical skill, as when Exodus 31 speaks of the artisans responsible for the Tabernacle as having “wisdom,” or broader life skills, as in the preamble to Proverbs (1:1-7). Both kinds come through practice, reflection, self-discipline, and the loving criticism of a teacher. It is perhaps useful to think of this wide range of the word “wisdom” in our reflections on it. Thinking of becoming wise as a process similar to that of acquiring a skill such as fine carpentry or sewing might be a useful approach for us. Wisdom does not come by accident, but as the result of hard work and, according to many parts of the Bible, through prayer.

Solomon's Prayer for Wisdom

First Kings 3 consists of three parts. Verses 1-2 mark a transition to a new section in Solomon's story, noting his marriages to foreign women, who brought him both international prestige and religious headaches. The text then explains an element in the following story, Solomon's sacrifice at the high place of Gibeah.¹ Why was it acceptable for him to do this? Because the Temple had not yet been built, says the author of 1 Kings, who would have expected his audience to be bothered by Solomon's actions

The second part, the key one for our purposes, appears in 3:3-15. The text introduces Solomon as one who keeps the statutes of his father David, hence as a pious man from whom we should expect great things. He does not disappoint because in his encounter with God in a dream, he passes the great test imposed on him. Rather than asking for longevity, wealth, and military victory, he asks for wisdom, which would allow him, as it happens, to achieve at least some of the others.

Solomon's address to God is particularly interesting. In verses 6-9, he carefully addresses God as the one who (1) showed “steadfast love” (Hebrew, *hesed*) to David, with whom he enjoyed a mutually respectful relationship (David acted with integrity, and God rewarded him with a dynasty [see 2 Samuel 7]); (2) made him king instead of David, in

¹ A “high place” (Hebrew *bamah*) need not be elevated. It is simply an open-air sanctuary, perhaps surrounded by trees or upright stone monoliths and sanctioned by long usage as a holy place. The one at Gibeah, just north of Jerusalem, must have been particularly large because Solomon could offer there as many as 1000 animals.

spite of his lack of real qualifications (he's an inexperienced youth); and (3) can grant the most important attributes of kingship to the willing recipient. Verse 8 is particularly striking because it puts Solomon in the best possible light: "But your servant [note the deferential, respectful language throughout this prayer] is in the midst of your people, whom you chose as a great people, innumerable, unaccountably great." He acknowledges that his qualifications rank far below the challenges of his job and thus asks for divine aid.

The story so far allows the narrator to reflect on the nature of the good leader. Far from being self-sufficient or complacent, such a person recognizes his (or her) own limitations and seeks help for them. The good leader, according to 1-2 Kings, also places a higher priority on high ethical standards and personal integrity (including real courage) than on mere display of grandeur or short-term victories over foes. The rest of the book will return to this theme of the good leader (and its opposite) repeatedly.

The rest test comes in the third section of chapter 3, verses 16-28, the story of the two prostitutes and their babies. Immortalized (and laughed at) by Mark Twain's Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, the story has a serious point in spite of its seeming triviality. (Though it would hardly be trivial to the people involved.) The wise king appears, despite his rough exterior, as a gracious and compassionate leader who seeks the welfare of people as vulnerable as the baby of a prostitute. It is curious, then, that the narration would begin with this story as an example of Solomon's wisdom because it does not quite seem to measure up to the glorious standards of temple building and tribute collecting. Yet the sort of practical issues with which leaders deal often do not rise above the unseemliness of this episode. Its real-world characteristics commended it to the earliest readers of the book, and perhaps to us.

Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

Chapter 10 returns to the theme of Solomon's wisdom by reporting the visit of the queen of Sheba, a kingdom in what is today Yemen. The Sabaeans were an advanced culture that built dams to sequester water for irrigation and drinking. Their trade in perfumes, drugs, and spices carried them to Syria-Palestine, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Ethiopia. The story in 1 Kings reports the queen's astonishment at Solomon's cleverness and wealth, confirmation of divine favor, at least to her.

Later legends married the queen to Solomon, and in the Ethiopian tradition they are the ancestors of Menelik, the first ruler of Ethiopia. These post-biblical legends have little historical value except that they rightly indicate the cultural connections between southern Arabia and the Horn of Africa.

For Further Reflection

1. What does Solomon mean in 1 Kings 3:9 by requesting a "listening heart"? For what, and to whom, do good leaders listen?
2. What do you make of the story of the two women before the king? What does the story say about the vulnerability of women in their (and our) society? (For example, where are the fathers, and in what ways, if at all, are they accountable?) Does the fact that Solomon's wisdom is first on display in a family matter relate to your conceptions of leadership?

Lesson 2: The Leader and Prayer (1 Kings 8)

First Kings 8 records one of the longest prayers in the Bible. This prayer, which draws heavily on Deuteronomy's ideas of covenant-keeping and divine mercy, lays out a wide and majestic view of Israel's faith. Marked by trust in God and a willingness to find a place for human integrity and hopefulness amid the vicissitudes of history.

1 Kings 8 introduces several major theological themes in 1-2 Kings. Among them are: the covenant between God and David and God and Israel, the importance of prayer, the significance of the Temple, the majesty and greatness of God, and the leadership of the king. All of these themes are introduced, not in a sermon, but in a prayer by Solomon. Here we will examine the shape of the text and then the main themes of it.

First Kings 8:1-9:9 itself consists of three major sections:

8:1-21	The completion and dedication of the Temple
8:22-53	Solomon's Prayer
8:54-9:9	Conclusion of the Dedication of the Temple

The prayer of Solomon thus sits in the middle of a great event in Israel's history, the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem. This event has had repercussions lasting until today, for the site of that great structure has been a holy site ever since, and today is graced by the beautiful Dome of the Rock, a major Muslim shrine. The great retaining wall built by Herod the Great over 2000 years ago still stands, and at its base lies a synagogue at the Western Wall.

