

THE MINOR PROPHETS & GOSPEL OF JOHN

Bible Reading Schedule

12 Weeks

WEEK 1

We begin our journey through the Minor Prophets, which will probably take us to the end of the year. At the same time, we will read the Gospel of John for about the next ten weeks. I hope you enjoy the practice of reading both the Old and New Testaments in our daily readings as much as I do. Our first minor prophet is Hosea. God calls him to marry Gomer, who is described as a prostitute (1:2). That gets our attention from the beginning. Hosea would experience firsthand betrayal and anguish because of his wife's adultery. His experience would reveal God's agony over his people's sins. Hosea opens a window for us into the very heart of God, who is just but also entirely loving.

The Gospel of John may not need an introduction. But with a sense of anticipation, I remind you that John gives us a full expression of the identity of Christ, who is the "I am!" There will be multiple "I am" statements throughout these chapters. Our reading through John will be at a pace allowing us to absorb this magnificent book. It's September, and our desire is to draw near to our loving and faithful God, as expressed by the prophet Hosea, as well as being inspired by John's record of Jesus' life. Here we go...

DAY 1 – Hosea 1 & John 1:1-18

You might know this about Hosea, but God's command for him to marry a prostitute is indeed unique. It might not mean her profession was prostitution, but that she was a promiscuous woman. This part of the story is difficult to understand since it doesn't seem like God would ask anyone to do such a thing. But it clearly revealed how disappointed the Lord was with his people. Israel had acted like a prostitute by turning against the Lord and worshiping other gods. Hosea and Gomer have three children in this chapter, who become a part of the prophetic message from God. Even though the prophetic word of judgment is very strong, beginning in verse 10, Hosea shares a hopeful word for Israel in the future. Jezreel means "God plants," so one day the Lord will restore his people, and they will become fertile and even flourish. The message of chapter 1 will unfold with warnings, judgment, and future hope throughout this prophetic book. Despite the Lord's disappointment in his people, he will never stop loving them.

Aren't you excited to take several weeks and absorb this amazing record of the life of Jesus from the Gospel of John?! These first 18 verses are some of the most powerful and insightful words about Jesus ever written. The idea of him being the "Word" is stunning. The Word has to do with revelation and representation. God spoke the world into existence by the word of his mouth, which revealed his power and presence. But in Greek thought, the Word has the overarching principle guiding the universe. What I am saying is that this use of the "Word" is very profound and extensive. This means Jesus shares the same essence as God, which we believe, but here it is pronounced. The divine presence that has existed from before time can now be known in Jesus Christ. John writes in verse 14, this Logos, divine presence, became flesh and lived among us as a human. This means Jesus is 100% divine (the Word) and 100% human (became flesh). Don't you just love this unique introduction to Jesus that John gives?! What phrase or verse is especially intriguing to you? Why has this stand-alone text meant so much to believers for the last 2000 years?

DAY 2 – Hosea 2 & John 1:19-34

The strong message about Israel being a prostitute gets our attention, as we have already read about Hosea marrying a promiscuous woman named Gomer. With each statement, the message is clearer and clearer: Israel has chosen to live as an unfaithful wife. This will lead to punishment and emptiness. To me, this chapter is like a synopsis of the whole book. Israel is unfaithful and will feel the consequences, but God's love for them will remain strong in spite of their choices. Verse 23 wraps up these harsh words with hope, "At that time (when I restore Israel) I will plant a crop of Israelites and raise them for myself. I will show love to those I call 'not loved.' And to those I called 'Not my people,' I will say, 'Now you are my people.' And they will reply, 'You are our God!'" Gomer's children have names that previously meant the opposite, but the Lord will reverse all of that. "On the day I will make a covenant..." (V18) The Lord will never abandon his people.

Our reading in John highlights another John, aka the Baptist. It is fairly simple. John identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God, and as he does, he tells us that his calling from God has been fulfilled. In fact, John says in John 3:30, "He must become greater and greater and I must become less and less." It was no problem for John to have some of his disciples follow Jesus. That was the plan from the beginning. As the other Gospels tell us, John will be imprisoned and then executed. John would live a short life, but he would also do everything that God planned for him. This is actually true for all of us. It is inspiring to me that John willingly gave himself wholeheartedly, and then God took him home. Today, you can live for yourself, or you can live

for God. How does John the Baptist's example speak to you? What are you noticing in these 16 verses? How can you testify as a witness for Jesus, "make straight the way for the Lord?"

DAY 3 – Hosea 3 & John 1:35-51

Obviously, this is a very short chapter, so I debated about reading chapter 4 also. But this is the storyline of Hosea. He could identify so closely with the Lord regarding the unfaithfulness of Israel. He lived with that reality because his wife was sexually unfaithful. What a huge issue; so much so that marital unfaithfulness is a permissible reason for divorce (Matthew 19:8-9). Adultery would be punishable by death/stoning, according to the law. However, Hosea purchases his wife back. The reason for payment is twofold in my thinking: first, Gomer probably became a slave with no money, and that meant that Hosea would have to buy her back. Secondly, the redemptive plan of God was to offer his son as payment for our sins. This would point to the future work of God to free us through the sacrifice of his son. How difficult would it be for Hosea to take his wife back? Think of it, there is no sense that she was even sorry. The reuniting of Hosea with his wife was also delayed because it would be a long time before Israel would be restored. Sometimes when we disobey the Lord and go our own way, we think that it should all be better since we repented. But the process of restoration is often a slow process. Do understand? What stands out to you in this short chapter?

The next section in John highlights the first disciples. There's something about Jesus that moves these men to follow him and even think of him in very lofty terms. Jesus hasn't really done anything yet. No miracles, no teaching... but they could sense the Spirit of God with Jesus. People asked John if he was the Messiah in verse 19, as this section begins. The anticipation of the Messiah seems to be very high. But, like in our world today, that anticipation might have been around for some time. But nevertheless, they were eager for the Messiah. I think we should also be eager for the Messiah. I am obviously referring to the Second Coming of Christ. In verse 41, Andrew tells his brother Simon (Peter), "We have found the Messiah!" These first disciples displayed a spiritual fervor that motivated them to leave the safety of their jobs and homes to follow Jesus. The Lord is still looking for disciples like that, right? As a believer, what do these first disciples teach you and me?

DAY 4 – Hosea 4 & John 2:1-12

These prophecies are leading up to the destruction of Israel, which will be led into exile as Samaria is destroyed by Assyria in 722BC. This is the first chapter of several warnings and judgments from God through Hosea. These prophetic warnings are still relevant in our day, with no faithfulness or kindness, the propensity to blame everyone else, and the weakness of the

religious leaders. God is grieved the most when his people give allegiance to other gods. He calls it religious prostitution. "They will play the prostitute and gain nothing for it, for they have deserted the Lord to worship other gods." (V10) In history, there is a common theme of blaming women for prostitution when all the while men are participating willingly. "For your men are doing the same thing (prostitution), sinning with whores and shrine prostitutes." (V14) Both men and women are accountable for their sins. The travesty is tied to the way that Israel is no different than all the other pagan nations around them. There is no longer any distinction evident among God's people. You can sense how disappointed and grieved our God is for the moral corruption of Israel.

This story in John is one of my favorites as it is only recorded in the Gospel of John. Jesus arrives with the disciples at a wedding celebration. Weddings were a big deal in any Jewish village. The celebration probably included a large portion of the people who lived in Cana. Jesus seems reluctant to solve the problem of no wine. He refers to the timing, saying, "My time has not yet come." (V4) But the meaning of offering wine could and would be a great way to initiate his identity by blessing the people. Good wine was a symbol of God's blessing (Amos 9:13-14). The Messiah, God's greatest blessing, had arrived. We will read about Jesus showing who he is, as well as telling the people who he is. This is thought of as the first miraculous sign of Jesus being the Anointed One. He will also give great evidence of who he is through what he says and teaches. John has fewer miracles than the other writers, but the way he presents the seven miracles he highlights is very purposeful. How does this first miracle inspire you? Through this miracle, it says, "his disciples believed in him." (V11) How does this story speak to you?

DAY 5 – Hosea 5 & John 2:13-25

We understand why Hosea uses the pain of prostitution so often. His wife had left him for one or more adulterous relationships, and God commanded Hosea to remain her husband and bring her back. He felt his own pain when he spoke these warnings to God's people. Obviously, these words are hard to read. They display God's righteous anger and the necessity of punishment for sin. But verse 15 tells us that God is waiting for their genuine repentance. Waiting "until they admit their guilt and turn to me." There's something we often neglect, it seems to me. We are slow to confess our sins. We might rationalize our sin or just plain ignore it. But God is responsive to genuine confession. We read about it in the Psalms as well as in the New Testament time and again. The hardship that God initiates has a redemptive purpose, that we might return to him. Hebrews 12 tells us that the Lord disciplines those he loves so that their hardship might refine their lives and cause them to honor the Lord as God again. Does that ever happen to you? Do you understand that God will allow hardship to draw us closer, especially when we are drifting?

The second event in John 2 is the cleansing of the Temple. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include this event, but they place it during the last week of Jesus' life before his crucifixion. This raises the question whether this event in John is the same one as in the other Gospel accounts. Even though they sound so much alike, I think Jesus came to the Temple twice to confront the irreligious nature of what the leaders were doing by selling animals and exchanging money. Human nature tells me that one cleansing would not be enough to change their minds and cause them to realize they are grieving God with such a practice. The righteous anger of Jesus coincides with what we are reading in Hosea from the Old Testament. The reference to Jesus cleansing the Temple in Mark includes an idea that I want to affirm with you. "The Scriptures declare, 'My Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations,' but you have turned it into a den of thieves." (Mark 11:17) The Temple represents God's presence and is meant to be open for everyone, so our concern must also include the peoples of the earth. The inclusive nature of the Gospel is affirmed in these words. I want to be a person who cares about the nations and prays for their salvation. What part of this story grabs your attention?

WEEK 2

This begins Hosea's chapter of judgment on Israel. The warnings are presented in roughly chronological order, leading up to the destruction of Israel in 722 BC. These began when Jeroboam was king through the reign of Hoshea. Hosea presents God's charges against the people of Israel and especially against their leaders. The consequences of their sins will be severe, with the nation being destroyed. But notice God's persistence in loving them and not giving up on hope for the future.

John 3 is our "go-to" chapter on the Gospel message and being born again. No doubt it is familiar to you, but I can foresee God speaking to us in a fresh way through these timeless truths. John 4 models the ministry of Jesus to a stranger, and we will wrap up the week on Jesus healing a lame man on the Sabbath. John's account will not disappoint us.

DAY 6 – Hosea 6 & John 3:1-21

There's no doubt that reading Hosea's harsh words can be difficult. But then you discover something about God in the midst of these words that really stands out because it is still true today. Verse 6 tells us so much about God's desire for a relationship with us. "I want you to show love... I want you to know me..." This is because our God is a covenant-keeping God. The best covenants are ones when both parties are faithful to their commitment to each other. Isn't that what is at stake? God is faithful and he always will be, but the reciprocal response from his people is what makes all the difference. The religious acts, like sacrificing animals, mean nothing without relationship, "to know me." How often do we read about God's people doing religious acts, but then are referred to as hypocritical? How does a loving relationship with God remain your main priority?

How could I possibly summarize John 3 with just a few words? Could I just say that we have read the heart of the Gospel today as Jesus speaks to Nicodemus? Born again can be translated as rebirth or born from above. What stands out to you about what Jesus said to Nicodemus? Why? My attention is on the snake in the wilderness (VV14-15). This is a profound statement and tied to a historical event from Numbers 21:8-9. If we look to Jesus, who was lifted up on a pole (the cross), we will be spiritually healed. I am quite sure that Nicodemus knew the event Jesus highlighted, but had no idea what the prophetic implications would be. That is fascinating to me. Everything has been provided for connection with God through faith (believing) in Jesus. There is too much to say about this passage, or I may have said too much already. I believe it speaks as clearly to us as anyone would ever need.

DAY 7 – Hosea 7 & John 3:22-36

These words might seem like a general rebuke, but they are often specific to the people and the situation. The kings were corrupt, and so were the priests. During this time, there were seven different kings over the 25-year ministry of Hosea. Verse 1 mentions Samaria, which was the capital of the Northern Kingdom known as Israel, compared to the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The wickedness of God's people in and around Samaria cannot be fully fathomed. It would turn our stomachs inside out if we knew the details. But God still says, "I wanted to redeem them, but they told lies about me." (V13) Instead, "They cut themselves, begging foreign gods for grain and new wine, and they turn away from me." (V14) These are words of grief from our God through Hosea. It is possible to grieve God, as I am sure you know. Hosea warns them harshly so that they might come to their senses. I think of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 and how he came to the end of his rope and realized his folly. Hosea is praying that the people would respond like that.

John 3:22f is not nearly as familiar to us, but gives us insights into John the Baptist. First, let's clarify that Jesus wasn't actually baptizing people since 4:2 tells us, "(though Jesus himself didn't baptize them—his disciples did)." Secondly, John is the perfect forerunner because he has no jealousy about Jesus and continually tells people he personally is not the Messiah. One of my favorite verses that I mentioned last week is 3:30, "He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less." John clearly knew that Jesus came from heaven and John was merely a human being called by God to prepare the way. He counted his role as an incredible privilege. I have always liked John, and so did Jesus. He had a very short life, but will clearly be elevated in heaven for all of us to see one day. Verse 36 is uniquely translated in the NLT, with the reason people are under God's wrath being because of disobedience and sin. The NIV simply says "whoever rejects the Son will not see life..." Those who believe, you and I, are accepted by God and receive the gift of life eternal. But all others are judged on their behavior and must display complete obedience because they don't know the Son. I think that it is important to realize again that we are accepted in the beloved by faith and faith alone; otherwise, we would be judged by our thoughts and actions, which would always fall short of God's standard. Grace is truly a beautiful gift God offers and we receive by faith. What did you notice in these verses?

