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Walking with the
WORD

**Daily Ventures into
15 Books of the Bible**

Br. Larry Schatz, FSC

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Saint Mary's Press®

Dedication

To my sisters, Jane and Claudine,
and to all my Brothers

The publishing team included Laurie Delgatto, development editor; Lorraine Kilmartin, reviewer; cover image: iStockphoto/AVTG; prepress and manufacturing coordinated by the production departments of Saint Mary's Press.

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Introduction

Whatever we call it—the Bible, the Scriptures, the Good Book—it remains a fascinating treasury of stories and wisdom. You are about to read, chapter by chapter, through fifteen books of the Bible. Though the books may seem randomly chosen, they actually represent a sample of all the major types of writing in the Bible. They are not arranged in chronological order, simply because they do not tell the story of salvation history from beginning to end. Luke is first, because for those of us who are followers of Christ, the Gospels are the definitive portrait of Jesus and how we can best get a sense of who Jesus is. You will encounter a mix of Old and New Testament books: history, prophets, wisdom literature, letters, and even some apocalyptic writing. The Bible is an endlessly fascinating account of humankind's encounter with the God revealed through Jesus. You will inevitably be more attracted to some books than others.

Begin your daily mediation by slowly reading the indicated Scripture passage. Then read

through the reflection on that passage in this book. Finally, spend a few moments thinking about the passage. Be assured that a rich and rewarding journey awaits you. Have a wonderful walk with the Word!

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke 1:1-25

We all know how important the first sentence of a book is. Those well-chosen words could make us want to either read on or move on to another book. Imagine, then, how carefully the author of Luke's Gospel must have chosen his words, knowing the importance of his subject. The opening phrase lets us know that the Book of Luke is one of several accounts of the Good News. As Luke explains to Theophilus ("lover of God"), he intends to write an orderly version of the events that have been handed down. He clearly wants his readers to fully understand the real meaning of all the things they have heard about Jesus the Christ. And so, Luke starts from the beginning with the miraculous births of John the Baptist and his cousin Jesus of Nazareth and, true to his word, he uses an orderly structure to do it.

Think About . . .

Compare the opening sentence of Luke to the opening sentences of the other Gospels. What impressions do you have of each author?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke 1:26–80

The heart and soul of this part of chapter 1 is verses 46–55, referred to as the *Magnificat*. Perhaps the similar word *magnificent* best describes this eloquent prayer of praise that Christians around the world recite every day in the Liturgy of the Hours. This prayer captures a major theme of Luke's Gospel: those who possess much in the world's eyes will find themselves with very little; the Savior will turn everything upside down. Mary realizes her own humility by expressing her lowliness, and yet she knows she will be called blessed. She proclaims that through Jesus's growing in her womb, God is fulfilling an ancient promise, and that this fulfillment will quite literally change the world. And indeed it does!

Think About . . .

What would you say to praise God's actions in your own life? Write down your words of praise.

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke 2:1-21

Whenever we see a crèche at Christmastime, it doesn't seem complete without a shepherd or two. It is important to understand that at the time of Jesus, shepherds were outcasts that were generally despised. They were definitely not part of the Jewish mainstream. Luke continually focuses on the Good News being given to those who are poor and downtrodden. Think about it: the first ones to hear the news of the birth of the long-awaited Messiah are the lowly shepherds out in their fields. The angel points them to the manger so they can be the first to witness the birth of the Lord. And it is entirely fitting that they should encounter a poor couple forced to lay their newborn in a manger, a feeding trough for cattle. This is just the opposite of what would be expected for the birth of the Savior.

Think About . . .