It is important in understanding this great prayer to understand also the sense of place that it assumes. In antiquity, a temple was understood to be a copy of a deity's palace in heaven. Often the temple is called the "house of god X." Here the worshiper came to the deity as at no other place. Through sacrifice, music and dancing, and prayer, the worshiper gained access to the heavenly realm. A good biblical example of this way of thinking appears in Psalm 48. On the other hand, Jeremiah critiques excessive, uncritical reliance on the Temple in Jeremiah 7.

Israel shared this basic idea, though with some modifications. As Solomon puts it in 1 Kings 8:27, a temple was not really a house for God (though the Bible often uses the phrase "house of God") in the sense that it could somehow contain God. Still, God can be said to be present there.

Verses 1-22 describe an elaborate ritual of dedication that included sacrifice, prayers, parades, and finally the indwelling of God as represented by a cloud. This last point is important. Note that when Moses dedicates the Tabernacle in Exodus 40, a cloud fills it to signal God presence (Exodus 40:34). The overall point seems to be that God has a real presence in the Temple, at least when the community of faith as a whole comes there to worship.

The Prayer of Solomon

The prayer by the king is carefully structured and theologically rich. After an introduction that associates David and Solomon with Israel's long story of redemption beginning in the exodus (vv. 25-30), it contains seven petitions:

1. Vindicate those who ask for help (vv. 31-32)
2. Help Israel after defeat (vv. 33-34)
3. Give rain to Israel (vv. 35-36)
4. Relieve famine (vv. 37-40)
5. Answer the prayers of foreigners praying in the Temple (vv. 41-43)
6. Protect Israel in battle (vv. 44-45)
7. Return deportees (vv. 46-53)

Behind these petitions lie a set of theological assumptions, including (1) the idea that God's people sometimes sin and suffer; (2) that God's concern extends even to the foreigner who has no connection to the story of redemption both friendly and hostile; (3) that appeals to past examples of God's forgiveness and faithfulness are common and useful (see, for example, Psalms 80 or 105, among many others); and (4) that suffering is, at least sometimes, punishment for community sinfulness. The most important underlying assumption is, of course, that God opts for mercy whenever possible.

Hidden within the petitions, often in the asides or clauses starting with "because" or "so that," are major witnesses to the symmetry within the story of redemption. Note, for example, that according to vv. 41-43, God should heed the prayer of the foreigner directed toward Jerusalem, so that "all the peoples of the earth may know your name and honor you." The theme of the Gentiles honoring God goes far back in the Israelites' faith, all the way back to the exodus story (see Exodus 15:14) and even the call of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). Here it comes as a great surprise because the prayer envisions the possibility of Israel's defeat by the very Gentiles to whom God should listen. The prayer is thus very daring. This would be a surprise, as I say, except that the Bible is full of such ideas that Israel does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of the world as a whole.

Overarching Ideas

In reading this chapter, to conclude, we should consider several major ideas:

1. **Covenant.** In the ancient world, a covenant was a treaty between an overlord and a vassal. The Bible uses this metaphor to describe God's relationship with Israel. In a covenant, each side undertakes certain obligations, the violation of which lead to bad consequences. The book of Deuteronomy, from which the theology of the entire Deuteronomistic History derives, describes a covenant between God and Israel in which God promises blessings to an obedient people and curses to a disobedient one.
2. **David.** 2 Samuel 7 describes an agreement between David and God, in which God promises to bless David's royal descendants, and they promise to be faithful. 1 Kings 8 remembers that covenant and asks God to keep it. The Temple sat a couple of hundred feet from the palace of David's descendants who ruled Judah, and the building was practically a royal chapel at certain points of its history.
3. **Community.** We should note that worship here is not the activity of individuals only, but of all Israel together. This is true throughout the Bible, where the individual derives some sense of importance from the group rather than the other way around as we Americans tend to assume.

4. **Worship.** Worship in the Bible is an awe-inspiring experience. Here that is signaled by the sacrifices of huge herds of animals, by the grandeur of the building itself, and by the elaborate ritual marking its dedication.
5. **God's Faithfulness .** The prayers presuppose that God will carry out his commitments. Note that Solomon makes no effort to impress God with human goodness.
6. **Hope.** The whole point of the chapter is to hold out promise even to those who were sent into Exile on account of sinfulness.

For Further Reflection

1. Think about 1 Kings 8's understanding of place and praying in the direction of a place. Does this idea have any resonance with you at all? How does the chapter's understanding of Jerusalem as both a special place and one inadequate to contain God inform our understanding of sacred space?
2. Note the interaction between sin and repentance here. How do our prayers speak of these two realities and their relationships? Could we do better in conceiving of either or both?
3. Note how the chapter ends with a reflection on God's mercy. Where have you seen evidence of God's mercy in your own life, and the lives of those around you?
4. What are the key topics of prayer in your experience? What should they be? In your experience, what are the gaps in our prayers that we should address?

Lesson 3: Dividing a Kingdom and a People (1 Kings 12)

The division of the kingdom comes because of God's discontent with the abusive policies of the Davidic rulers. However, the results of divine intervention prove to be less than hoped for, because Jeroboam, the chosen ruler of the northern tribes, plays pragmatic politics. The text explores the relationships between power and piety, and between practicality and ideals.

According to 1 Kings, Solomon's reign left Israel with a series of political and social contradictions: great splendor at the center paid for by overwhelming taxation; an educated leadership class hostile to, and distrusted by, the people they ruled; and a beautiful temple surrounded by sanctuaries to foreign gods. Handling such contradictions well would have required a leader with a sure touch. Unfortunately, Solomon's successor Rehoboam was not such a leader. Instead, he followed the advice of his closest friends, young men who had "grown up with him," that is courtiers with little experience struggling to rise in life and little awareness of the sufferings of their fellow Israelites. He rejected the sound advice of the experienced leaders of the nation, who did not after all, encourage any sense of benevolence but simply a more pragmatic "serve them now, and they will serve you forever" (12:7). Rehoboam's foolish and arrogant handling of the peaceful tax revolt at Shechem led to the division of his kingdom, which he was powerless to avert.