DAY 8 – Hosea 8 & John 4:1-42

As this chapter begins, it reminds me of the Israelites' lack of faith in entering the Promised Land. When they realized how they had rejected the Lord, they wanted to go into the land anyway, even though God had pronounced judgment on them. So too, these Israelites want God

to help them (V2), but it is too late. We might have forgotten the theme of prostitution directed against God's people, but it resurfaces in this chapter, "The people of Israel have sold themselves—sold themselves to many lovers." (V9) Again, Hosea is very specific as he confronts Samaria for erecting a calf as an idol beginning in verse 5. Jeroboam I, the first king of the Northern Kingdom, ascended the throne and established places of worship in Dan and Bethel so that the people would not have to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem. At each of these sites, he erected a gold calf for the people to worship (1 Kings 12:26-30). Idolatry represents the biggest breach of faith in our God. The letter of 1 John ends with this verse, "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols." (5:21) When the Lord delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses, he began with, "Have no other gods before me." There is no way to please God if other gods (things) are more important to us than he is. How do you respond to this truth?

This definitely is the marque story in John 4 of Jesus as he connects with a stranger, leading them to life. And, not only one woman, but so many others in the village. This is so big and has so many points of application to our lives. Jesus is being the example so that he can encourage his disciples to do the same in verses 34 to 38. Jesus was all about the harvest of people's souls. The disciples would follow his footsteps after he ascended, but at the moment, they seemed quite confused and more concerned about whether Jesus was hungry and had eaten enough (V31). The message about worship, living water, and the arrival of the messiah fills this story. Jesus both entered the woman's life and journey, as well as shared the truth. I can see the importance of her story, the Lord's story, and God's story in our reading today. We see each aspect of these in John 4. In which way do you notice them? The beautiful part of this story for me is that the woman becomes a witness, and so many others get blessed. I may shrink back at times to talk about the Lord and his truth, but I continue to remember that one life genuinely changed can have a ripple effect on so many others. I said yes to Jesus as several young adults, my age in 1976, shared their witness. Their courage and ambition to reach out to me would multiply many times. When someone responds in sincere faith, others are sure to be touched. The harvest is plentiful...

DAY 9 – Hosea 9 & John 4:43-54

We know of Hosea's hardship regarding marriage, but in this chapter, we get a hint at how difficult it has been to be a prophet to the wayward people of Israel. Verse 8 says, "The prophet is a watchman over Israel for my God (Hosea obeyed the Lord every step of the way), yet traps are laid for him wherever he goes. He faces hostility even in the house of God." The watchman stood guard on the wall of the city to warn of any threat. So too, Hosea was God's watchman, stationed to warn Israel of her sin and of the judgment that sin would inevitably bring. Despite his call from God, the people pushed against him and had plans to trap him. But Hosea was

faithful despite the hardship. What does it mean to be a watchman today? How might God be calling you to serve in this way?

This is the second miracle recorded by John. It is interesting that he is in Cana again, the same village where he turned the water into wine. He would then run into the government official who showed courage and faith that Jesus could heal his son. Maybe he had heard of the Lord's first miracle or even had attended Passover as Jesus was active in chapters 2 & 3 teaching and being among the people. Nonetheless, the Lord healed the boy in Capernaum, several miles away from Cana. Two aspects of the Lord's willingness to perform miracles are seen in this story. First, the man had faith. Second, the Lord performed a divine miracle for a purpose, and that purpose was accomplished when the official and his entire household believed. (V53) John utilizes the miracles of Jesus less frequently than the other Gospel writers, and he ties the Lord's miracles to the mission each and every time. You will see. Tomorrow, the miracle will confront the religious limitations of what God can do. How might God be speaking to you through this story?

DAY 10 – Hosea 10 & John 5:1-15

Did you notice how this chapter begins with God's blessings on the people? The Lord had prospered them, but they attributed it to pagan gods and to their own accomplishments. How often have I noticed this in the lives of believers, when blessed immensely, drift from their devotion and dependence on God? So often! In Romans 1, the downfall of people is a lack of gratitude and genuine worship of the God who provides. Romans 1:23, "Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools." The idolatry in Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom, appears to be rampant, with plenty of idols and golden calf monuments to place their trust. (V6) Hosea still pointed them to a solution even though they would ignore it, "Plant the good seed of righteousness, and you will harvest a crop of love. Plow up the hard ground of your hearts, for now is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and shower righteousness upon you." (V12) Is there any evidence in my life where I might be hardening my heart to God? If so, this verse applies to me.

Are you ready for the third miracle of Jesus? John tells us about a man who had been lame for 38 years. John often tells us that Jesus was back in Jerusalem for a religious festival. I find that interesting but purposeful. Jesus said his first mission was to the house of Israel. He could have had the biggest impact as the crowds gathered in Jerusalem to honor their religion. He wanted to speak into their lives. Their bondage to the law was a specific concern for Jesus. He would knowingly heal a man on the Sabbath, which will carry us into tomorrow's reading. After 38 years, this lame man may have given up. So, Jesus asks him if he wants to be well. This had to be

a hopeful message for a hopeless man. The mercy of God is displayed by Jesus as he intervenes and heals the man. This man broke one of the many Sabbath prohibitions by carrying his mat. This seems very insignificant to us, but when a religious person is basing their righteousness on the law, everyone else has to conform. Miracles have a clear purpose for Jesus and the Apostle John. This miracle will launch Jesus into a very significant and intense interaction with the Jewish leaders. I appreciate the mercy of God displayed in this story. God's mercy is essential to my life.

WEEK 3

Hosea will highlight the love of God, both his tough and tender love. We have four chapters left for this week. If you want to reread a chapter, the 11th chapter is the focal point of God's heart for his people, along with the importance of consequences to sin and disobedience. Hosea is the longest book in the minor prophets and gives us the most intriguing illustration of God's faithful love, even when we are unfaithful. Hosea is our example as he marries a promiscuous woman named Gomer. Kudos for reading these sobering words from this amazing prophet.

On the other hand, John emphasizes the profound teaching of Jesus about himself and his identity. Being the bread of life is the first "I am" in John's Gospel. But there will be many others as we progress through this unique and inspiring account of Jesus.

DAY 11 – Hosea 11 & John 5:16-30

This chapter has always been special for me. I have a memory of Hosea 11 from my seminary days before I was even 30 years old. We were assigned 4 passages for the semester in our first preaching class. Hosea 11 was one of them. It sticks out to me because I did not know the first thing about the prophet Hosea. Of course, the assignment was to research his life and analyze the meaning of his message in Hosea 11. It is actually a very significant "word" about our God. The picture of God being a father is so noticeable because it isn't the normal description of God in the Old Testament, much less the prophets. How could God abandon his children? The emphasis is on being his child? Rebellious children are disappointing but never unloved. Always remember that this is true about our God, "My heart is torn within me, and my compassion overflows." (V8) How do you respond to this honest and insightful chapter from God through Hosea?

There are two of the most important truths in these verses from John 5. Verse 24 is the essence of the Gospel: "I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life." To be born again is to be forgiven and made new. We were dead in our sins, but through Christ, we receive life eternal. So gracious... almost too good to be true. The second truth that has shaped my spiritual journey deeply is something emphasized in "Experiencing God" by Blackaby. Another statement that begins with "I tell you the truth..." "...the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does." (V19) The idea is that the Father is always doing something and if we discern what it is, we can partner with the Father as Jesus did and his kingdom will grow and flourish through us. Too often, I set the agenda for my life. But what if the Father has

something else in mind? Wouldn't the best life be the one that he guides and empowers? This idea of partnering with God so closely that I notice what he is up to, and then I get involved, is sure to prosper and be successful. How do you respond to this approach to life and ministry?

DAY 12 – Hosea 12 & John 5:31-47

This chapter may seem a lot like other ones, but the analogy he gives of Jacob and his life of struggle while pleading with God makes me think that wrestling with God is better than turning your back on God. Verses 3 to 6 get my attention as I have studied Genesis 32 several times when Jacob wrestled with God. The part of the story that I remember is the fact that Jacob would not let go until the Lord blessed him. Verse 6 is the hinge verse, as some commentators suggest that Hosea is saying, don't be like Jacob. But I think the opposite. "But you must return to your God (like Jacob did); maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always." That sounds like hanging on to God as you wait, like Jacob did, and wouldn't let go. I think the Lord is inviting his wayward people to a fight. Let's struggle together; let's get down and dirty; let's hang on for dear life! I know that God would prefer anger over apathy. If you have slowed your interaction with the Lord because of disappointment or frustration, tell him. Hang on until he blesses you like Jacob. Does that make sense? I think that is what God wanted from the people in Hosea's day.

This probably seems somewhat complicated, and in some ways it is. He is speaking to religious Jews who had already decided that Jesus did not fit their mold for a messiah. But Jesus uses a form of teaching that could possibly connect with the crowd. He was utilizing the importance of witnesses. To verify the truth, Jews had to have witnesses, at least two or three. Jesus shares his list of witnesses with them, beginning with God himself, followed by John the Baptist, who was very outspoken about the identity of Jesus. His most convincing witness was the Scriptures, which speak of him throughout the Old Testament. "But you refuse to come to me..." (V40.) And, finally, he identifies Moses as a witness for him. "If you believe in Moses (of course they do), you would believe in me, for he wrote about me." (V46) The key to life in the kingdom centers on Jesus, and we say YES! But for the Jews, he was a stumbling block and still is even to this day. Being convinced of who Christ is as King and Lord of all is essential to us as well. The Lord must be high and lifted up in your life if you are going to be a witness of Jesus in today's skeptical world. There is more than enough evidence. Why not spend a few minutes in prayer affirming who Jesus is with adoration and gratitude!?

DAY 13 – Hosea 13 & John 6:1-15

This might be the heaviest chapter from Hosea in the whole book. He says they will be destroyed. But I got to thinking that these intense judgments match the intensity of hell. People who turn to other gods and ignore the One True God found in Jesus Christ will be judged and found guilty. The sins of the people were continuous, with awareness of God's warnings and ignoring them, just like so many people do today. But I can see myself in verses 5 & 6, "I took care of you in the wilderness, in that dry and thirsty land. But when you had eaten and were satisfied, you became proud and forgot me." Hasn't the Lord been good to us, satisfying us in so many ways? Do we sincerely appreciate it, or am I prone to take it for granted? Ultimately, they did not rely on God or thank him for his kindness to them. As I mentioned previously, the downward decline of people in this world begins with ignoring God and being ungrateful (Romans 1:21f). Do you struggle with self-sufficiency? How so?

John records the feeding of the five thousand just like the other Gospel authors. John's account seems very similar to the other Gospel writers. Verse 14 stands alone as it reveals the anticipation about what the Prophet Moses wrote (Deut. 18:15-18), as well as the supplying of bread from heaven like the Lord did in the wilderness through manna (Ex 16:1-36). You notice the crowd wants to make him their king in verse 15. Tomorrow's reading will illuminate the profound nature of this miracle by Jesus identifying himself as the "Bread of Life." John utilizes every miracle for its maximum impact. It is an amazing event with well over 5000 people being fed from just five loaves and two fish. But like the miracle of wine in John 2, it is not the time for the complete revelation of Jesus being the Son of God. However, John wants it to be clear that Jesus is the Lamb of God, the anticipated One, with many statements referring to Jesus as the "I am" of history. Did you notice any new insights for you from this miracle? How so?

DAY 14 – Hosea 14 & John 6:16-40

This last chapter is so reassuring to me. God's tough love gives way to tenderness and restoration. I have read over these 9 verses several times because they close this book in a hopeful way. The Lord even gives them the script to use, "Forgive all our sins and graciously receive us, so that we can offer you our praise." (V2) It reminds us that God's healing, restoring grace is always more powerful than human sins. And don't you cherish the words that come from the Lord through Hosea in verse 4? "Then I will heal you of your faithlessness, my love will know no bounds, for my anger will be gone forever." Hosea displays an intensity about the travesty of sin but also the treasure of God's love for us. The way the book ends is what I want to remember most. What phrase, sentence, or verse especially blesses you? You have done well to read through the longest minor prophet. Next week, we will take in the words of Joel, which have a richness to them that is prophetic and powerful.

Our reading in John begins with Jesus walking on water. Of course, I quickly recall the time in Matthew (Chp 14) when Peter also walked on water for a few seconds anyway. John tells us that the sea is windy and dark, which makes it even more fearful. The disciples seem to have fear for both the conditions of the sea and the appearance of Jesus walking on water. The miracle of walking on water is combined with the boat immediately reaching its destination. The crowd followed the next day after the miraculous feeding of the 5000. Jesus points them to a much higher meaning than just getting their fill with bread and fish. I told you we would read the “I am’s” in John. “I am the bread of life.” (V35) The connection is profound as Jesus proceeds this statement with the wilderness event of manna. This is Jesus using wisdom and relevancy to speak to the people. They brought the topic up, and then Jesus would call himself the true bread from heaven. And of course, John would emphasize the response of belief. Believing in Jesus as the true bread of heaven leads to spiritual life, which points to eternity. “The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” (V33) John gives us the most compelling analogies for Jesus’ identity. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tend to hide the reality of Jesus being the Son of God, but John makes it his purpose to lift him up as the centerpiece of history who offers salvation to the world. We are still in the beginning chapters of John as he opens the mystery of Christ to his readers. What does this first “I am” say to you?

DAY 15 – John 6:41-71

I decided not to launch into Joel until next week. Our reading in John has plenty for us to think about. In the other Gospel accounts, Jesus is known for teaching in parables, but in John, he uses analogies. Living water, bread of life, the gate, the light of the world... This section has exceptional teaching, which was hard for even the disciples to understand. Some of what Jesus is saying seems to tie to his interpretation of the Passover. At the Passover meal in the upper room, Jesus would say This is my body, this is my blood. The meaning behind the meal and the meaning behind what Jesus is saying about being the Bread of Life is found in Jesus and received when one places their faith in him. Thus, the outcome is eternal life. Like the parables, this teaching is not straightforward forward so that the people would have to listen closely and continue to pursue a relationship with Jesus; otherwise, they would have a shallow faith and give up too easily. In fact, this is even happening by the end of this chapter as it says, “At this point many of his disciples turned away and deserted him.” Having faith in Jesus is straightforward and simple, but hanging on to Jesus for life and a relationship is a dive into the deep end. The people had lots of baggage to let go of. They would be naturally drawn to Jesus because he displayed the miraculous and taught like no other teacher. But eating his flesh and drinking his blood was accomplished through stepping in and placing him front and center in your life. Jesus knew that many would turn away and even one of his closest would betray him.