If Jesus were born today, to whom would the news of his birth be given and where would he be born?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke 2:22-52

Here Luke provides us with the only Gospel story of Jesus as an adolescent. And, as so often is the case between adolescents and their parents, it involves worrying and misunderstanding. By deliberately staying behind in Jerusalem, Jesus put his parents through several days of fear and anxiety. When they finally find him, his response to their understandable concern is a very challenging one. Mary speaks of Jesus's earthly father, Joseph, but Jesus replies by referring to his heavenly Father. As all adolescents do, Jesus is beginning to explore the meaning of his own identity, one that will continually be misunderstood by people who are expecting a very different kind of Messiah. Jesus does, however, return home with his parents, obedient to them for many more years before beginning his public ministry.

Think About . . .

Spend some time reflecting on your own struggles with your parents or guardians as you grow into your identity. Ask Jesus to help you with your "growing pains."

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 3

Eighteen years have passed, and now Jesus is about to begin his public ministry. This chapter gives us a vivid portrait of Jesus's cousin, John the Baptist. John is preaching the need for repentance, and in verses 10–14, three times he is asked, "What should we do?" What is really being asked, of course, is, "What should we do to be saved?" And in each case, John gives very practical advice. Simply put, he tells his listeners to do the right thing and, especially for the tax collectors and soldiers, not to abuse their positions to become richer. As he does many times in his Gospel, Luke raises the point that wealth and possessions can easily keep us from growing in our faith. John is also clear that he is the forerunner to the Messiah, that he is only preparing the way by urging people to repent and be forgiven.

Think About . . .

What advice might John the Baptist give you if you asked him, "What should I do?"

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke 4:1–13

After forty days of fasting in the wilderness, who wouldn't be hungry? And really, what would be the harm in turning a stone into a loaf of bread? It would be kind of a cool trick, wouldn't it? Actually that's the problem here. If Jesus were to give in to this temptation, along with the other two he faces, he would be a totally different Messiah. He is essentially being asked to show off, to perform tricks that would be very impressive and would, no doubt, win people over. But Jesus is ready to begin his public ministry as a human being, as someone who has to deal with life and its temptations and distractions just as we do. By choosing to be one of us, he is also rejecting special treatment, or the easy way out. Jesus wants to show us the way of a servant who seeks to do good for others, not for himself.

Think About . . .

Why does it seem so much more appealing to be a celebrity rather than a servant?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke 4:14–43

Where better for Jesus to begin his mission than in his hometown of Nazareth? After all, he grew up there, and everyone knows he is Joseph's son. So how does Jesus go from being the hometown hero to almost being thrown off a cliff within a couple verses? The answer probably has more to do with his listeners than with him. Clearly Jesus really impressed them in the synagogue with his message of the Good News. When he tries to get his old friends and neighbors to think bigger than just Nazareth, however, sparks begin to fly. It seems rather abrupt, but perhaps Luke is foreshadowing what will happen to Jesus in Jerusalem: initial acceptance and enthusiasm followed by rejection and rage.

Think About . . .

Why is it that the people who know you best can sometimes be your harshest critics when you take a different path than they think you should?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 5

It is hard for us to really imagine what it was like to have leprosy in the time of Jesus. Lepers were feared and were outcasts, banished to the fringes of society. No one wanted to be around them; they were considered unclean. It was best to just look the other way and not even get near someone with leprosy. Notice how much Luke tells us about Jesus in only a few short verses (see verses 12–16). The leper approaches Jesus, which was a bold move, and requests to be healed. Clearly he has heard that Jesus can work wonders. Not only does Jesus immediately respond to the man's request, but he actually touches the leper—an equally bold move and a powerful sign of how Jesus intends to break through barriers and stereotypes to let people know they are worthy of dignity and attention.

Think About . . .

In your neighborhood or school, to whom would Jesus reach out? Could you do the same?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 6

The last part of this chapter (verses 43–49) deals with quality. Typical of Jesus, he uses everyday images—fruit trees and house foundations—to make his point. Have you ever noticed how most people pick out fruit in a grocery store? They generally pick up and put back a few before they find what they are looking for. They want the best looking fruit because they assume it will taste the best. And before people purchase a home, they generally check the basement or lower level to make sure it has a good foundation. If it doesn't, they look somewhere else, unless they are careless or in a hurry. The point is clear: quality matters. The foundation of a structure is the key to its strength and ability to last. Good trees bear good fruit. Solid foundations resist the forces of nature.