At this point, the story is simply a meditation on unearned power, a pointed description of what happens when immoral people assume roles of prominence while having no principles and no grounding in life. But the story takes a more interesting turn when it brings forward the new king of the ten northern tribes (and thus of most Israelites, since Judah at that time was a primitive backwater except in Jerusalem). Jeroboam son of Nebat had experience in Solomon's government and was aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the system that the old king had built. He enjoyed divine approval and popular sanction. He thus had every opportunity to be a truly great leader. Yet he was not, and that failure to succeed did not come through inattention to the practical and reasonable (as with Rehoboam), but with an over-attachment to the pragmatic at the expense of the ideal.

Despite divine promises of his success and a divine warning to Rehoboam not to try to reassert his power, Jeroboam undertakes a new religious policy aimed at solidifying his control. That story and its aftermath consist of three basic scenes:

Scene 1: Jeroboam builds new cult centers (12:25-33)

Scene 2: A prophet speaks against the new centers (13:1-10)

Scene 3: The prophet fails to listen to God (13:11-32)

A summary statement in 13:33-34 foreshadows much of the rest of 1-2 Kings, which unflinching condemns the northern Israelite kings as apostates because of their support of the temples in Dan and Bethel.

Our point here is not to explore the very fascinating stories in chapter 13, which emphasize the role of the prophet as critic of the king. That theme will become ever clearer in the stories of Elijah and Elisha, which we will pick up later. The key part of the story is Scene 1, the end of chapter 12.

What really happened here? The author of 1 Kings says that Jeroboam built the new cult centers at the borders of his kingdom because he was afraid to lose control of his people if they continued to worship in Jerusalem. There must be something to that, for, after all, the community that worships together does stay together, and the annual pilgrimage to the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem would, over time, have turned the minds of people to the older unity of their nation. Or so Jeroboam might reasonably suppose. However, for 1 Kings, such a view as his seems unwarranted because Jeroboam himself has received the divine promise of kingship, and Rehoboam has heard from God that the Davidic covenant, while not abolished, is being severely re-construed. So, at some level, Jeroboam's action reflects distrust in God, and even ingratitude.

It seems unlikely that Jeroboam saw things this way, however. The story portrays him as setting up a calf in Dan and Bethel, the northern and southern border cities of his kingdom, as a way of demarcating the entire land as belonging to the deity worshiped in those sites. But who was that deity? Neither he nor his subjects thought that the deity they were worshiping was anyone other than Yahweh, the God of Israel. The calf was not a representation of the deity, but simply a symbol of the divine presence or perhaps a platform on which the deity was imagined to stand. (Perhaps a modern equivalent would be the erection of a cross in a church – no one assumes it is THE cross or that it completely represents God, and yet its presence symbolizes the entire Christian story and points to God's presence.) Thus 12:28 connects the calves to the story of the exodus, apparently with a twist. Yahweh and other gods, Jeroboam says, brought Israel from Egypt.

How innovative was this change in Israel's worship? Many modern scholars would say, not very innovative at all. Israelites had not yet agreed that there was only one God or that monotheism was the only option for Israel. That viewpoint was under intense debate and would be for several more centuries. Even Jeroboam's changes in the calendar (12:32-33) may reflect variations in local customs since many of the biblical festivals were tied to the agricultural year, the cycles of which would vary from place to place.

Nevertheless, 1 Kings understands Jeroboam's practices as a serious violation of his role as king. Perhaps the key to the book's view comes in 12:33 in the little phrase "which he had fashioned alone" (or "in his heart" – the Hebrew manuscripts disagree among themselves here, though the point is the same). Jeroboam's reforms did not come from God, but from his own political imagination. And therein lies the problem.

For Further Reflection

1. When does pragmatic thinking get in the way of being morally or spiritually serious? How do we develop the spiritual capacity to avoid taking shortcuts in our decision-making processes?
2. In this story power and piety intertwine. Think of some ways they get connected today? When is that appropriate, and when not? What are the dangers to faith when it becomes too closely associated with political, economic, or social power?
3. Arrogance corrupts, and so does insecurity. In these two kings, we see examples of both. How do we correct one without drifting into the other? What are the ingredients of a proper confidence in oneself and God that would equip us for proper leadership and service of each other?

Lesson 4: Ahab and Elijah (1 Kings 17-18)

Israelite prophets often assumed the role of culture critic, and especially the critic of kingly power. Among the most dramatic confrontations were those between Elijah and Ahab, the great ninth-century ruler and creator of Israelite power. Demonstrations of courage amid tyranny, these stories reflect some of the main themes in the prophetic critique of abusive power.

First and Second Kings contain two cycles of stories about the prophets Elijah and Elisha, as well as other stories about these inspired opponents of abusive monarchs. The great ninth-century prophets and wonderworkers, Elijah and Elisha, were particularly interesting to the authors of these books, perhaps because they showed what determined commitment to the divine will even in the face of human corruption could achieve.

The foe of Elijah, with whom we will begin, was the great ruler Ahab (reigned 873-852 BCE). The first Israelite ruler mentioned in Mesopotamian texts, he was one of the major figures of his time, a great general and builder of cities. However, the Bible remembers him chiefly as the cruel opponent of the great prophets, a puppet of his wife Jezebel and a symbol of all that could go wrong when leaders lost their regard for their subjects and their God.