There is a lot at stake, and Jesus didn't want to water it down. Is Jesus the centerpiece of your life? He is looking for those who are wholehearted for him.

WEEK 4

Joel is both a fascinating book and yet brief. Joel includes one of the most repeated prophecies in the Bible, as well as something we share as Christians still today. We don't know when Joel gave his prophetic message because there is nothing in the text that makes it definitive. In fact, some scholars have suggested that Joel's prophecies are still to come because they are apocalyptic. The words of Joel continue to have relevant meaning to us today. There are strong warnings from Joel that God will punish his people for their wayward lives, but restoration is also a promise when people repent.

John is focusing on the teaching of Jesus in chapters 7 & 8. We will hear about living water and the light of the world. The promise to set us free is also included in chapter 8. These are longer chapters, so I don't think we will get any further than the importance of what Jesus is teaching in these two chapters. John is such a unique and inspiring book for all of us. Get ready for some very applicable truth to live by this week.

DAY 16 – Joel 1 & John 7:1-24

We live in a time when there are increasing numbers of natural disasters. Joel is saying that this natural disaster has spiritual implications. The locusts have shredded the countryside. The interesting sidenote from verse 4 is that scholars are not at all certain about what Joel means by the four different types of locust. This has led to various interpretations that are intriguing to me. The mention of the Day of the Lord in verse 15 says that this disaster is a forerunner to the terrible day of the Lord. The mention of this day also adds intrigue to Joel's prophecy. Maybe the prophetic word for Joel is one that is yet to come, with the onslaught of four kingdoms coming against Israel as a sign that the Day is near. As we go on in our reading of Joel, I think you will notice that the locust has an army-type terminology associated with their destruction. All I am saying is the historical setting is uncertain, so it might point to something yet to come. The Bible teaches that the Day of the Lord will take place during the culmination of the age. Another thought that I began with is God getting our attention through the intensity of natural disasters. One can draw near to God during unexpected and difficult circumstances, or others might shake a fist at God. When bad things happen, what might God be saying to us?

John 7 opens to the reality that already, religious leaders are plotting to eliminate Jesus. In an evil world, often people will hate the truth and do almost anything to defend their opinions and perspectives. We see that in today's world, almost every day, with the news highlighting opposition and polarization that has led to violence time and again. John tells us that Jesus would often attend the major religious festivals in Jerusalem. This is not emphasized in the

other Gospels. Each time Jesus teaches that he is the fulfillment of the Father's plan, but most would not embrace his message or believe who he actually is. Jesus told his disciples to go without him so that he could show up in a surprising and courageous way, it seems to me. His use of the law of Moses is an effort to connect with something they feel strongly about. At the same time, he leaves them in suspense for another opportunity to proclaim the truth and his identity, which will be especially compelling as we anticipate our reading tomorrow. Why do you think Jesus went to Jerusalem alone? Could he have heard from the Father that he should go as part of God's plan? We learned that Jesus only did what the Father guided him to do. I am drawn to this truth that the Father has plans for me, and the best path is to follow Him.

DAY 17 – Joel 2:1-17 & John 7:25-53

This is a fascinating section in Joel's prophecy. Chapter 1 tells us how the locusts devastated the land already. But now this idea is repeated, or is it? Many scholars believe that the locust plague is an actual event that will be repeated in the last days with warring armies instead of locusts. Everything that Joel describes is warlike. In this chapter, Joel saw the plague as a sign of the day of the Lord and that God was judging the people of Judah and Jerusalem for their sins. The only appropriate response is one of repentance, as verse 12 emphasizes the need to rend one's heart before the Lord. Because of the reference to the Day of the Lord and the future emphasis in the rest of chapter 2, I cannot help but think of this as an apocalyptic description of things yet to come. The Day of the Lord is both a day of judgment for all who rebel against God, including sinful Israelites. But, as we will read tomorrow, it is also a day of salvation for those who have listened to the words of the prophets and have turned to the Lord.

There are more questions from the Jews than answers. Jesus is not telling them everything, but he is making an impression. Even the temple guards were amazed at his teaching (V46). But all of this groundwork of Jesus' teaching in Jerusalem during the festival was leading to his proclamation in verses 37 & 38. He is offering living water just as he did in chapter 4 to the woman at the well. Some people were so excited and believed Jesus to be the Messiah, but others questioned the possibility, as he was from Galilee, and that meant to them that he couldn't be in the line of David. Of course, they were wrong. Living water is such a powerful description of what Jesus can mean in a person's life. Clarification is presented in verse 39 that he was pointing to the work of the Holy Spirit in someone's life as they place their faith in Jesus. How do you understand the meaning of living water? Why is that such a great way to think of Jesus and his influence in your life?

DAY 18 – Joel 2:18-32 & John 8:1-11

God's promises for those who repent are many and give assurance of God's mercy. The call to repentance from verses 12 to 17 leads to these hopeful words of restoration. Both the people and the land would prosper by the hand of God. The last sentence in verse 27 gets me thinking about a time in history when everything will be reversed. "Never again will my people be disgraced." That's the kind of promise that lasts forever. This is not surprising, as many scholars point to verses 28 to 32 as futuristic. Peter announces these words on Pentecost as the Spirit is given to the church. Obviously, that fits, but the words of verses 30 & 31 are often repeated as a prediction of what is to come. Jesus used these words to point to his return, his second coming, in Matthew 24. Verse 29, "Immediately after the anguish of those days, the sun will be darkened, the moon will give no light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." The same words that Joel uses and the same words that Isaiah uses for the Day of the Lord in Isaiah 13:9,10, are announced by Jesus. There is a time coming associated with the end times that God will restore his people, pour out his Spirit to those who call on his name, and at the same time render judgment on the people and nations who have refused to acknowledge Christ as Lord. No wonder many scholars believe that Joel's prophecies are yet to be fulfilled at the culmination of the age. How do we respond to the promise of spiritual vitality and devastating punishment at the same time?

In most Bibles, it will say that many ancient manuscripts don't include this story of the woman caught in adultery. But the reason that your Bible includes verses 1 to 11 is that it fits the posture of Jesus so completely that most scholars believe it is authentic. You understand that this is another example of the religious leaders trying to trick Jesus into breaking the law or neglecting the importance of mercy. The woman's lover would be condemned with her according to Deut. 22:23-24. So, the purpose of the religious leaders is not about following the law, but about tricking Jesus. The wisdom of Jesus is on full display as he honors mercy and throws the ball back into their court, so to speak. "He who is without sin throw the first stone." (V7) As if to say, if anyone here doesn't need forgiveness, go ahead and judge her. But everyone, including this woman, needs forgiveness. "Go and sin no more." (V11) Jesus gave this woman an opportunity to begin again. This is a spiritual principle that I truly appreciate. It helps me to be forgiving, knowing I need forgiveness; I need a second chance. Does that make sense? How do you respond to this fascinating story?

DAY 19 – Joel 3 & John 8:12-30

I have wrestled with the interpretation of Joel's prophecy since so much of it seems final. Even the Valley of Jehoshaphat has to point to some valley common for warfare because there is no Valley of Jehoshaphat. It means "a valley where the Lord judges." The valley most often referenced in the Bible is the Jezreel Valley near Megiddo, where the final battle called

Armageddon will take place (Rev. 16). Plus, verse 17 seems final and complete, “Then you will know that I, the Lord your God, live in Zion, my holy mountain. Jerusalem will be holy forever, and the foreign armies will never conquer her again.” Most of the chapter points to God bringing justice and punishment on those who have oppressed God’s people. But I also notice that the prophetic warning is against Tyre, Sidon, and the cities of Philistia, which are regional and historic locations. However, Joel announces judgment on all the nations as well. What has impressed you about the prophet Joel? I have a new appreciation for his words and ministry. And I can’t help but think that some of his words are still to be fulfilled.

John 8:12f begins with the light of the world. Jesus announces that he is the light of the world. But I quickly think of what Matthew wrote from the Sermon on the Mount, “You (believers) are the light of the world.” Jesus invites us into his light so that we also would be the light of the world. This section continues from the same festival of chapter 7, the Festival of Shelters. Jesus is opening himself up to the crowds, and they are confused and resistant. But this section ends with a hopeful statement, “Then many who heard him say these things, believed in him.” (V30) But the more Jesus says about himself (tomorrow’s reading), the fewer will accept his teaching and identity. John began his Gospel with these words, “He came to his own people, and even they rejected him.” (John 1:11). Jesus had already told them, “I am the bread of life. Now he says, “I am the light of the world.” If his connection to the bread of life is too much for the people to take in, being the light of the world is clearer with many Old Testament references for them, like Isaiah 9:2, which all the Jews would understand as messianic. “The people who walk in darkness will see a great light, for those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine.” What do you appreciate about Jesus being the light of the world? There’s no doubt Jesus is claiming to be the Messiah in these verses, but the Pharisees say, “You are making those claims about yourself! Such testimony is not valid.” (V13) The religious leaders and people were stuck in their narrow view of things. Don’t let yourself get to a place where you are stuck, not teachable.

DAY 20 – John 8:31-59

Again, we will not start with a new minor prophet until next week, which leads us to Amos. But today’s reading will easily grab our attention. The dialogue is fairly tense, and the people are changing their minds about Jesus as we read. They were stirred by what he had been saying, but now they call him a demon. The tension begins with such a positive statement that has been important to me for many years. You might feel the same: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (VV31-32, NIV) I have memorized these two verses in the NIV. The people even opposed this hopeful message of being set free. Jesus teaches us about grace, forgiveness, salvation, knowing him,

and more. As we hold onto his teaching, we know the truth. Jesus sets us free from sin, doubt, insecurity, and the fear of death, to name a few. The deeper I embrace the truth that Jesus taught, the more confident and content I am. There's no doubt that Jesus is patiently telling this skeptical crowd about who he is. "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I Am." (V58) That says it all. Jesus is proclaiming that he has always been alive. We believe this about Jesus, but the crowds were ready to stone him. They had their blinders on and could not receive the marvelous truth that the Messiah was standing in their midst. The most important prophetic message of the Old Testament is found in the Messiah, and they were blind to the fact that it was being fulfilled before their very eyes. And for the most part, they still are. How does it help you to fully believe that Jesus is the Messiah? And what truth that Jesus taught comes to mind and helps you to be free?

WEEK 5

Amos is our next minor prophet who served God during the reign of Uzziah in Judah and Jeroboam II in Israel. “Prepare to meet your God,” Amos proclaimed to those who worshiped idols (4:12). Let there be “a mighty flood of justice,” Amos admonished the rich who oppressed the poor (5:24). What brought this shepherd from Tekoa to Bethel to pronounce such powerful judgments? Amos did not make his living as a “professional prophet” (7:14); the “roar” of God (1:2; 3:8) had moved him to make the journey. His message calls for righteousness—right worship that yields right social action. God’s people still need the prophet’s help to act justly and love mercy. (Micah 6:8, a prophet who followed in Amos’ footsteps.)

John highlights another fascinating story about a life that was changed, along with a powerful connection that describes Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Plus, we will read about Lazarus in John 11. John gives us plenty of variety as we hone in on the personality and identity of Jesus. These chapters this week (9-11) continue John’s elevated presentation of Jesus as the One to believe in! We will appreciate reading John as Amos confronts the idolatry and injustice found among God’s people.

DAY 21 – Amos 1 & John 9:1-41

It is impressive to me that a shepherd from Tekoa would not only listen to the word of the Lord but would go to another village and speak boldly against the sinfulness of city after city. These are foreign cities that have lived wicked lives in disobedience to the Living God. Each time the NLT says the people have sinned again and again (Verses 3, 6, 9, 11, & 13), literally, this is translated “have committed three sins, even four.” This expression is used for a repeated act of rebellion against the natural order established by God. As the people of Bethel listened to Amos’ message, they might have said, “Amen!” But by the next chapter, the disobedience of Judah and Israel will become front and center. So often, we can point our fingers at the disobedience of others and ignore our own selfishness. The dark days in which Amos lived called for a man of sturdy moral character and fearlessness. His determination, molded in the harsh terrain of the wilderness of Tekoa, enabled him to stand before kings, priests, and the people, proclaiming the word God had given him. We must appreciate his courage.

Reading all of chapter 9 in John is purposeful since it is just one story about a man born blind who is healed by Jesus. First of all, Jesus says something very surprising to his disciples and contrary to common belief. Verse 3, “It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins...” The disciples and other Jewish leaders assumed that someone’s sin—the man’s or his parents’—had

caused him to be born blind. The issue was much bigger than human behavior. God's plans are far deeper and more of a mystery to us than we realize. The disciples wanted to explain everything in human terms. But not everything can be reduced to our finite perspective. Just like in chapter 4 when the woman at the well came to faith and so many in her village, this blind man could now see physically, but in verses 35-38, it tells us he can now see spiritually. What aspect of this story stands out to you? What do you notice about Jesus using miracles in John's Gospel? What does that say to you about why God is good to you? What might be the most important purpose of God's goodness in our lives?

DAY 22 – Amos 2 & John 10:1-21

After repeating the rebuke to another tribe, the Moabites, Amos addresses Judah and Israel for their sin and injustice. Verses 6 to 8 reveal God's harsh warning against social injustice. Amos was appalled by Israel's abuse of the powerless. Unlike the surrounding nations, Israel had known God in a uniquely personal way and then turned away from him. Their behaviors were especially egregious because they knew that God created all people and he had/has compassion on all he has made. This grieved the heart of God and could not go unpunished. So, God would meet Judah and Israel with judgment. They should what? Know better! Protection for the unfortunate was outlined in God's law. These violations are announced in Deut. 15, Lev. 25, Ex. 23, and more, with God's direction for helping the poor and oppressed. The moral character for God's people is outlined in Lev. 18 & 20, for example. The weight of God's Word was being ignored, and the fallout would be devastating. Why is it so serious when people ignore God's commands?