Think About . . .

- What kind of foundation are you built on?
- What happens when times get rough?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 7

Hospitality. That really is the crux of the last section of this chapter. Jesus is invited into the home of a Pharisee named Simon. Then this woman shows up, and in an almost embarrassing display of affection, she bathes and kisses Jesus's feet. She is of course a woman "with a reputation." Simon can't believe Jesus doesn't know this. Ah, but that's precisely the point: Jesus *does* know this, and he uses this woman's repentance to drive home an important point in Luke's Gospel: even though Simon invites Jesus into his home, it is this sinful woman who makes Jesus feel welcome. Her emotional response to Jesus sharply contrasts with Simon's response. By welcoming this woman, Jesus reflects God's generosity and God's lavish love for us, especially when we seek forgiveness.

Think About . . .

Why is judging others a barrier to hospitality?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 8

How can Jesus sleep that soundly? The boat is filling with water and obviously rocking heavily, and yet he is still fast asleep. What is this scene all about? For people in biblical times, water, especially a stormy sea with big waves, was a symbol of chaos. A boat often symbolized the early Church. Add to that the image of Jesus's commanding the wind to cease, which casts Jesus in the role of the Creator. The message is clear: No matter how dangerous or threatening things may seem to be in our faith journey, Jesus is always with us and will not let us go down. Even when it appears that Jesus is asleep or dormant, we can't forget that he is a powerful force in our lives and can calm any turbulence we may feel.

Think About . . .

Consider a tough time you've had recently. Now try to picture yourself with Jesus during that time. What might he say to you?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 9

In verses 46–48, Jesus teaches his followers a vital lesson. At this point in the Gospel journey, they have been with him long enough to have seen him do some pretty amazing things. Three of them have just witnessed Jesus's Transfiguration. He has spoken about his suffering and death. And yet his followers really don't get it. We often see pictures of Jesus with children, and it's not hard to imagine that he loved to be in their presence, and they in his. And so he places a child next to himself to drive home the point about who is first, who is last, and who is the greatest of them all. Jesus came to upend all our assumptions about what is important. It is not one of the Apostles that Jesus puts by his side, but rather a little child. End of discussion. Status means nothing. Sincerity and trust, the qualities of childhood, mean everything.

Think About . . .

Reflect on the difference between being childlike and being childish.

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 10

The familiar parable of the good Samaritan appears only in Luke's Gospel. The problem is that the word *Samaritan* doesn't mean much to us. To the followers of Jesus, however, it is definitely not a neutral word. What Jesus is doing here is trying to vastly expand the concept of neighbor. The first two who pass by the nearly dead man do so out of a sense of following the Law and not wanting to be made unclean by having contact with someone who might be dead. So who stops to help? Who proves to be the true neighbor? It is the person we instinctively cast as an enemy, as a bad person. And suddenly the idea of loving your neighbor gets more challenging and unpleasant. The question becomes not what is the correct thing to do, but what is the right thing to do.

Think About . . .

Whom in my life, or in the world, do I have the hardest time seeing as my neighbor? Why?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 11

This chapter begins with Luke's version of the most familiar prayer uniting all Christians: the Lord's Prayer. If you compare Luke's version with Matthew's (see 6:9–13), you'll notice that Luke's is more concise, although the same basic elements are in both. Luke focuses his attention solely on how to pray. He makes two points in his story about the friend who wants to borrow bread. The first point is that persistence is valuable. We don't hesitate to pester our parents or friends if we really want something. We shouldn't hesitate to "pester" God either. The second point is that as parents we would never deliberately give something harmful to our children. We are far from perfect, but we do know how to give our best to those we hold dear. Imagine, then, how much more eager and willing God is to do the same for us.

Think About . . .