The stories in 1 Kings 17-18 are, therefore, stories of confrontation, in which a heroic prophet demonstrates the superiority of Israel's God to the foreign deity Baal (and others). Today's text has two major stories, each with three scenes:

Story 1: Elijah finds hospitality in Zarephath

Scene 1: The drought as divine judgment (17:1-7)

Scene 2: First miracle at Zarephath – feeding as a sign of divine approval (17:8-16)

Scene 3: Second miracle at Zarephath – healing as a sign of divine approval (17:17-24)

Story 2: Elijah's confrontation with Ahab and the Prophets of Baal

Scene 1: Elijah and Obadiah (18:1-14)

Scene 2: Elijah and Ahab (18:15-19)

Scene 3: Elijah and the Prophets on Mount Carmel (18:20-46)

Both stories are familiar and require little rehearsal here, but a route into a deeper appreciation of them lies in understanding how they are placed together to create meaning larger than the individual stories would have alone, and how they draw characters that provide models for the readers' moral reflection.

To take the first issue, the stories are structured around a series of oracles from Yahweh, Israel's God. At each juncture, God speaks to tell the prophet, who is always obedient, what to do and why to do it. See 17:1, 8; 18:1. However, complementing the speeches of God are the speeches of Elijah, either to God, or to a human being on God's behalf. Thus when seeking to heal the dead Gentile boy in Zarephath, Elijah challenges God to respond to the widow's hospitality, not by allowing a death, but by bringing about life. And, as 17:22 puts it, "Yahweh heard the voice of Elijah." In other words, the communication could go both ways.

That brings us, then, to the issue of character development. The stories show us these people usually through side remarks, brief comments on their character, as well as by quoting their conversations. Thus Obadiah appears as a brave person willing to take risks in hiding prophets, but unwilling to confront Ahab face to face. The widow figures as a hospitable person, but also as someone who understandably fears her prophetic guest as someone around whom disease and famine linger (after all, Elijah, the “man of God,” does seem to bring disaster wherever he goes!). Ahab appears as a tyrant, but also as one afraid of Elijah and thus, at some level, of God. And Elijah himself, perhaps the least developed or flattest character of all, moves from one confrontation to another without hesitation or regret (a fact that makes his petition to God on behalf of the boy all the more remarkable).

However, the most complex character here is that of God. It is instructive to trace the actions attributed to the deity here: bringing a drought and ending it; speaking and listening to a prophet; providing food for one hungry Gentile family while a nation experiences famine and drought; bringing life from death (compare Psalms 16; 17; 49 and many others); and demonstrating power unavailable to the other gods, including the great storm god Baal. It is not just a question of power at stake here, however. The real question is whether the God of Israel is worth having a relationship with. The stories of divine care here for the righteous, made still more clear in chapter 19, point to a positive answer to the question.

For Further Reflection

1. A theme in chapter 17 is God’s provision to Gentiles, an idea that appears repeatedly in 1-2 Kings. What do you make of the Gentile woman’s hospitality? Why does the text emphasize it and understand it as an act that obliges God to act on her behalf?
2. Signs and wonders play a major role in Elijah’s story, and in the stories of conversions at various times in Christian history. What role do such stories play for us today, even if we have experienced no such wonders (assuming we haven’t)? What do these events say about the God of the Bible?
3. Obadiah is portrayed here as a responsible leader trying to make the best of a difficult situation. What are the moral limits of behaviors open to persons in such a position? What challenges and opportunities do they face? When must they stand against the movements of power, and when should they be accommodating?

Supplement: A Sermon on 1 Kings 17

Sometimes waking up in the morning is not that easy. Sometimes because you didn’t sleep enough. Sometimes because your pillow was a stone, and your dreams were no different than the horrors of lying awake. Most of all, it is difficult to get up in the morning when you have reached a decision about the future and realize that you have none; your decision is irrevocable, final. So it is in our story. It must have been difficult waking up that morning for the young woman whose name we’ve lost, the widow of Zarephath. Perhaps she looked over at her little boy, all that was left to remind her of a dead husband. There was almost nothing to feed him. Today they would begin to die.

How had it come to this? The drought played its part of course. Some said the drought was deity’s way of warning the powerful to pay attention. If so, it was not entirely successful. The rich were doing just fine, thank you. For the poor, it was a different story.

No one could share, there was nothing to spare. Empty breadbaskets and empty bellies except for a few. Perhaps she remembered the hushed conversations with those who had more. "Isn't this your mother's jewelry? Are you sure you want to part with it? Oh, I wish I could give you more, but business is hard up these days." It's hard to forget your neighbors' "no I can't help you," and hard to keep saying to an eager boy but increasingly thin boy who loves his mother, "Oh no, son, I'm not hungry. You eat," when even the smallest child could see fear in her eyes and discern that odd odor of the malnourished. Today we eat, and someday soon we die. What could be clearer? Waking up to that plan is a difficult proposition.

So there she is, our anonymous widow, gathering sticks enough to cook a last meal. Did she feel the pitying eyes of neighbors? Or, perhaps not pity really, but rather a sort of grim relief. Pity would imply a willingness to help. Relief comes when we know that the other person's very existence no longer challenges us to offer a cup of water. For, when the poor die, at least the rest of us have the satisfaction of lament and guilt, the voyeur's ultimate satisfaction.

When your plans are made and you have accepted your fate, meeting a stranger who promises to bring another one presents difficulties, especially when the stranger is one of those wild-eyed prophets coming from the desert, the sort who had seen some things no one else had. God perhaps. The trouble with those who see God is that sometimes those so bedazzled cannot see anything else for the glare. Or sometimes they see everything as it is, not as it seems to be. Which way the prophet will go – that's anybody's guess.

So it is in our story. God says, "I have commanded a widow woman there to support you." It's not clear that God had bothered to tell her yet, but the plan is in place. The prophet will speak and, against every impulse in the human soul, which tends inevitably to self-preservation and the blindness we amusingly call common sense, she agrees to prepare the last meal not for her hungry son, but for the strange man from the desert. She who has nothing to give becomes the giver, and in doing so, she whom her neighbors have abandoned and left for dead – this is what pagans do; it's what makes them pagans – becomes the hostess, not just for a prophet used to the service of less communicative waiters who can only croak "Nevermore." Hospitality is the foundation of all society. To refuse to accept from another is the ultimate violation of human trust. Conversely, by placing himself in a position of dependence, the man who spoke to God could allow someone else the chance to live fully.