John 10 and the Good Shepherd highlight a favorite picture of Jesus. Many paintings have depicted Jesus with sheep. But he also said, "I am the gate." This thought can be overlooked, but Jesus made it clear many times that to enter the Kingdom and receive life from above, he is the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus is the entry point for life eternal. The entry point is obviously important, but the ongoing connection to the Shepherd is equally important. He tells us to listen to his voice; he tells us to follow him; he tells us that he will never leave us. In verse 16, he gives assurance that other sheep will also enter in. This anticipates believers outside Judaism one day joining Jesus' sheepfold. This illustration makes us appreciate Jesus all the more and ties him to Psalm 23 as "The Lord is my shepherd..." He will lay down his life voluntarily (NLT) as we know. The Shepherd gives his life for the sheep. What aspect of Jesus being our Good Shepherd encourages you most? Why?

DAY 23 – Amos 3 & John 10:22-42

This first message of judgment from the Lord warns Israel that its status as God's elect will not excuse it from God's punishment. Instead, they will be held to a higher standard than the surrounding nations. Verses 3 to 6 list one question after another. Obviously, the answer, time and again, is "no." The people of Israel and Judah (V13) believed that because of their chosen status, God would intervene to rescue them and never let them perish. The imagery is one of a shepherd arriving too late to rescue the sheep from the mouth of the lion. Nothing grieves God more than when his people turn to idolatry for their help. Also, idolatry can be in the form of trusting in worldly treasures instead of the strong arm of God. (V15) The Lord disciplines those he loves, so we are not exempt from his correction. Hardship in your life could be a sign of him trying to get your attention. (Hebrews 12:5-11)

John 10:22f begins another event in the life of Jesus associated with the time of Hanukkah. About two hundred years before Christ came to earth, the Temple was partially destroyed in 165BC, with some reconstruction and a festival of dedication called Hanukkah. This would bring large crowds to Jerusalem, which Jesus would utilize for teaching and proclamation of salvation. He again uses the idea of being a shepherd with sheep who listen to his voice. Connection with Jesus would enlist the security of the Father as One who will never let go. I love that truth and believe I am secure in Christ, not by my own effort, but through Christ. Verses 27 to 29 are worth extra thought and prayer. How do you respond to this promise that Jesus gives his sheep? As always, Jesus creates an opportunity for belief with the possibility of people rejecting him as Messiah. But as this section closes, people are believing in him. Why do you think that took place? Do you realize that the time for Jesus is winding down? The next episode is thought of as only a week or two before his arrest.

DAY 24 – Amos 4 & John 11:1-16

This is a disappointing chapter as the Israelites are callous to the Lord and hardheartedly ignore God's warnings and refuse to return to the Lord. Sometimes we might think that these prophecies represent a general rebuke from God for their lack of devotion and allegiance. But as we begin this chapter, Amos confronts Samaria's wives for urging their husbands to perform ruthless acts in order to provide money for their parties. Israel had plenty of religious rituals, but there was no reverence or real communion with God. Like God did in Egypt with plagues to show his power and displeasure, he did again, but God's people refused to repent. "But still you would not return to me," says the Lord. (Verses 6, 8, 9, 10 & 11) This chapter represents a major theme through Amos' prophecies. Since Israel would not repent, they must meet... God in judgment. Here is another example of natural disasters intended to get the attention of God's people so they would repent. I have often wondered if God still operates this way. I would say yes. What do you think?

I know these first 16 verses may seem like just a setup for the real deal with Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. But the Lord's statement in verse 4 is so illuminating. This has happened in the way it will happen for the glory of God and his Son. This is an important principle regarding answered prayer, the miracle power of God, and setbacks in our lives that we think God ignored. God's intervention in our world is to display his glory, as we will read tomorrow. I have prayed for many, many needs, concerns, illnesses, and struggles for myself and for others. When I pray, I have confidence that God will do the right thing, something consistent with his will, which will ultimately bring the Lord glory. That's what we want anyway. If my difficulty can be used to point to the Lord and his presence, which is available to those who seek him, I am all for it. How about you? Verse 16 closes this section with a seemingly defeatist statement. Thomas might not have thought he would die, nor did he want to. But there was an obvious danger that had already been evident previously, as the religious leaders were looking for a way to get rid of Jesus. So, in a way, the disciples are showing some real courage to die with Jesus. I think that posture is very powerful. Jesus said on more than one occasion, "deny yourself..." The disciples were being prepared for the intensity of serving Jesus after his ascension. How do you respond to my thoughts on this topic?

DAY 25 – Amos 5 & John 11:17-44

"Come back to the Lord and live!" (V6) Amos weaves words together of opportunity and repentance, but there is no sincerity or turning back displayed by God's people. Plus, anytime I read about the Day of the Lord, my antenna goes up (beginning in verse 18). Woven into the prophecies of Joel, Amos, Isaiah, and others is the mention of this culminating season of God's wrath, accompanied by the deliverance and salvation of those who have trusted Christ. Ironically, the Israelites wanted the day to arrive, but Amos says, "You have no idea what you are wishing for." (V18) Israel has a distorted view of what they deserve and who they are. They think they have a chosen status, but Amos is pointing out their present disobedience, and the subsequent consequence would be punishment. As he says, "The day will bring darkness not light." (V18) Their insincere worship would be deemed hypocrisy. Of course, these are sobering words, but they remind us that we can't fool God. Nothing is hidden from him. May that thought lead us to surrender, obedience, worship, and commitment. Amen!?

You have just read one of the most significant stories in the Bible. It is the forerunner to Jesus rising from the dead. John 11 contains my favorite verse, I'm not kidding. Verses 25 & 26 share another "I am" statement from Jesus. Is this the best one of all? "I am the resurrection and the life." The wording is perfect, assuring us who believe that we will never die, even though our heart stops, our souls will be in heaven where Jesus has prepared a place for us (John 14:1-4). You also notice the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept." (V35) Jesus is moved by our heavy

hearts and emotional wounds. I love that our Lord is compassionate and empathetic. We have some knowledge of Mary and Martha as Luke 10:38-42 presents Mary sitting at Jesus' feet and Martha slaving in the kitchen. Both of these women are genuine believers, and even though we didn't get to meet Lazarus before he died, we can know he is a follower. Jesus said that Lazarus would rise again (V23), but not necessarily giving us the impression that he would bring him back to life. Jesus had taught the people that if they believed in him, they would have eternal life. Lazarus was miraculously raised from the dead, but he would physically die again. However, the greatest gift the Lord gives is salvation, which means we will be with him in heaven forever. I am sure Lazarus was completely ready to die since he had been given a glimpse of heaven already. What do you like about this story?

WEEK 6

Most of this week, we will read the Prophet Amos, but one day in Obadiah, we will cover the whole book. I am looking forward to reading this minor prophet because I can't remember the last time I read Obadiah. I wondered what his word would be? I will leave us in suspense. Amos will express five different judgments on the idolatrous people of God. However, we won't end the book without the promise of restoration.

The Gospel of John arrives at the final week of Jesus with the beautiful anointing, the triumphal entry, and the last-ditch effort of Jesus to speak to the crowds about his identity and upcoming death.

DAY 26 – Amos 6 & John 11:45-57

Amos is confronting their worldly focus on possessions and pleasure. The material world will let them down, and they will be accountable to God for their misguided priorities and idolatry. We know that God opposes the proud. He despises arrogance. I still remember how each of the kings of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Amos was prophesying during these dark years of wicked leadership and immense idolatry. It is so upsetting to read. The facts are that they didn't listen to Amos and thus didn't listen to God. The mark of a believer is a sensitivity to sin and the courage to admit our selfishness, pride, and disobedience. You understand that God was always ready to receive the repentance and sincerity of the people to change their ways. But they obviously didn't see the need. These words might not seem as relevant to you, but God's concern for righteousness and honesty is still just as strong. Remain soft and sincere before God!

John 11:45f fills in the story that leads to the Lord's arrest and crucifixion. The decision to kill Jesus is based on the high priest convincing the high council to do away with Jesus. "It is better for you that one man should die for the people than the whole nation be destroyed." He did not mean for this to be a prophecy about Jesus being a sacrifice for all, but that is what he said. God caused him to say something very profound that gave meaning to Jesus' death as a pathway to salvation. As I said, Lazarus was raised to life only a week or so before Jesus entered Jerusalem on a young donkey. I had us only read these few verses because they are unique to the Scriptures and profound for us all. The time had come, and evil leaders would be ponds in the hands of God to carry out his purpose for Jesus to die for all the nations. These events were not surprising to God. Neither are the events of your life. He has a purpose for you, and he will bring it to completion. (Philippians 1:6)

DAY 27 – Amos 7 & John 12:1-11

This begins Amos' prophecy against Israel with five judgment visions from God. The first two conclude with the Lord relenting. Amos said, "O Sovereign Lord, please forgive us or we will not survive, for Israel is so small." Amos interceded on behalf of the people, which is a great example for us. We know people who are caught in sin and will surely meet God's judgment. But let us pray for them with compassion rather than judgment. The third vision will not be met with God's relenting grace. The plumb line reveals the necessity of judgment because the people have violated God's commands and will be held accountable. Because of Amos' strong words, Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, confronts the prophet and commands him to leave Israel and go back to Judah. But this only intensifies the warning and rebuke from Amos. Because Amaziah had tried to silence Amos, the Lord gave Amaziah a grim prophecy of what his life would be like after the Assyrian siege. Amos was a courageous prophet who did not shrink back even in the face of threatening words from the priest.

This is a beautiful story of extreme devotion. Mary is the key character and displays an extravagant love for the Lord. John's record of Jesus being anointed gives specifics that the other Gospel writers do not include. Primarily, the act of devotion was initiated by Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This creates a deeper, more memorable story as an example of someone giving so much because of her love for Jesus, the Messiah. This is the same Mary who sat at Jesus' feet listening to his teaching and again showing her devotion (Luke 10:38-42). Jesus also gives meaning to this generous act by connecting it to his burial. The spice/perfume used was a burial spice for his death. He essentially tells them that he will die soon, which is the plan of God and portrayed in Mary's sacrificial act of anointing him, as his dead body would be anointed in one short week. How do you respond to this beautiful story of devotion?

DAY 28 – Amos 8 & John 12:12-19

Amos's concern about injustice is impressive to me. It also reminds me that our God cares deeply about the "underdog." The Lord would punish Israel for how they treated the poor and needy. Their merchants were also known for cheating their customers. The Lord despises the proud attitude of his people. This topic is important to God. We forget that, as we live in such an affluent place on the globe. I also notice the judgment of silence from God. His word would have a "famine" as the word would dry up until the people repented and realized their need for God's direction and instruction. It seems to me that God's Word was hard to find from 400 BC until the time of Christ. This is called the Intertestamental period, as God was especially "silent" as there was such a noticeable lack of prophetic messages from God. Amos could have been

pointing to this difficult time in history. How could you survive without God's Word? How important is God's Word to you?

John often makes connections to Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead as such a monumental moment with God's power demonstrated over the grave. The enthusiasm of the crowd on Palm Sunday is attributed to their excitement over the Lazarus event in verses 17 & 18. This is a high moment in the life of Jesus as the people laud him as the Promised One who is the King of Israel. Zechariah (9:9) prophesied that the Messiah would present himself on a donkey as he entered Jerusalem. The arrival of Jesus on a donkey also has importance. Some leaders would enter a city on a warhorse reflective of kingship and victory. But Jesus wanted the crowd to remember him as one of them who shepherded and showed compassion. A more approachable leader who came to give life and hope. Why is this event so important? How does this posture of Jesus match his true identity?

DAY 29 – Amos 9 & John 12:20-36

The intensity of judgment continues until some words of promise get our attention. God's disappointment in his people is very clear, but he never completely turns his back on them. Even in verse 8, with such strong words, he says, "But I will never completely destroy the family of Israel." The promise of a "time will come" when there will be evidence of God's goodness, when he will rebuild and restore the vitality and blessing our God loves to share. Some have suggested that this promise is still in the future because Amos ends with these words, "They (my people) will never again be uprooted from the land I have given them," says the Lord your God. The blessing of harmony and security points to a future we do not yet know. But God's Word is full of the promise that this will happen. Do you believe it? As I said last Sunday, there are many antichrists in our world. But one day, they will all be defeated forever.

As I often do, I listen in my heart for what part of this reading is meant for me. Verse 27 jumps out to me. Jesus is honest about his heavy heart. I have always appreciated this about our Lord because it means he understands us when we feel weighed down. Verses 27 & 28 remind me of his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was in travail and ended up praying, "Your will be done." That sounds very much like verse 28, "Father, bring glory to your name." The occurrence of the Father's voice and the words he shared are also reminiscent of the Father speaking at Jesus' baptism. This is a more obscure passage, but I love it. The Lord is boldly telling the people about the need for him to die, but the result would be "a plentiful harvest of new lives." Plus, I notice the principle of drawing people to himself as he is lifted up from the earth. (V32) This could be the cross, as he is lifted up from the earth (I think that), or when he is lifted up to heaven at his ascension. John points to the glory of the cross, and I think that's how we

understand it today. The favorite hymn, “The Old Rugged Cross,” brings this understanding out very strongly. What phrase or words in this section stir your heart? Why?

DAY 30 – Obadiah 1 & John 12:37-50

I am reading a book about WWII and how the French sided with the Germans to weed out Jewish people in their country. Being a Jew in France was not a secure place to be because the French had succumbed to the aggression of the Germans and their hatred for Jews. Very upsetting. Like that, Obadiah is prophesying against Edom because they looked on passively and even helped the Babylonians take out Judah and Jerusalem. Obadiah probably wrote his prophecy shortly after Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BC. Obadiah tells the Edomites that what they did to Judah will rebound against them. Verse 15, “As you have done to Israel (my people), so it will be done to you.” The promise of restoration is given to Israel and Judah but not to Edom. Obadiah tells them time and again, from verses 12 through 14, that “You should not have...” You will be swallowed up as my people were swallowed up, and you will “disappear from history.” The Babylonian King Nabonidus burned Edom to extinction in 553 BC. We know very little about Obadiah, but his message to oppressive nations like Russia, North Korea, and even Germany is still a warning from God today. God will hold people accountable for ruthless acts of oppression and warfare. Do you believe it? I do, because we have an eternal God who will make everything right one day.