It's such a simple story, this one. It's a story of divine provision, of never-failing Wonder bread and extra virgin olive oil. A woman who had resigned herself to death reenters the world, not just as a recipient of someone else's generosity, but as a conduit of grace to others. A prophet – and all of us readers – learns to look beyond his usual circle of contacts to find God at work. True, the story presents all sorts of conundrums: why did the God who could set up a raven airlift let a stream run dry? Why send a prophet to be fed, not at home, not even by wealthy Gentiles who might welcome him as an interesting diversion at their cocktail parties, but by the poorest of the poor, and a woman at that? Why? But in addition to all our questions, the answer sounds forth. This is a story about God's hospitality to the smallest of us, about whom it would be fitting to use the words of the poet Joseph Brodsky:

I did not see, will not see your tears,
I will not hear the rustling of wheels,

Carrying you to the bay, to the trees,
Along the fatherland without a memorial to you.

Yes, this story is a memorial: to a prophet who stood up to power and embodied in his life a radical obedience to God, and to an otherwise forgotten woman who had given up hope, and thus it memorializes the human race as a whole, since most of our species are poor, obscure, and struggling. The story reminds us that our task of Christian service and leadership around the world cannot be tamed and domesticated in the channels we often seek to make them run in. But there is a deeper sense in which the real hero of this story is a God whose care extends to pagans, to the frightened, to the despairing. This God offers hope by placing those who have met him face to face among those who have not. (And, by the way, it's not always easy to tell who is who.) God takes us from the valley of despair and the cesspool of guilt to the mountain of hope, where we can enter his banqueting hall and share in a bounty that knows no limits.

In our pagan world, in a world of swelling GDPs and ever more capable armies, of growing poverty and declining life expectancies in the poorest parts of the world, the people of God easily begin to practice an accounting system quite alien to God's. We give the microphone to the shrill voices telling us that all is well, all is well. We strut and fret our hour on the stage, hoping that our words are more than sound and fury, and that they do signify something. Which they do not. And in our use of noise to silence the vulnerable, we forget that God – whose opinion, after all, may be the only one that counts – has a different accounting system that makes him say strange things like, “I have commanded a widow to care for you,” or “I am the resurrection and the life,” or even “death will be swallowed up in victory.” Now that's something to get up in the morning for!

Lesson 5: Leaders in the World of Miracle (2 Kings 4-5)

Unlike the prophets whose names grace books of the Bible, the prophets of the ninth century, especially Elijah and Elisha come down to us as wonderworkers, purveyors of miracle whose interactions with the world challenged easy assumptions about human ability to control their surroundings, whether through religion or any other method. The Elisha stories, in particular, show him as a dramatic figure whose actions point to the surpassing power and goodness of Israel's God.

“As Elijah was, so Elisha is, only more so.” That is the message of the stories about the younger prophet in 2 Kings. The astonishing work of God through the prophets did not end with the assumption of Elijah into heaven (truly a remarkable event!) but continued through his most eminent disciple and the rest of their circle, the so-called “sons of the prophets.” The stories in 2 Kings closely follow those in 1 Kings. Both prophets provide oil for a destitute family. Both raise dead children. Both receive hospitality from unlikely persons. And both confront the rulers with their misdeeds. On the surface, it seems that nothing has changed.

But what has changed is the external surroundings that the prophets face. Although Ahab's successors are no less brutal than their father, they lack his military and administrative genius. And thus they are unable, according to 2 Kings, to avoid the decay that always befalls dynasties. Elisha and his disciples roam around an Israel in decline and face a monarchy in trouble. Pressured by foreign invasion and internal famine, the king of Israel whom Elisha faces in chapter 4 seems to be a weak ruler, afraid of his own shadow and so despairing of hope that he cannot imagine anything happening in Israel as splendid as a healing of a leprous leader from Damascus. The change of scenery thus profoundly affects the stories before us. Though outwardly so similar to those in 1 Kings, they differ profoundly from them.

The two stories considered here closely resemble those about Elijah in 1 Kings. These chapters consist of two acts, each with five scenes:

Act 1: Elisha with His Disciples and Others

Scene 1: A miracle of oil for a widow of a disciple (4:1-7)

Scene 2: Elisha and the Shunnamite woman (4:8-17)

Scene 3: Elisha heals the widow's son (4:18-37)

Scene 4: The “poison” soup (4:38-41)

Scene 5: A feeding with outside help (4:42-44)

Act 2: Elisha and Naaman the Damascene

Scene 1: Naaman in Aram (5:1-5)

Scene 2: Naaman in Samaria (5:6-7)

Scene 3: The healing of Naaman (5:8-14)

Scene 4: The “conversion” of Naaman (5:15-19)

Scene 5: Gehazi takes a bribe and is punished (5:20-27)

A key feature of the stories is the way in which the prophet reveals to a Gentile audience the might and graciousness of Israel's God. This revelation, in turn, helps the Israelite audience of the story (after all, you had to speak Hebrew to understand them!) recall the same point.