How do you respond to John’s reading? The Jewish people still did not believe in him even after he performed so many miraculous signs and taught such profound truths. But Isaiah prophesied that this would happen in Isaiah 6:10. From verse 44 to the close, Jesus gives the clearest and most compelling message to the crowd of people just a few days before his arrest. What phrase or sentence stands out to you? It is such a difficult reality for me that so many Jews reject one of their own whom we believe is the Messiah. I was once asked what ethnicity I would want to be if I weren’t white. I said I would want to be a Jew. My heart is burdened for the Jews. The Bible does teach that many, if not most, Jews will come to faith in Jesus at the close of the age. But Jewish people are dying every day without Christ. They have so much reason to have him in their lives. He was one of them! All prophecies point to Jesus. But as we read in this section, their hearts were hard then, and their hearts remain hard to Christ now. How does that reality affect you?

WEEK 7

Let's read Jonah in two days, since it is a well-known story, and anticipate Micah as well. Jonah's story is actually very practical because it is about a person who runs from God because he doesn't want to do what God has directed him to do. You can identify on some level, I am sure. Micah announces God's judgment against false prophets, against Israel's wayward leaders, and against the rich who oppressed the poor. God's indictment against his people resulted in their ruin, but after ruin would come restoration.

John will highlight Jesus and his disciples in the upper room on the night before he was betrayed. This is sometimes called the upper room discourse. Jesus sets a marvelous example for us and then teaches his disciples such important truths that will carry them along after he has ascended. We don't want to be in a hurry through these chapters because they are still so applicable for us today!

DAY 31 – Jonah 1-2, plus John 13:1-20

Daniel and Jonah are unique among the minor prophets because they tell us their story. And because of it, these are well-known stories. Just because I am suggesting we only read Jonah today and tomorrow, I am not glossing over the important message that Jonah brings. The prophet who runs and the prophet who lacks compassion is forfeiting their right to be called a genuine prophet. I know that sounds derogatory toward Jonah, but it is actually how I feel. However, Jonah's status as a child of God is intact because he admits his wrong and seeks the Lord. He also finally obeys the Lord, as we will read tomorrow. Being a prophet is a special privilege, and how the prophet serves is as important as what he does. But Jonah is in the Bible as a prophet, so who am I to make a case against his role as a prophet? He was disobedient and he did lack compassion, but he wasn't immoral and he did not proclaim heresy. What stands out to you from these first two chapters? What might you learn from his prayer in chapter 2? Something else comes to mind, Psalm 139. Jonah would most likely know this Psalm of David. From verses 7 to 12, David declares God's omnipresence. Jonah could not escape God's presence, no matter how far he ran. He is definitely an example of that, as he spends 3 days in the belly of a whale.

John 13 gives us one of the most compelling stories about the personal engagement of Jesus as he washes the disciples' feet. Isn't that incredible!? There are several points of application in this story as the scene in the upper room unfolds. Jesus knew he was the Son of God, and so he could serve in the most humble of ways. That's the point: when we know who we are because

of the grace of the Lord, we can step down into greatness, as one author put it. This means that nothing can change our secure identity in Christ, so that menial tasks have no effect on our status with the Lord. If anything, they elevate it. Peter also helps us see that forgiveness and cleansing weren't about multiple aspects of his life, but one cleansing that Jesus offered would be sufficient, as Jesus is referring to his sacrifice, which will cover all their sins. Plus, the dynamic example of Jesus for us to wash the feet of others, like he did. Jesus, as teacher and Lord, is truly the one we are called to follow as he gave of himself time and again. There is even more to glean from these 20 verses, so what might be another point of application for you?

DAY 32 – Jonah 3-4 & John 13:21-38

Maybe you agree with me that God's willingness to forgive is on display in this story. Even an immoral people like the Ninevites, when they genuinely repent, the Lord is forgiving and merciful. Isn't it marvelous to have a God like that? But also, we see Jonah's hard heart and lack of compassion that reveal something of a Jewish mindset regarding Gentiles. Jonah obeyed, but he also made his ministry personal. In 4:3 Jonah says to the Lord, "I'd rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen." We see the weakness of Jonah's character in this story several times, with running, personal expectations, despair, and questioning God throughout. Jonah finally fulfilled what God wanted him to do, but how he did it was less than a prophet strong in faith and courage. I am sure I have responded to God's call like this from time to time. I might run out of fear or put my human expectations on the Lord. I might walk in Jonah's footsteps more than I even realize. To me, that is why this story is in the Bible. What kind of thoughts and reflections do you have after reading this well-known story?

In John 13, we'll have the prediction of betrayal and denial. Judas and Peter both let the Lord down, but Judas would not return to the Lord, as we know Peter did. We obviously believe that betrayal is worse than denial, but the key is how they would deal with it. Judas could have repented and been restored, and Peter could have slipped away and never returned. There was still hope for Judas, but he did not see it. That is the amazing thing about the Lord; he will always forgive when we turn to him in honest confession. In verses 34 & 35, we read the essence of God's commands and the unique statement about a new command. This is not a new command, really, but Jesus words it in such a way to give it new meaning. "Love each other as I have loved you." (V34) Jesus's love is profound and points to the cross. A sacrificial love that is the word "agape." Why is love so significant and so central to the Gospel? How might you obey the new command to love like Jesus loves?

DAY 33 – Micah 1 & John 14:1-14

Some of my favorite verses in the minor prophets are from Micah. But chapter one is not one of them. Micah spoke the words of God just a few years before Assyria conquered Samaria and all of Israel (Northern Kingdom). Micah prophesied from 735 to 725 BC, and Samaria was destroyed in 722 BC. This whole chapter is full of warnings and judgment. This was not easy for Micah as he mourned for the people. “I mourn and lament; I will walk around barefoot and naked.” The leaders of Israel should have been Israel’s glory by setting an example of moral excellence and wise, caring leadership. Instead, God’s shepherds corrupted their nation, and devastation was sure to follow.

John 14 begins a long section of deep teaching from Jesus that will be essential for the disciples when Jesus is gone. The first six verses are some of my favorites, and I often read them at memorial services, which makes sense. Jesus promises to prepare a place in heaven for his disciples, which includes you and me. The idea is that we would live in heaven near Jesus. That sounds like the best part. I also notice another “I am” in verse 6 with the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus seems to be a bit disappointed with Philip and his questions. Philip was slow to understand the identity of Jesus, and I don’t think he was the only one. John will make more of this in his letter (1 John) by saying anyone who denies the Son of God also denies the Father. As we know, John makes the identity of Jesus his number one goal. What aspect of the Lord’s promises in verses 1-4 stands out to you? What does it mean that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life? How do people respond to Jesus in our world? Why is viewing Jesus with the right identity so crucial?

DAY 34 – Micah 2 & John 14:15-31

Micah begins with a very relevant topic, as the wealthy take advantage of the poor. We have a phrase describing this tension: “the haves and the have nots.” In today’s world, we say the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. This is not the plan of God. No one should be oppressed by those who are in power according to God’s way of justice. But in verse 12, Micah makes a profound prediction of hope and restoration. I really appreciate these words in verses 12 & 13. Even Israel will be scattered, but they will be brought back. I have utilized this promise as a springboard for various ministries I have led. In the NIV, the wording in verse 12 says, “the place will throng with people.” There are two specific times when I felt God affirming this message for a present-day ministry that the Lord had caused to flourish. Both times were exciting and God breathed. The Lord loves to bless ministries that give him the glory and bring people into the fold. “I will bring them together like sheep in a pen...” Also, let me note that verse 13 is often considered messianic. “The One who breaks open the way...” “Their King will pass through

before them..." Jesus would bring a greater freedom from slavery from sin as the Messiah. Amen! Why is this promise so encouraging?

This is the first time Jesus announces the promise of the "Paraclete." The ESV calls him the Helper, which is such an inclusive title for the Holy Spirit. I think of the Spirit as my Helper! There are several other titles for the Spirit that also seem to fit the meaning of Paraclete. The titles used are Advocate, Comforter, Counselor, Teacher, Friend, and Helper, which I prefer because they encompass all of the titles the best. This is an exceptional topic because Jesus is promising the presence of his life within us. "You know him, because he lives with you now (the presence Jesus in their midst) and later will be in you (the indwelling presence of Christ's Spirit)." (V17) Jesus will mention the Paraclete four more times in these next few chapters as the disciples are with Jesus in the upper room. I like how the NLT translates verse 26, "But when the Father sends the Advocate (Paraclete) as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you." Jesus also said I will send another Advocate. Who would be the first Advocate? None other than Jesus himself? The Holy Spirit would obviously be the "another" Advocate, like Jesus. This would allow every follower of Jesus to be led by Christ because his Spirit lives in you. What do you appreciate about the gift of the Holy Spirit as a believer?

DAY 35 – Micah 3 & John 15:1-8

The topic for Micah in this chapter is a rebuke to the leaders and the prophets who are corrupt and sinful. Leaders are called by God to watch over the people for their well-being. They behaved in the opposite of how God wanted them to live as an example to others. They hate good and love evil. The prophets are no better, as Micah refers to them as false prophets. They are leading the people astray when they promise peace and pretend to represent God. Their true colors will be exposed, and the Lord will punish them in accordance with the harm they have done. Micah reminds them that a true prophet cares about justice and renounces sin and rebellion. A true prophet is led by the Spirit and filled with God's power. (V8) Because of the disguise of the leaders pretending to be righteous, Jerusalem will suffer, and so will her people. Leadership is supposed to represent the Lord and lead the people on God's path. Godly leadership has always been God's plan for prosperity and success among His people. When the teachers ignore God's laws and His Word, the foundation of the nation will crumble. This was true then and is still true today. Who are you called to lead? How might God want to use you for his good as you influence others?

The parable of the vine and the branches is so profound that I only want us to focus on the first eight verses. I remember reading a book on these verses written by Bruce Wilkinson. It was

called the Secret of the Vine. The main topic is “abiding in Christ.” It is the word “meno” in Greek. It means to “stay,” and “remain,” describing an intimate and enduring relationship with Jesus. The promise is really announcing abundance in Christ. We will bear fruit in character and bear fruit through our influence as Christ overflows in our lives. I wonder what phrase or sentence in this teaching from Jesus means the most to you? The promise of verse 7 inspires my prayers. The idea is that I would be so close and so connected with Jesus that I would pray the prayers that he would pray. 1 John 5:14-15 tells me that as I pray in line with God’s will, He not only hears me but he gives me what I have asked. Prayer is a big emphasis in my life as I get older. I would like to say that it has always been that way. But not with this kind of passion. A promise like verse 7 thrills me and makes me more eager to get to know Jesus more deeply. The MSG paraphrase says abiding is to “live deeply” in fellowship with Jesus. These eight verses are an invitation to live deeply with Jesus. Amen?!

WEEK 8

Our goal this week will be to finish Micah, one of the most famous minor prophets, because of his beautiful prophecy about Bethlehem in chapter 5 and his monumental statement in Micah 6:8. Each day, Micah will bless us with a memorable truth worth contemplating. Micah is a contemporary of Isaiah with similar warnings and several hopeful words of promise for the future.

John records the words of Jesus in the upper room (chapters 15 & 16) like no other writer. We do well to focus on his teaching, which is so essential to modern-day ministry. His goal is to prepare the disciples for what is ahead, but also these words transcend time. Let's not be in a hurry to speed through but rather, grasp what Jesus is teaching in a fresh and inspiring way!

DAY 36 – Micah 4 & John 15:9-17

Time and again, I have taught that our God has always had a heart for the whole world. Micah 4:1-5 verifies this with a message of hope that will extend forever and ever (V5, literally, lasts for endless ages). As we read chapter 3 last week, we might think all hope is lost. But Micah bursts forth with God's plan to bless all nations. Jerusalem will be central to that, as Abraham's descendants, those redeemed by the Lord through Christ, will extend his invitation throughout the world. How do you read these first five verses? It is quite a prediction to forecast a time when wars will cease in verse 3. "Nation will no longer fight against nation..." Plus, the words of Micah from verse 6 to 13 get specific to Israel and also Jerusalem, even though they will be defeated by Babylon, that is not the end of the story. I found the honesty and hope of this chapter refreshing. How might these words uplift your heart?

How does it feel to have Jesus call his disciples his friends? Do you think of yourself as a friend of Jesus? Jesus has a definition for friendship. He told them what was on his heart. He didn't keep secrets but passed on what the Father told him. In the Old Testament, Abraham and Moses are called friends of God. Why do you think they are described like that? This idea of divine friendship has my attention. What was the key to being a friend of Jesus? He said, "You are my friends if you do what I command." (V14) He also said something about laying down his life for friends. What might this theme mean to you?

DAY 37 – Micah 5 & John 15:18-27

Nothing compares to the announcement of a ruler to originate from Bethlehem, David's birthplace. When the religious leaders of Jerusalem were asked by Herod about the birthplace of the Messiah, they all agreed it was in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:5-6). The wording of this prophecy is such that it has to refer to someone both divine and human. His origins are in the distant past and make a difference around the world. "He will be highly honored around the world." (V4) Micah and Isaiah prophesied at the same time, connecting the Messiah to peace, bringing peace as the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) and the "source of peace" in verse 5. No sooner does the reader get excited about the ruler from Bethlehem than, abruptly, Micah announces the invasion of Assyria (V5b), which we know took place in 722 BC. The rest of the chapter announces purification for Israel since they had pursued the idolatry of the surrounding nations. But at the same time, Micah does give a hopeful message for the remnant of God's people who remain obedient to God. How does this monumental prophecy about Bethlehem encourage you? Why do these words fit for Jesus?

As we know, Jesus is with his disciples in the upper room, teaching them about life when he is gone from their presence. The Lord wants them to represent him by showing love, through obedience, and when facing opposition. In verse 22, he affirms the fact that he spoke words of truth that make them accountable for their sin. But in verse 24, he adds to his words with his actions, as he did many miraculous things. The importance of both words & works is highlighted again through the life of Jesus and becomes a model for us – show & tell! But none of this will go well without the Paraclete who is their Helper. This is the third time Jesus mentions the Holy Spirit as the One sent to them to live in their hearts. What do these two verses teach about the Holy Spirit? Why is that important?

DAY 38 – Micah 6 & John 16:1-15

I try to be fair with the full message in any given chapter, but when something rises above the rest, I can't help but make that the focus. Such is the message found in verses 6 to 8 in this chapter. The questions of verses 6 & 7 are meant to bargain with God, which is not something our God desires to do. Sacrificing animals, possessions, and even your children is not sufficient nor acceptable to our God. For the Israelites to even ask such foolish questions as these has to be disappointing to God. God's requirements are so much deeper and life-changing. Justice, mercy, and humility are paramount in the priority lists of God. Act justly pertains to how we treat people with fairness, never using manipulation or oppression to get our way. Mercy is on the soft side of justice with compassion, loyalty, and grace, accompanied by a heart to rescue. Humility is on the other side of the coin from fear of God. Walking with the Lord in humility and reverence is pleasing to God. Pride and arrogance have no place in the heart of a genuine believer. These three principles have been referred to time and again because they are timeless.

What Micah wrote 2700 years ago is as valid today as it was then. This is what the Lord requires, so let us examine ourselves in light of these truths. How does your life reflect these qualities?

Verse 7 has always grabbed my attention because, at first glance, you probably disagree. But remember, I told you the Spirit was another Advocate, like Jesus. The Spirit came to live in your heart to be Jesus inside of you. That means that every believer has Jesus in a very personal way, right? That is BETTER than having him walk among us on earth. The other eye-catching topic is the conviction of the Spirit. This means that the Spirit is at work, revealing the sin and the spiritual need in people. This section focuses on the Spirit convicting the world, but there's no doubt that the Spirit also reveals sin in our lives so that we might confess and repent. How will you and I know the truth? Verses 12-15 also point to the ministry of the Spirit to guide us in all truth and tell us what the Father wants us to know. I can't get over the importance of what the Spirit does in my life. Do you feel the same? You know that we would be powerless without his help. The work of the Spirit is a very important theological topic. What stands out to you in verses 5 to 15? Why? How does that help you?

DAY 39 – Micah 7 & John 16:16-33

As I read verses 2 to 6, I had a thought about the way things were among the people of Israel. It sounds like the way things will be in hell, where God's absence is forever. There was no evidence of justice, righteousness, or love. Everyone took advantage of others for selfish reasons; they created a society in which all forms of oppression were the norm. Thank goodness for the rest of the chapter, which contains some of my favorite thoughts in all of Micah. Hope and compassion begin to unfold, leading to the last three verses (Verses 18-20). There is no other God like our God! His posture toward people who fear him is loving, faithful, forgiving, and true to his promises. The description in verse 19 is one of my favorites, with the Lord trampling our sin underfoot and throwing it into the depths of the sea. The Psalmist David wrote that God removes our sin as far as the east is from the west, which is like Micah's promise in the depth of the sea! (Psalm 103:12) These words at the close of Micah are such a marvelous way of wrapping up a book of judgment and warning. Micah stands out as a memorable prophet with many highlights to hold onto. Verses 18-20 are definitely a crescendo at the close. How do you respond to this incredible promise of forgiveness?

Most of the teaching from Jesus in verses 16 to 33 has to do with what will unfold in the next three days, with the grief of his death and the joy of his resurrection. But he will also give them promises concerning prayer and the assurance of his presence in this world of troubles (v33). I think these summarize what Jesus is promising – joy and answered prayer. The miracle of the resurrection is the most incredible event in history, which will only be surpassed by the return

of Christ one day. The resurrection makes joy and answered prayer come to life. An idea to keep in mind: praying in Jesus' name is not just saying at the end of a prayer, "in Jesus' name." To pray in line with the name and purpose of the Lord is to be led by the Spirit and pray according to the will of God. As we persist in prayer, the Lord will teach us to listen to his voice and pray according to his will. I have been mindful of this very important principle in prayer for several years. It has not caused me to say in prayer, "if this is your will," but rather to pursue God through prayer so that I might be close enough to him to sense his desires and his leading in prayer. The words we pray are not magic; the deep authenticity of heartfelt groans within leads us to Spirit-led prayers. Think about it... How does it encourage you to know that the Lord has overcome this world?

DAY 40 – John 17

This is the longest prayer by Jesus recorded in the New Testament. I felt led to have us focus on this chapter and none other. There are many aspects of this prayer that get my attention. The simple but profound statement concerning eternal life in verse 3 is very crucial. The key to eternal life is a relationship with Jesus; "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, Father (and me)." (NIV) There are a number of prayers in these verses that I have repeated in my life, like verse 15, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." (NIV) I would pray that for my children every day as they were growing up. I still pray that prayer for them and others, but not as frequently as I should. Then, the prayers for unity in verses 20 to 23 are especially important and elevate the significance of unity among believers. John already wrote, "By this (our love) everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (13:35). Jesus prays for this kind of love and oneness because he reveals that it is the key for the world to believe in him. Verse 23 is the strongest statement about the importance of unity – "I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." Genuine love for one another is very rare, especially when the love is expressed by people from diverse backgrounds. The Body of Christ is very diverse but meant to be together and full of love. These ideas are a few of the things that Jesus emphasized in his prayer. What else do you notice? How might you pray a similar prayer for those you care about?

WEEK 9

Nahum and Haggai are next, since we have already read Habakkuk and Zephaniah. Nahum will speak specifically to Nineveh over 100 years after Jonah prophesied against that Gentile city. You remember that the King and the people of Nineveh repented in spite of Jonah's strong desire for them to be destroyed. But their repentance would not last, and they again would be the wicked aggressor and turn their back on God and his ways. Nahum would warn Nineveh and comfort God's people at the same time. Haggai will come on the scene 100 years after Nahum and give hope and encouragement to the remnant that is returning to Jerusalem. The people listened to Haggai, which was unusual but proved to be a blessing to God's people.

The Gospel of John brings us to something we refer to as the passion of Christ. Our Lord will be arrested and beaten before he is sentenced to death and is crucified. We have arrived at chapter 18 with Judas' betrayal as Jesus shows amazing courage and complete resolve.

DAY 41 – Nahum 1 & John 18:1-12

The Assyrians have been the aggressor for Israel's exile for many years now. Nahum is announcing the intervention of God on behalf of Israel. The Assyrians thought little of the God of the Israelites so Nahum proclaims God's greatness as a reminder to the people that God can do anything. "His power is great..." (V3) Plus, don't forget God's goodness, who will bring justice to the enemies of God's people and deliver them from the hands of the Assyrians, as is the promise in verses 12 & 13. "I will break the yoke of bondage from your neck..." (V13) The defeat of Israel and Samaria took place in 722 BC, and Nahum is prophesying around 630 BC. That is a long time to be captive. But Nahum's timing is just right as God is planning to overthrow the wicked Assyrians through the hand of the Babylonians. We learn that no nation is so great that God will overlook its evil. God is aware of the plight of those who are oppressed. What encouraging words are used by Nahum in this first chapter?

The olive grove of trees mentioned in John 18 has to be the Garden of Gethsemane. In the other Gospels, Jesus is praying there before Judas and the soldiers show up. Some scholars believe that John 17 is a fuller expression of the prayer that Jesus offered to the Father. Nonetheless, Judas shows up with a military company to arrest him. Verse 5 especially gets my attention since Jesus says, "I am," and the soldiers all fall to the ground. With this response of "I am," Jesus identified himself by the divine name of God. He has done this throughout John's record of Christ's life. John tells us that Peter cut off the ear of the high priest's servant and even gives the servant's name. But Matthew, Mark, and Luke only say someone with Jesus took a

sword and cut off the servant's ear. Luke says that Jesus healed the ear. We aren't surprised that it was Peter, but I am surprised it didn't cause a huge skirmish with the soldiers. The solution is found in Luke with the Lord healing the servant and Jesus telling everyone with him to drop their swords. (V11) I focus on these verses because they affirm the identity of Jesus and his authority even in his arrest. How do you respond to this encounter?

DAY 42 – Nahum 2 & John 18:13-27

Assyrian Kings often referred to themselves as lions. The great Nineveh would be compared to a den of lions (V11). Nahum purposefully ridicules their pride and invincibility with the certainty of defeat. The last line says it well, "The voices of your proud messengers will be heard no more." "Nineveh's exile has been decreed..." (V7) Tomorrow, Nahum will go into greater detail in chapter 3, bringing a message of destruction for the wicked city and oppressive nation of the Assyrians to completion. What posture did Nineveh possess that offended our God? We do well to stay away from that perspective, right?

Of course, the main theme in these verses has to do with Peter. He clearly denies knowing the Lord three times, just like Jesus predicted. But the Lord did not give up on Peter, even though Peter might have been tempted to give up on himself. We will read about Peter's restoration in John 21:15-17, which is a powerful presentation of Jesus helping Peter come to terms with his failure. The Lord is used to our failures and is ready to help us overcome and even become stronger. I see that in Peter, who is such a key person in the plans of God. Most of the time, we suggest that Jesus didn't say anything before the high priest and others, but here we have two recorded statements from Jesus. Jesus knew that the proper procedure was for the high priest to ask witnesses about Jesus, but he was trying to trick Jesus into saying something that would incriminate him. Then, to strike someone arrested was also unlawful. Jesus always points to the truth and cares about justice even though he knew they were going to crucify him unjustly, which was all a part of God's plan. "But God knew what would happen, and his prearranged plan was carried out when Jesus was betrayed. With the help of lawless Gentiles, you nailed him to a cross and killed him." (Words of Peter at Pentecost, Acts 2:23) Do you notice anything new in these verses for your application?

DAY 43 – Nahum 3 & John 18:28-40

The Lord's wrath is squarely aimed at Nineveh because of godlessness, arrogance, and worldly wealth. The Lord would put up with it no more. Plus, the Assyrians have treated God's people shamefully, and the Lord will punish them shamefully as well. This is a reminder that one day God's justice will fall worldwide on those who have rebelled against him. (Rev. 17-19) Assyria

had been so cruel to so many that when she is laid to rest completely destroyed, the people of God will clap their hands for joy (V19). It is unusual for a prophet to focus so completely on one nation, and especially one city, Nineveh. But that was God's call on Nahum's life. His message was also to be an encouragement to the people of God who have endured such pain and persecution. The God of justice will make things right. Read Romans 12:19-21.

I think one of the strongest statements from Jesus about his identity and mission is found in verse 36. Jesus knew who he was and did not get entangled with earthly pursuits or earthly applause. Again, Jesus does speak out to Pilate, a Gentile pagan, as he did yesterday with the high priest. It is possible that the Lord was thinking of Pilate's eternal soul and wanted to point him to the eternal, to the kingdom not of this world. Pilate did not engage with Jesus, as he mentions the importance of truth. This, too, could have been a kind effort from Jesus to speak to Pilate about his spiritual need. These are new thoughts for me, but they make perfect sense because Jesus loved Pilate also. Pilate knew enough to want to release Jesus, but he freed a revolutionary murderer instead (V40). Obviously, I want us to absorb these moments as Jesus is on trial and soon to be crucified. What are you thinking and feeling because of these verses?

DAY 44 – Haggai 1 & John 19:1-16

I am so drawn to this prophet because he speaks a prophetic word in a way that I understand as prophecy. Also, we have a specific date (520 BC, August 29th) and a specific situation that Haggai courageously addresses. It is time to build God's Temple! People are working hard at being satisfied, but basing their lives on their possessions and their successes. Building God's house is much more significant and leads to spiritual renewal. Haggai confronts the people for neglecting their relationship with God. But it is more than building the temple; their greatest need is to return to the Lord, which will be even more pronounced in tomorrow's reading. I think of prophecy as "forthtelling," compared to predicting the future. Haggai is my kind of prophet, and I desire to follow his lead. In fact, the Apostle Paul told us to desire spiritual gifts, especially prophecy. Then, in 1 Corinthians 14:3, he writes, "But the one who prophesies strengthens others, encourages them and comforts them." Haggai was used by God to do just that! What do you think about the gift of prophecy? How might you desire this gift more so?

John mentions Pilate more so than the other writers and we learn about the insight and depth of Jesus as he forthrightly tells Pilate that he might think he has the power, but nothing happens outside the hand of God: "You would have no power over me at all unless it were given to you from above." (V11) Pilate did not want to take responsibility for the execution of Jesus because in reality, he was a coward. "When Pilate heard this (he called himself the Son of God), he was more frightened than ever." (V8) He punished Jesus unjustly so that the religious leaders would

feel sorry for Jesus and give up on their desire to crucify him. Each step toward the cross, Pilate wants to release him. In Matthew, he literally washes his hands of the matter. Pilate is an interesting character and ultimately a pawn in God's hands. The Lord Jesus knew this and could face the situation with incredible courage. I like the phrase used, "he set his face like flint" toward the cross. What do you think that means? He had an unwavering resolve, which is inspiring to me. How do you respond to the Lord's trial before Pilate?

DAY 45 – Haggai 2 & John 19:17-27

Haggai is my new favorite minor prophet, at least he is today! He is responsive to God's call on a specific date(s) and about a specific concern. I like how the NLT says it, "Be strong... and get to work." (V4) Haggai is moved by God to give encouragement and warning. He displays tender and tough love as he confronts their need for obedience and purity, but also tells them that the future Temple will one day display the glory of God. We know from Ezra that this rebuilt Temple was far less than Solomon's Temple. Most believe Haggai is pointing to the arrival of Jesus and his presence in the Temple, which would be magnificent, to say the least. Both the Temple and Jesus would reflect the glory of God. The result of rebuilding the Temple was a guarantee of the promise of future peace because peace comes from the Lord, which the Temple represents. The realization of Zerubbabel being a descendant of David reignites an anticipation of the coming Messiah. I think Haggai's short book has many points of encouragement and application. Did you notice anything that caught your eye in this chapter? How so?

In John, we read about the crucifixion. We realize the agony and horror of the cross, but John does not focus on that, but rather on the fulfillment of Scripture with the soldiers dividing his clothes. (Psalm 22:18) What John highlights in these verses is far more important than the brutality of crucifixion as much as that shows us how much the Lord loves us. He is given the title, "King of the Jews," in verse 19. Jesus' kingship was posted in three languages for the whole world to understand. Jesus is also expressing love and concern for his mother (Verses 26 & 27) even though he had to be in excruciating pain. Right up to his last breath, the Lord is thinking of others. In fact, this scene could have even more meaning as the people surrounding the cross would hear this and realize that Jesus called them to love each other as a new community, as John willingly takes care of and shows concern for Mary, the mother of Jesus. This characteristic for followers of Christ is so important to Jesus that he used his limited ability to speak from the cross to show and tell the high view he had of love. As you meditate on these verses, what surfaced for you?