This message becomes clear in the fourth scene of the Naaman story (5:15-19). A sort of conversion story much like those of Ruth or Rahab, which were also responses to acts of divine mercy, this event underscores the key elements of Israel's confession of faith, all coming from the mouth of the Gentile general:

- (1) "there is no God in all the earth except in Israel" (v. 15)
- (2) This God deserves to be honored through sacrifice (v. 17)

The story contains a fascinating subtext of gift-giving, which also reveals something about the theology at stake. Naaman, like many ancient people, believed that relationships were established through the exchange of presents. He had received an enormous gift, healing, and he sought to return the favor in the most lavish way he could. Ordinarily in the ancient world, such a gift would have gone to the temple of the deity being honored, but here, perhaps since the healing had not taken place in a temple, Naaman offers the gift to the intermediary of God's grace, the prophet Elisha. Elisha declines the gift without explanation, though we need not struggle too much to guess it. He appears in these texts as very poor and dependent on the largesse of others, and such a magnificent gift would have altered his life status in a radical way. In any case, he declines to enter into a relationship based on reciprocity with Naaman, as if to say that the gifts of God cannot be bought or even repaid. (And this is why Gehazi's bribe-taking is so offensive; his sin is not ordinary greed, but also a misunderstanding of the nature of trust in a benevolent God.)

The other interesting thing about Naaman's conversion is that he resumes his previous life, including his religious commitments. The text does not expect him, a foreigner, to give up the worship of other gods entirely. Unlike Isaiah 40-55 and other later texts, inside or outside the Bible, 1-2 Kings does not fault Gentiles for worshiping other deities. "What can one expect?" it seems to say. Naaman's willingness to pray to the God who has healed him seems adequate for the moment. In this text, then, we see the beginnings of an idea of conversion to Judaism, not the fully developed version of the idea as it came to be known by the time of Jesus.

For Further Reflection

1. How do the characters in these stories deal with fear of loss, or the reality of loss itself? Do you find their reactions realistic? Instructive? How would you respond in similar circumstances?
2. What assumptions do the characters in these stories make about the nature of God and God's interactions with the world? Are their assumptions plausible? How do your assumptions differ from, or resemble, theirs?
3. Physical well-being often relates to spiritual health in a complex way. The Old Testament often portrays God as one who seeks the well-being of people in every aspect of their lives. How important is physical health to spiritual health? What are the limits of the connection? How should we talk about issues of health in church?

Lesson 6: Hezekiah in Sickness and in Health (2 Kings 18-20)

The illness of a major leader always poses problems for the group he or she leads, especially during times of extreme external crisis. All these pressures marked the reign of Hezekiah, who had to face Assyrian invasion, movements of refugees, domestic intrigue, and a range of related problems. He led in such a time by calling for reform, and this is why Israel remembers him as one of its greatest leaders.

The reign of Hezekiah was one of the most troubled times in the history of the ancient Near East. The vast Assyrian Empire, centered in northern Mesopotamia, expanded to absorb all of Syria, much of modern Turkey and Iran, and then northern Israel itself. Samaria fell to the Assyrian ruler Sargon II in 722 BCE, ending a decade of warfare and ceasefires with the total annihilation of the northern kingdom of Israel. The destruction of northern Israelite cities led to refugees settling in the south, with Jerusalem itself more than doubling in size and acquiring new fortifications and an expanded water supply system (the Broad Wall recently found by archaeologists, and Hezekiah's Tunnel, respectively).

The age of Hezekiah also saw, as far as we can tell, a religious revival. Many scholars believe that this was the era in which the material in the books of Deuteronomy, Hosea, Micah, Amos, and Isaiah came to prominence. There are many learned debates about how much of this prominence is innovative (certainly Isaiah was active during this time), and how much continues older ideas and practices. But it does seem clear that many people in Judah and Israel were very interested in preserving what they could of their own past and seeking the guidance of Yahweh for the future. Perhaps good examples of this overall attitude appear in Isaiah 2-12.

In any case, 2 Kings 18-20 portrays him as a reformer and a pious man who dealt with serious problems in thoughtful ways. There are four major acts in his story, plus a summary statement:

- Act 1: Hezekiah's initial reforms (18:1-8)
- Act 2: Hezekiah's struggle with Assyrian (18:9-19:37)
- Act 3: Hezekiah's illness and recovery (20:1-11)
- Act 4: Hezekiah's Babylonian misadventure (20:12-19)
- Summary statement (20:20-21)

Most of this material, with slight alterations here and there, appears in Isaiah 36-39, probably because of the close, and mostly friendly, connection between the king and prophet in the stories.

Several strands of Hezekiah's work as a reformer deserve attention. The first is the nature of the reform itself, as seen in 18:1-8. Unlike modern popular movements that bubble up from the masses (or so we claim), ancient reform movements usually involved those at the top of the society. And so it is here. Moreover, Hezekiah's actions seem to combine a return to a particular view of the past, the Mosaic ideal, with a disregard for certain long-established customs. Thus he closed the open-air sanctuaries ("high places") and even desecrated them despite their long established usage by families and communities throughout Israelite history. He destroyed the copper snake Nehushtan,

which goes back to Moses because it had become an “idolatrous” figurine. And he eliminated sacred objects associated with Asherah, even though both Israel and the Canaanites who preceded them had worshiped that goddess for uncounted centuries.

The explanation for this approach to reform comes in 18:5-6: Hezekiah trusted Yahweh in unprecedented ways. He sought divine guidance at every turn.

Second, it is not hard to see that this reform of Hezekiah’s generated much hostility or at least uncertainty among his subjects, so much so that the Assyrian leader, the Rabshakeh, tried to play upon local discontent in his speech against Hezekiah (18:22). Apparently, the reforms had gained international attention no doubt because of their extreme oddness. The idea that one should worship only one God and in only one place, though the default assumption of a book like Deuteronomy, was very unusual in Hezekiah’s world.

Third, Hezekiah’s changes combined with the external reactions to his aggressive foreign policy (he tried to subjugate Philistia and revolted against Assyria) led to serious theological reflection in Jerusalem. Even the Rabshakeh picked up on this in 18:33-35, when he challenged the people’s assumption that Yahweh was powerful enough to protect them from the Assyrians and their gods. The narrator wants readers to hear that statement as irony: the Assyrian spokesman was wrong. Yet the theological reflection does not end there. Rather it continues throughout the stories about Hezekiah.