WEEK 10

Zechariah is the longest book of the minor prophets and should have plenty for us to contemplate. He coincides with Haggai in timing regarding the rebuilding of God's Temple, but his emphasis speaks to the exiles concerning their spiritual vitality. Only spiritual renewal could foster true worship and meaningful service. The prophet wants the people to obey the Lord, pointing to the long-awaited blessing, prosperity, and righteousness that God has in mind for them.

We are reading the conclusion of John's Gospel this week, which speaks to the death and resurrection of our Lord. Jesus' final words from the cross, his appearance to Mary and the disciples as the resurrected Lord, his encounter with "doubting" Thomas, as well as cooking breakfast for the guys, will highlight our week of readings this week.

DAY 46 – Zechariah 1 & John 19:28-42

I think I am going to appreciate Zechariah more because he is teaching on getting back on track. I have felt this kind of concern for myself and especially for the churches I have served. Verse 3 announces a theme of his, "Return to me, and I will return to you," says the Lord. Of course, this call is still valid and important today, as we humans can wander... as the hymn recites, "Prone to wander, of how I feel it." The people of God are returning to Jerusalem, and Zechariah wants them to step into this new opportunity with repentance and hope. The Lord intends to rebuild the city and the people. "The towns of Israel will again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem as his own." (V17) The Lord will also act justly toward the nations that destroyed Jerusalem and exiled Judah. This first chapter has a more modern ring to it, as we are often in need of justice, and we are often called to repent. How are you tracking with Zechariah's message in these first 21 verses?

I think I have referred to verse 30 in John 19 as much as any. "It is finished." The literal meaning is "paid in full." It was a marketplace term used to confirm the sale. Over the years, I have had the privilege of sharing the Gospel many times, and this phrase was often included. On the cross, Jesus was paying for the sins of the world. Romans 6:23 says, "the wages of sin is death." Jesus died a sinner's death, but three days later, he was raised to life as the glorious Savior. The Greek word is "tetelestai!" That word rang out from the cross as an announcement of victory. The chapter ends with the kindness of Joseph of Arimathea and his friend Nicodemus (remember him from John 3) burying Jesus in a special tomb. I happen to remember Isaiah 53, which says, "He was buried like a criminal; he was put in a rich man's grave." (53:9) This is a

prophecy fulfilled through a wealthy man named Joseph 700 years after Isaiah's prophecy. John makes sure we know that what is taking place through Jesus as he is dying on the cross was always God's plan for redeeming the world through his Son, who paid the price. How does that strike you this time?

DAY 47 – Zechariah 2 & John 20:1-10

It is easy to see why Zechariah is already a favorite because he speaks a hopeful message. His ministry is tied to the return of God's people to the Holy Land and Jerusalem. Zechariah was certain that God would again live among his people and that the glory of the Lord would rest in Jerusalem. "Then I, myself, will be a protective wall of fire around Jerusalem, says the Lord. And I will be the glory inside the city!" (V5) Spiritual restoration and agricultural bounty are promised through Zechariah as he speaks this hopeful word to the people returning. Verse 13 reminds me of a powerful statement in Psalm 46, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." (46:10) I think Zechariah could have written those words because they match his message in this chapter. How do you respond to the promise of God's presence for his people?

John's record of the empty tomb highlights these 10 verses. John gives us personal insights into that first Easter morning as he outruns Peter and as he sees the burial clothes of Jesus folded in place, he tells us that he believed at that moment. Mary Magdalene is the first to view the empty tomb and, as we will read tomorrow, the first to meet Jesus in person. Mary might have thought that someone stole the body, but John's account includes the detail of folded burial wrappings, which would not be there if someone(s) stole the dead body of Jesus. These significant details are there to assure us that Jesus is the risen one and we will rise with him one day. As I have mentioned, I wanted to slow down enough to think through and contemplate the message of John as we have reached the most important event in history. How does John's record of the empty tomb affect you? Do you relate to Mary, Peter, or John the most? Why?

DAY 48 – Zechariah 3 & John 20:11-18

I had in mind to read through Zechariah in two weeks, even though there are 14 chapters. But each time I read a chapter, there is so much to think about. Even though this chapter is shorter, the message seems so pertinent since I am writing this on Halloween. What Zechariah says about Jeshua, the high priest, seems very relevant to how it still is today. Satan is an accuser, even as John says the same thing in Revelation 12:10. The idea of being an accuser relates to the prosecuting attorney who finds fault in Jeshua and in anyone he can label as guilty. I think you can understand this concept as the devil still causes believers to stumble and feel

condemnation even though they are forgiven in God's sight. So, it is not surprising to point out the filthiness of Jeshua's clothing and the result of forgiveness, giving him a new set of clean clothes as we read in verse 4. Plus, Zechariah is pointing to a time of restoration provided by the servant who is the Branch (V8). Servant and Branch are both titles for the Messiah. The hope of the Messiah is woven into Zechariah's powerful prophetic message. I am surprised and uplifted by the words and the message of Zechariah, and it makes me look forward to each day in this book. How does this short chapter speak to you?

Again, Mary Magdalene is front and center as she is the first one to see the resurrected Jesus. This would be a surprising outcome because women were thought of as "less than" men, and Jesus wouldn't want to place such a high honor on a woman. No Jew in this period of history would make up such a story. The uniqueness of Jesus is seen again as he approaches Mary. The story is also intriguing as Mary thinks the man is the gardener. It all changes when Jesus speaks Mary's name. There have been a couple of times when I was sure I heard the voice of Jesus say my name. It was a whisper, but still it filled my heart. It did the same thing for Mary as she turned to Jesus with excitement and gave him a huge hug, it seems. There have been various interpretations about why Jesus didn't want Mary to cling to him. But my thought is that Mary was so taken by the moment that she might never let go. The Lord wanted her to do what would be the mission of the church: tell everyone I am resurrected, beginning with the disciples. Mary Magdalene is an amazing person, and God chose her to be the first to see, and she would follow through with determination to tell the world about Jesus. May Mary inspire us all!

DAY 49 – Zechariah 4 & John 20:19-31

This is another short chapter, but the significance of verse 6 has always been memorable to me. I think the simple but profound truth in this verse spills over to many aspects of life as a Christian. The Apostle Paul was frustrated with the Galatian (Chapter 3) believers because they were trying to live by mere human effort over the work of the Spirit. I imagine you understand the propensity we have as humans to be self-sufficient. "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord Almighty. Jeshua, the priest, and Zerubbabel, the governor, would have success in rebuilding the Temple, not by their own force or strength, but because of the presence of God's empowering Spirit. The activity of the Spirit would become even more crucial after Pentecost when the Lord makes it clear that we need the Helper. I have found that living the Christian life is impossible unless you pretend, without the Spirit's help. I think of it like the words of Jesus, "Apart from me you can do nothing." How crucial is the Spirit in your life, and what does it mean to have a Spirit-filled life? There are other truths in this chapter to notice, for sure. What else got you attention?

What do you think about Thomas? He is known as Doubting Thomas, but I don't see it that way. There is something positive about Thomas standing alone when all the other disciples said they had seen Jesus, but he was skeptical. The reason I think his honesty and even skepticism is noteworthy, we have evidence that after the ascension of Jesus, Thomas courageously evangelized all the way to India. The Mar Thoma Church on the west coast of India traces its roots back to the early missionary work of Thomas. Obviously, we can't be absolutely sure that this is connected to the disciple named Thomas, but the idea of him being courageous and promoting the resurrection of Christ seems like a fair bet. It had to be impressive to Thomas that the Lord addresses him directly when he appears to the disciples again. After expressing a greeting, "Peace be with you," Jesus focuses on Thomas, and the result is Thomas giving the strongest statement of faith, "My Lord and my God!" (V28) If we all responded like Thomas, the world might have already been evangelized, as tradition affirms his adventures for the Gospel. The last verses are thought of as concluding statements affirming the many miraculous and divine signs about Jesus as the Messiah. Because of verses 30 & 31, chapter 21 is interpreted as an addendum to John's book. I am looking forward to reading the next chapter, as I think of it as something John had to include to make the book complete.

DAY 50 – Zechariah 5 & 6, plus John 21

I thought it was appropriate to have us read both chapters 5 & 6 since they are tied together by an angel who meets with Zechariah to explain the meaning of these divine visions he received. Don't these visions and angelic interpretations remind you of Revelations? A flying scroll, a basket of grain, chariots, leading up to the throne, and a crown, each meaning something prophetic. These visions seem hopeful to me because they depict God's intervention in that day and maybe in the days of the Lord, in the future. For example, he uses the title Branch again in 6:12. In this case, Jeshua seems to represent the anticipation of the Messiah. The idea could be opening the minds and hearts of the people to the hope of the Messiah that in the future the Messiah would build the eternal heavenly Temple, which he has the right to do as the Son of God who died, was buried, and rose again on the third day. Zechariah is challenging the people to trust God and live honorably before him. Many scholars believe that 6:9-15 promises God's messianic blessing of prosperity and righteousness for the people as they obey the Lord. John 21 is special to me because I stood on that very shore, which scholars believe was the scene of this encounter with the disciples and especially Peter. It doesn't specifically say that Jesus made them breakfast, but it sure seems that way. The disciples knew it was Jesus, but only because they caught 153 fish and could sense the inspiration of his presence. But the passage again indicates that the resurrected presence of Jesus was different. Mary didn't recognize him at first, and the two disciples walking to Emmaus were clueless until he broke the bread. I find this fact fascinating and gives us an anticipation of the uniqueness of what a resurrected body

will be like for us one day. Peter's restoration is also fascinating and hopeful. Peter felt a sense of shame after his denial of Christ, no doubt. But Jesus takes care of that with three identical questions that set Peter free, I believe. This is a marvelous conclusion after ten weeks in the Gospel of John. So much more could have been written about the life of Jesus on earth, as John writes in verse 25 as well, and more words could be added to match the incomparable presence and ministry of our Lord. I sure hope our journey in John has led you closer to Jesus.

WEEK 11

Our first reading in Zechariah will again remind us that our God cares about social justice. But most of this week will highlight the future restoration God has in mind for Israel. Beginning in chapter 9, the prophet will forecast the Lord's return to the Temple, Israel's rescue from her enemies, and the establishment of God's kingdom in Jerusalem. Zechariah also gives hints about the coming Messiah. Zechariah is an exceptional Prophet. We have two weeks left in the Minor Prophets, and since I am studying 1 Peter, I thought you would appreciate two weeks in First Peter. Peter is a changed man, and he will express his message with humility and conviction. The concern that Peter has for the followers of Christ is a resilience that is gracious. Win the right to be heard with godly behavior and a respectful attitude toward others, even when they are harsh with you. I have found First Peter to be very inspiring and relevant.

DAY 51 – Zechariah 7 & 8, 1 Peter 1:1-7

Zechariah reminds them of how they got into the predicament of exile. If they respond like that again, it will lead to the same results. Remember, God cares about how we treat others. He calls us to be fair and gracious. Also, without sincerity of faith, the Lord is not pleased with sacrifices or festivals or fasting... (7:4-7) The confrontation of chapter 7 leads to the hope of chapter 8. God has a special place in his heart for Jerusalem. I felt that in 2016, on my trip to the Holy Land. Central to Jerusalem's prosperity is the Temple. Zechariah joins Haggai in challenging the people to finish the Temple. The Lord is determined to bless Jerusalem. The people can be assured he will do it if they follow his clear instructions in 8:16-17. How do you respond to these commands from the Lord? The idea of people gathering in Jerusalem from different nations (people groups) begins to open the message of Zechariah to God's future plans for the coming King who will reign in Jerusalem.

Some have suggested that 1 Peter could be titled, "Be Hopeful." The kind of hope mentioned is described as a living hope that will sustain God's people in difficult times. These first seven verses are ones that I often read to people in the hospital because they are usually facing a trial (Verses 6-7). What ideas does Peter share with us in this first reading? Chosen, born again, living hope, kept in heaven, refined by fire, to the glory of Jesus... are ones that stand out to me. A secure salvation will sustain us with hope no matter what. How do you respond to that statement? What blesses you most about this first reading in 1 Peter?

DAY 52 – Zechariah 9 & 1 Peter 1:8-12

Obviously, chapter 9 has two parts with judgment on enemy nations and the blessing of peace for God's people with the coming deliverer-king who will be victorious, yet righteous and humble. I am sure you noticed the name Gaza in verse 5. What I also noticed is that some of these enemy nations realized that Israel has the one true God, and in the midst of war and defeat would join the people of God. Our God has always had open arms for people who realize their need for him. But verse 9 is the most well-known prophecy from Zechariah because it was fulfilled when Jesus entered Jerusalem on the Sunday before being crucified on the following Friday. Both Matthew and John make reference to Zechariah's prophecy in Mt 21:5 and Jn 12:15. The results of the king's coming are written out by Zechariah in the remainder of the chapter. We read that wars will cease, the boundaries will expand, safety will prevail, the shepherd will rescue his people, and so on. When Zechariah says "on that day," he is using a phrase that is tied to the Messiah coming as a king and a faithful shepherd. What hopeful words in verses 9-17 caught your eye?

Salvation is such an important topic for Peter; he gives us more teaching on the importance of salvation. He tells us that salvation overflows with love, trust, and joy in verses 8 & 9. The impact of salvation changes everything. What a privilege to be alive after the revelation of the incarnation as God comes to earth through his Son. Jesus imparts the way to eternal life. The two mountain peaks of spiritual truth and anticipation would be Mount Calvary and the Mount of Olives. Calvary has already taken place, and we know without a doubt that Jesus walked this earth and died in our place. Also, his resurrection was verified by hundreds of people. But the picture of the Mount of Olives is the return of Christ to reign forever. We are sure of his first coming; we can be sure of his second coming as well. How does this short reading inspire your faith?

DAY 53 – Zechariah 10 & 1 Peter 1:13-21

I read this summary of chapter 10, "God will strengthen his people by his power and restore them because of his compassion." You will also notice the need for a shepherd in verse 2 and the contrast between a good shepherd and an evil shepherd. The picture of a shepherd looking out for the flock is seen in a subtle way in verse 8, "When I whistle to them, they will come running..." In biblical times, shepherds herded the flock by whistling or piping to them. Jesus was described as the Good Shepherd in John 10, and the sheep know his voice. The need for a shepherd was motivational to our Lord because so many were like sheep without a shepherd. In what way do you need the Lord to be your Shepherd? Does any phrase or statement stick out to you in this chapter? How so?

I titled these verses in 1 Peter 1 as “ready for action.” Holiness literally means to be set apart for a godly purpose. Because of Christ and through Christ, we are called to live in a way that is distinct from the world as well as attractive, so that people will ask, “How can I have what they have?” We are privileged to receive salvation, but now God gives us a sense of responsibility. Our lives matter; God meant for us to be a reflection of Himself in this world. “Be holy, as I am holy.” There was so much at stake with the Early Church. Everything was crucial to the integrity and expansion of God’s Kingdom in the 1st century. What stands out to you in these verses about obedience, holiness, and living for Christ?

DAY 54 – Zechariah 11 & 1 Peter 1:22-2:3

The theme of shepherds obviously continues into chapter 11. The Lord is very disappointed in Israel’s shepherds, right? These are hard words to read because they again remind me of the disappointment that the Lord felt concerning his people. Nothing but a renewed vision of what a godly shepherd could mean to Israel will relieve the heaviness of these words. Zechariah is writing these words 500 years before Jesus the Good Shepherd arrives. But the disappointment could be reversed so that the true Shepherd could rescue the people, and that is who Jesus was and is. A dramatic point is seen in verse 10. The Lord is eager to unite the people, but the evil shepherds grieve the heart of God. He takes the staff called Favor and breaks it in two, representing division, brokenness, and separation, which is spiritually devastating. This is indeed a difficult chapter. Why are spiritual shepherds important? In what ways are you a shepherd to others?

These short readings in 1 Peter are packed with ideas worth contemplating. The behavior that is especially necessary in the Body of Christ is what? You guessed it. There are actually two kinds of love mentioned. The friendship love as brothers and sisters; the agape love that is deeper and necessary to weather the challenges facing this new church and the people in it. A sacrificial love will be used by God to sustain the fellowship of believers. How will you develop a deep love for others? Peter tells us it is nourished through the living and enduring word of God. In verse 2, the idea of spiritual milk must be connected to the truth of God’s Word. The vitality of the church can be drained by envy, hypocrisy, deceit, and harsh words that destroy others. This verse, in 1 Peter 2:1, points to the need for sanctification, to grow in Christ. Put off the old nature of selfishness and sin; put on the truth of God’s Word, which will cause you to grow. I encourage you to slow down and reflect on what God might be saying to you in these 6 verses!

DAY 55 – Zechariah 12 & 13, 1 Peter 2:4-10

The repeated phrase, “on that day,” heightens the significance of Zechariah’s message, for it points to a culmination of God’s plan for Israel and for the world. God’s protection over Jerusalem begins with these prophetic words from Zechariah. Jerusalem was/is especially dear to our God. The enemies of Jerusalem have no chance. However, the gracious rescue of the Lord for his people and his undeserved favor to them will cause repentance and even grief for how they treated the Lord previously. The New Testament tells us that the kindness of the Lord leads to repentance. (Romans 2:4) Chapter 13 promises a cleansing from sin. The people of God have been influenced by idolatry, pagan worship, and immorality of every kind. Zechariah touches on several aspects of how life would be when Jesus arrives. The scattering of sheep (13:7f) points to the scattering of Jesus’ disciples and his followers both during his arrest and crucifixion but also when persecution breaks out in Acts 8. Zechariah prophesied things that he could only envision and probably didn’t realize the significance of his words in these powerful chapters. Next week, we will complete Zechariah’s message in chapter 14 and continue with Malachi.

1 Peter 2:4f are especially inspiring words about the New Community the Lord has formed through his Son, Jesus. The word “church” is not mentioned in these verses, but everything points to it, in my opinion. The spiritual house, the cornerstone, the elevated descriptions of God’s people as chosen, holy, and priests... give us a picture of God’s plan to birth the church as the gathering of God’s people, a witness to the world. Verse 9 is the culmination of these lofty words and descriptions about God’s plan for the church. “As a result, you will show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” The church is meant to be a gift for God’s people but also a light to the world. What aspects of this short reading point to the church, affirm the church, or reveal the purpose of the church? Peter had learned so much from Jesus as well as through his own failure, so that we can glean much from his wisdom expressed in this letter! How is 1 Peter speaking to you?

WEEK 12

Most of this week, we will be reading through Malachi, the last of the minor prophets. I remember that Malachi has a challenging message, but also one that still speaks today. I read this about Malachi's diverse emphasis to the people of God: "Malachi had a multifaceted ministry. As a sensitive pastor, Malachi offered God's love to disheartened people. As a wise theologian, he instructed the people of Judah in basic doctrine that emphasized God's nature. As a stern prophet, Malachi rebuked corrupt priests and warned of God's judgment. As a spiritual mentor, he called his people to more sincere worship and challenged them to live by the ethical standards of God's covenant. Malachi conveys God's simple but vital word to Israel, 'I have always loved you'" (1:2).

1 Peter 3 & 4 will be our focus as we complete the Minor Prophets. Peter addresses the various issues of the church in his day, and these are still topics that we deal with today. Peter is the best, and his practical teaching and humble spirit are on display in this letter. I often relate to Peter, so I find these words especially applicable.

DAY 56 – Zechariah 14 & 1 Peter 2:11-25

It is hard to tell if Zechariah is speaking about the future after Christ returns again or if it is something sooner than that. The phrase "on that day," along with the promise of continuous daylight in verse 7, points to God's rule over all the earth. Zechariah includes judgment, salvation, and the universal kingdom of God in the future. After the siege of Israel and Jerusalem, God will restore his people, and Jerusalem will be exalted as the center of civilization. The marks of the created order are being transformed as outlined in verses 6 to 11. The symbolic language of these promises points to a time when God's holiness will be the persuasive characteristic of his rule over the earth. I think it points to a messianic kingdom in the future that gives hope of a place that will never end.

1 Peter emphasizes the challenge facing believers in the 1st Century. The governing authorities were not always trustworthy, and neither were the masters of so many slaves. This section brings us to Peter's main theme of suffering and facing opposition. Verse 17 has a simple but profound summary of how to live as a believer when the believers are a minority. Verses 17 & 21 are verses that get my attention. I have already told you why verse 17 is important, but verse 21 gives me an overarching principle: "walk in his steps." A famous Christian book was written in 1897, entitled "In His Steps" by Charles Sheldon. Have you ever read that book? It is exceptional and puts in story form the message Peter shares in these verses. What does it mean to walk in

his steps? There are many statements in these 15 verses worth noting. Which one(s) jump out at you? Why?

DAY 57 – Malachi 1 & 1 Peter 3:1-7

Everything is set in motion with Malachi's statement in verse 2, "I have always loved you!" Then, Malachi will give proof of God's love, even if his love is tough love. The first indicator of God's love is that he chose Israel to be his people. This is none other than a covenant love which is binding and unconditional. For example, God chose Jacob and not Esau. Israel seldom upheld the covenant and ignored God's fatherly love. What grieved God deeply was the insincerity of their worship and how they dishonored his name with worthless sacrifices. This message gets at the importance of motive. We can honor God with our lips, but at the same time, our hearts can be far from him. Malachi especially confronts the priests who were meant to be examples of genuine faith and sincere hearts. Malachi's message about other places in the world that truly honor God (Verses 11 & 14) is meant as a rebuke since they have seen God's hand at work firsthand to bless Israel. I have come to realize that there are many places in the world that have deeper faith and a more genuine worship than believers in America. This is upsetting but also encouraging as God spreads the message of His Son around the world. Maybe you are like me and don't even remember the last time you read Malachi. What impresses you about this first chapter? Malachi is the last recorded Prophet, with his ministry taking place in the 400s BC.

Peter addresses the subject of marriage that coincides with Paul's instruction about marriage in Ephesians 5:22f. The idea presented by Peter is that marriage can be difficult, but don't give up. When a Christian wife comes to faith, she has an even more significant purpose in marriage. The possibility of an unbelieving husband coming to faith is very hopeful since that man will see the change in his wife's life. Women were drawn to the uplifting and honoring truth of the Gospel more readily than the men were (at least that is how it seems). Like the Apostle Paul, marriage was an essential relationship that tested one's faith and challenged believers to put into practice the life of faith in the closeness of marriage. What do you learn about marriage from Peter in these seven verses? Let me remind you that Paul summarized the call of marriage with husbands loving their wives and wives respecting their husbands. (Ephesians 5:33) Why is that so important?

DAY 58 – Malachi 2 & 1 Peter 3:8-17

Maybe it is because Peter focused on marriage yesterday, but I was surprised and riveted by Malachi 2:14-16. It is very rare for a prophet to mention marriage at all, but to also mention it with such high regard is unique. This grabbed my attention. But I also noticed the strong words

against the priests who serve as shepherds to the people. The Lord was very disappointed in them, as is clearly stated in verses 1-9. There was a time with the Levites that God was pleased with their leadership, but not now. As a Christian leader and pastor for the last 40 years, I couldn't help but think of this more personally. The Lord blesses his leaders so that they might be a blessing to the people. When they drop the ball, the Lord disciplines his own. These words are words of discipline from God. We cannot pretend with God. If we say or do something that looks good on the outside but is not genuine on the inside, our God is grieved. These seem like very applicable principles to live by. Godly leadership, faithfulness in marriage, and genuine worship are emphasized by Malachi. How do these topics touch your life? What might God be saying to you through these words?

Peter gets to his main concern in 3:8-17. He wants to help them stand strong in suffering. If we stay connected to each other and faithful to the Lord by overcoming evil with good, I think we might "love life" as verse 10 suggests. But there are ample opportunities to face opposition, insults, and evil in this world. So, the strongest statement is found in verse 15 with the importance of "set apart Christ as Lord" in your hearts. With that deep and real commitment to Christ, a believer can withstand the persecution and slanderous words that come their way. If we remain strong, Peter says, "You are blessed." (V14) Peter tells us that good behavior can lead to sharing about the hope we have in Christ. (V15) But remember that how you share it is as important as what you share. Respond to unbelievers with gentleness and respect. There are a number of ways to apply these verses to your life. What caught your eye? How might the Lord want you to apply his truth to your life?

DAY 59 – Malachi 3 & 1 Peter 3:18-22

This chapter is quoted quite often in regard to giving. The principle of the tithe (a tenth) is highlighted. But before I jump into that topic, you can't help but notice the discipline of the Lord being compared to a refiner's fire in verses 2 & 3. The New Testament teaches that the Lord refines us through hardship and trials, like the process of purifying silver or gold through fire. Plus, Malachi adds the need for soap to cleanse. Malachi's second message in this chapter is about proving your commitment and allegiance to God through generosity. Why would that be? Because everything you have is from God. Sharing the tithe for the "storehouse," represents worship and faithfulness to God as the Temple becomes the focal point of God's community of faith. The divine invitation in verse 10 challenges us to test God to verify the enormous generosity of our God as he supplies our needs continuously. Honestly, I said yes to this challenge over 30 years ago and have never looked back. God is faithful to meet our needs so that it can spill over into generosity for others. You can anticipate Malachi's conclusion

tomorrow with a decisive day of judgment. How have you responded to the Bible's challenge to be generous and joyfully release the tithe for God's kingdom purposes?

1 Peter 3:18-22 has long been considered a difficult passage. It begins with "spirits in prison." The passage connects this phrase to the people of Noah's day. During the days of Noah, God waited patiently for the people to hear the proclaimed message and repent. But I want you to know that there is no certain interpretation of these verses, but the one I am drawn to is the preaching of Noah long ago, inspired by Christ. They had the opportunity to respond, but now are imprisoned, separated from God. But eight people believed tying this to baptism, which represents the salvation of our Lord. Peter might have meant that, as the water floated the boat in which Noah and his family were saved, so baptism saves believers. Not the mere mechanical act of baptism... "not by removing dirt from our bodies," as if the water itself cleanses our souls. Baptism is thought of as a reflection of salvation because it is based on inward faith and grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as Peter writes in Verse 21b. Sometimes Bible scholars look for deeper meaning and interpretation, but I am drawn to an understanding that is simpler so that readers like you and me can apply it to our lives. Noah's story is a story of warning. As the Gospel is preached, people are confronted with a message that they can believe or they may choose to reject. The result is a seat on the boat or the drowning waters of separation from God forever.

DAY 60 – Malachi 4 & 1 Peter 4:1-11

We have been reading through the minor prophets for 12 weeks. This short chapter brings us to our final day, which is rather appropriate, you have to admit. The day of judgment is coming, says Malachi. He uses intense words, but the result is similar to what Jesus said, "He will separate the sheep from the goats." (Mt 25) Can we think of the Messiah as the "Sun of Righteousness?" The promise that is given points to the ministry of the Messiah, that is, Jesus. In verse 5, the prophet Elijah is mentioned, which makes us think about John the Baptist and his role as a forerunner to the Messiah. But Malachi's wording isn't clear enough to say for sure he is referring to the end times. A day of judgment is coming, and it is inescapable, but that could refer to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70AD by the Romans, for example. However, a timeless principle surfaces as Malachi points to a time when fathers repent, and this draws their children to do the same. (V6) I think we could use a dose of that in our world today.

Again, the focal point of this reading can easily gravitate to verse 6 about preaching to the dead. But the meaning is more literally translated, "preached even to the dead." Peter refers to people now dead who were exposed to the Good News while alive; he does not envision a chance to repent after death. All people will die, but the ones who responded in faith will "live forever

with God in the Spirit.” (V6) This fits the context the best. Verses 7 to 11 are very practical and pertain to everyday concerns as a follower of Christ. Verses 10 & 11 are of special interest to me as they affirm God’s gifting in our lives and how they help us serve one another well. Speaking gifts and serving gifts are a helpful summary of how the Spirit gifts us as believers. I am sure you found something practical in these verses to contemplate and apply to your life.