Fourth, the deepest expressions of this reflection appear in Hezekiah’s prayers in 19:14-19 and 20:3. The latter is a simple, heartfelt prayer for healing, a cry from the heart from a deeply religious person who feels (rightly) that he much left to do. The former is even more interesting. At the height of the Assyrian crisis, when his entire kingdom except Jerusalem has been burned and pillaged, he prays to Yahweh as the creator and sustainer of the world, and the divine ruler of all. He invites God to look at, and listen to, the actions of the Assyrian foe, which he interprets as attacks on the “living God.” He confesses that Yahweh is the creator, while the other gods are merely the creations of human beings, a theme that will play a major role in all subsequent reflections on the nature of the deity (see Isaiah 41, for example). He clinches the argument for divine intervention by saying that thereby will all the nations of the world know that “Yahweh alone is God” (v. 19).

Fifth, the responses to these requests come in oracles through the prophet Isaiah, who promises the defeat of the invaders and, later, the healing of the sick king. God appears here as one who deeply cares for the welfare of Israel, in spite of all appearances to the contrary.

For Further Reflection

1. It is difficult to have the courage to make significant changes during times of crisis, yet Hezekiah does so. What does it take to do so? What attributes of character or resources are needed by those who wish to lead boldly?
2. What is the connection between prayer and leadership in the church? Hezekiah seems to feature prayer prominently in his understanding of his role. What could we learn from that fact? Why, in your view, does prayer play so small a role in our conceptions of religious leadership? How could we fix this problem?

Lesson 7: Josiah and His Reforms (2 Kings 22-23)

Like Hezekiah, Josiah came to the throne during a time of turmoil. Before his death, he saw the Assyrian overlord humbled and then destroyed. The Bible remembers him chiefly, however, not for his politics, but for his religious reforms. Inspired by the book of Deuteronomy, he led the people of Judah back to a worship of the One God in one temple, Jerusalem. The changes of his time continue to have enormous impact on our lives even today.

Second Kings remembers Josiah as a great reformer, like Hezekiah. However, his reforms differed in intensity and quality, partly because the historical situation had changed. The great Assyrian empire, in full flood during Hezekiah's reign in the late eighth century, had come to the verge of collapse early in Josiah's reign. A terrible civil war had weakened the empire. It collapsed during Josiah's lifetime, falling to the Babylonians, Medians, and Scythians in a coalition that Judah also tried to help.

The biblical story does not focus on these great regional political issues, however. Instead, it concentrates on the religious dimensions of Josiah's rule, for it was during his time that a major event in Judah's history occurred. The fight for monotheism became closely connected to a book and the interpretation of that book.

That book was Deuteronomy, or some part of Deuteronomy, which the priests found in the temple during a long overdue renovation of the then three centuries-old structure. The newly discovered book, whose authenticity was verified by the prophetess Huldah, and whose message led to national reform, drew the king's attention to the sharp contrast between the ideals of the Mosaic faith and the realities of Judah's practices.

The story of Josiah consists of several parts:

Scene 1: The rebuilding of the temple and the finding of the "book of the Torah" (22:1-10)

Scene 2: Validation of the book by Huldah (22:11-20)

Scene 3: The people's acceptance of the covenant laid out in the book (23:1-3)

Scene 4: Josiah's reform in 627 BCE (23:4-25)

Scene 5: The final assessment of his reign and his tragic fate (23:26-35)

In assessing Josiah's story and its relevance for modern readers, we should think about what he did and why it seemed significant to the authors of 2 Kings.

First, the finding of a book might not seem an adequate motivation for a wide-ranging change in the religious practices of an entire nation. Yet the book's specific message plus the prophetic validation of it by Huldah were sufficient to commend it to the king and the people. Partly this was because the finding of old books in temples was a well-known happening in the ancient world, and such books drew the attention of their discoverers because they bore witness to past values worth recovering.

Second, the specific contents of the book led to Josiah to carry out a series of reforms. These actions included (1) the destruction of vessels dedicated to Baal and Asherah in the Temple in Jerusalem, (2) the desecration of holy places throughout rural and urban regions of Judah and even the then Assyrian province of Samerina (formerly the northern kingdom of Israel), (3) the destruction of altars and incense burners on rooftops, (4) the desecration of the *tophet* or cemetery for children sacrificed in the Valley of Hinnom, (5) the removal of horses and other cult objects in the Temple dedicated to a

range of deities, (6) the destruction of rooms in the Jerusalem temple compound in which women wove garments for Asherah, and (7) the elimination of various installations used in necromancy and divination.

This list gives the impression that Judah was a land full of religious symbols. Apparently, one could hardly go anywhere without encountering many signs of the country's deep religiosity and interest in pleasing the divine realm and knowing its will. Thus Josiah's removal of all these symbols would have disrupted centuries of practice and belief in many cases. And it would have threatened to separate the king's subjects from the world of the sacred unless something took the place of all those holy sites and symbols.

The replacement came in two forms, in addition to the great Temple that stood now majestic in its solitary position as the only legitimate place to offer sacrifice to Yahweh. The first replacement form was a book itself. The heavy emphasis on Scripture as the major location of knowledge of the will of God goes back, as far as anyone can tell, primarily to the reign of Josiah. The second replacement appears in the reform's emphasis on Passover. Though already an old feast commemorating the exodus, Israel's primal story of origins and orientation, the Passover had fallen on hard times (see 23:21-23). Josiah knew that reclaiming a major festival would unite the nation and help it remember its core story and thus its core identity. The twin emphasis on calendar and text would become the hallmark of Judaism, and later, Christianity.

As 2 Kings presents it, then, Josiah's reform seems very radical and intense. Perhaps things were less turbulent in the moment. Certainly the changes did not stick in the short run, for after Josiah's death, Judah returned to the ways he had sought to change, and the destruction of the nation occurred in spite of his best efforts.

This last fact may give us an opportunity for sober reflection. No reform movement has a permanent effect on the lives of a community. To survive, much less flourish, any group of people must always be reforming, always seeking renewal. Judah's failure to do so led to its downfall, as 2 Kings argues.

For Further Reflection

1. Change always involves both discarding old things and adding or reclaiming new ones. In Josiah's case, reform meant casting off many old, time-honored practices that people regarded as holy. What do we need to do to reexamine our practices to determine whether they are legitimate or not? How do we decide in the absence of a found book or a king's commands?
2. Josiah changed how his people thought about sacred space. The Temple became, as Deuteronomy expected, the only place for sacrifice and thus the holiest spot on earth. How do you think about sacred space? In what ways do the spaces in which the church meets function this way for you? Why or why not?
3. Josiah also changed how his people thought about sacred time, particularly Passover. This time commemorated the key event in Israel's history, the exodus. The renewed celebration of Passover would bring the people together and help them live in light of the values of the exodus. How do our times of worship bring us together and reinforce or correct our spiritual values? When and why do they fail to do so under certain circumstances?

Lesson 8: When Leadership is Not Enough (2 Kings 17, 21, 25)

While 1-2 Kings is not an obituary for Israel and Judah, but a record of what went wrong and a call to learn from the past, its most poignant reflections center upon the death of the two kingdoms. Avoiding a merely materialist explanation of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests, the book argues that Israel and Judah fell because of specific religious and moral failings, which it calls upon readers not to repeat. These summary reflections reveal some of the deepest insights that the book has to offer into what it means for a group to call itself the people of God.

As we have already noted, 1-2 Kings was written in part to explain why Israel and Judah fell to foreign invaders. It is not, however, merely an obituary, but instead a meditation on how bad and good leadership can shape the behavior of a community over several centuries.

On several occasions, 2 Kings steps back from its story to comment on why tragedy befell Israel and Judah in spite of all their advantages deriving from the blessings of God. These reflections function as a warning to the future, and an invitation to imagine an alternative direction.

The first extended discussion of the reasons for the fall appears in 2 Kings 17, which reflects on the destruction of Samaria in 722 BCE by the Assyrians. The text draws a sharp contrast between the behavior of God, on the one hand, and of Israel, on the other. Whereas God has (1) brought Israel from Egypt, (2) driven out the Canaanites, (3) forbidden idolatry, (4) made promises through the prophets, and (5) given laws worth following to the ancestors through the prophets, Israel (1) honored other gods, (2) followed the rules of the nations, (3) attended to words that were not so, (4) built high places in every city, (5) erected inappropriate cult symbols, (6) worshiped idols, (7) rebelled, (8) rejected Yahweh's instructions, and (9) pursued empty things (i.e., served various gods other than Yahweh). In short, Israel acted in ungrateful, disrespectful, and inexplicably irrational ways. They abandoned their relationship with the God of the exodus by behaving in ways that erased any distinction between them and pagans around them. The text distinguishes between the northern and southern kingdom, preferring the second to the first, but hints strongly that any distinctions are of degree, not of kind.

The second discussion of the nation's tragic fall comes in 2 Kings 21, the description of the reign of Manasseh. Portrayed as a flagrant idolater, this ruler managed to keep Judah intact and at peace for almost six decades. Yet he did so by reversing his father's reforms and returning to a state of religiously problematic behavior (from the point of view of 2 Kings, at least). In fact, 2 Kings blames Judah's final demise on Manasseh, despite the fact that the kingdom survived his death by more than half a century. So scandalous was his behavior, that its impact long outlived him.

The third discussion comes in 2 Kings 25, which reports the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE. It would be hard to overestimate the importance of this event because the exile that followed led Israelites to collect and distribute their sacred writings in fuller form. Without the Babylonian exile, there would be no Bible and no Judaism (hence, no Christianity). Reflection on this exile appears all over the Bible, profoundly shaping the ways in which all of us think. Before the exile, many Israelites were polytheists. Theirs was not a book religion, not focused on individual or group obedience

to law, and in short not always very different from the religions of their neighbors. After the exile, everything was different. Yet, whatever the positive benefits of this tragedy, the fall of the nation to the Babylonians was also a terrible disaster that took generations to undo.

For us modern readers trying to make sense of this text, a few lessons surely come to mind. First, it seems clear that sound leadership is a necessary but not sufficient condition of a group's success. The entire community bears a responsibility for its own flourishing. Good followers are as important as good leaders. Second, since 1-2 Kings express a deep-seated distrust of overly powerful leaders (see also 1 Samuel 8), we also may consider whether the top-down style of reform that even the best kings of Judah practiced might be problematic. Power always presents the temptation to take shortcuts, to seek temporary success at the expense of long-term formation of people. Yet without the patient cultivation of the habits of virtue in the whole group, any project of reform is doomed to failure. Third, however, one of the most powerful lessons of 1-2 Kings is that tragedy need not be the final answer. Even during a time of utter disaster and widespread failure, there are reasons for hope and resources for recovery. These books, by telling stories of complex leaders and their successes and failures, seek to provide one such resource – truth. For in telling the truth, no matter how inconvenient it seems, we find freshness and life.

For Further Reflection

1. What capacities for spiritual growth should leaders help us cultivate? How can we become good followers?
2. Ingratitude seems to have been a major spiritual flaw in Israel and Judah, according to 1-2 Kings. The authors understood Israel's behavior in those terms because they conceived of freedom, the land, and spiritual opportunities as gifts from a benevolent God. How could we avoid ingratitude and maintain our relationships with God?
3. The texts we have studied in this series seek to consider the mistakes and missed opportunities of their past, as well as the less frequent occasions on which Israelites got it right. As we think about our own past as a religious community, what lessons do we learn? What have we done well? Not so well?
4. What sorts of leaders do you value? What makes those leaders successful? How can we raise up successful leaders for tomorrow's church?