Make a point of asking God every day to send you the Holy Spirit. How can you best remind yourself to do this?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 12

Why is it that in our world the rich get richer? Why are so many of us obsessed with the rich and famous? What is it that causes the wealthy to want to accumulate more and more? It's a big problem in our society. We don't have to look far for examples of corporate greed, of top executives acquiring much more than they'll ever need. The story of the rich fool drives home the point of how foolish it is to let greed take us over. Our first priority should be God. If we are greedy for anything, we should be greedy to acquire a deeper relationship with God, for the ability to trust in God above all else. Easier said than done, of course, especially in a world so obsessed with security and inheritance. Jesus tells us our hearts will follow our riches. Where is our true wealth?

Think About . . .

Make a list of your priorities in life. How many of them involve money?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 13

Mustard seed and yeast. It's pretty clear what they have in common. Both are small and seemingly insignificant. Both also hold tremendous potential for growth. Of course, they have to be given a chance by either being planted or activated. Without an agent—someone to plant the seed or mix the yeast into the dough—nothing will happen. So what do these two parables tell us about the Kingdom of God? Perhaps that each of us has a vital role to play in bringing about the Reign of God. Also perhaps that the Reign of God grows in a quiet, barely noticeable way. It's the little things that count. It's the small gestures that can make a huge difference. Slowly, steadily, the little things add up. The seed becomes a tree. The yeast transforms dough into bread. The world changes for the better because we have done something good.

Think About . . .

Reflect on some small acts of kindness that have made a difference in your life or in the life of someone you know.

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 14

There certainly is a focus on eating and feasts in this chapter. What is going on here? For one thing, it is necessary to understand how important hospitality is in Jesus's time. The sharing of meals occurs over and over throughout the Bible because eating is such a basic and vital part of being human and meals are meant to be shared. So who gets invited and how they respond and where they are seated all come into play here as Jesus weaves a couple parables into his teachings. One speaks of humility and how Jesus reverses what seems proper. Typical of Luke's Gospel, it is those who are poor and marginalized—"the least"—who end up coming to the banquet and being seated in the best seats. Jesus challenges us to seek out and invite those very people into our lives rather than all the people who can and will repay us with an invitation in turn.

Think About . . .

How well do you make others feel "at home"? Whom do you know that is an expert at hospitality?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 15

This chapter of the Book of Luke features three parables with the same theme of lost and found: a sheep, a coin, and a son. The third parable, unique to the Book of Luke, is a familiar and rich one, but it really is much more complex than it first seems, mainly because of the older son and his resentment. Note how in each parable, there is great joy and celebration when what was lost is found. In fact, it actually seems a bit extravagant, doesn't it? A woman throws a party because she finds a lost coin. The father actually runs out to greet his son and doesn't even let him finish his apology. He throws a huge party. It's the extravagance here that Jesus is emphasizing. Could it be true that God is really that accepting and loves us that much, especially when we have strayed and returned again? Yes, it's true!

Think About . . .

Try to picture God with arms wide open to embrace you and welcome you back. Try also to understand the older son's resentment at the extravagant love of his father.

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 16

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is about the have's and the have-nots, and the great gap that exists between the two. Typical to Luke, the order is reversed upon death. Now Lazarus has it all, and the rich man has nothing. It's not that the rich man is a bad man; rather, it's simply that he never even notices Lazarus. He is so insulated from anything but his own luxury that he can't see beyond all he has. Therein lies his downfall. He simply doesn't notice a poor man at his gate. He never crosses over the great divide. When he dies, he so wants to warn his brothers to notice those who are poor among them, but they have the same opportunities he had. How can we truly follow Christ if we are so caught up in the things of this world that we don't even notice those who go without?

Think About . . .

Being a Christian means being attentive. Try to make that your mantra today. Notice. Pay attention.

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 17

The parable of the grateful Samaritan appears only in the Book of Luke. Notice that once again, it is a Samaritan who stands apart as the righteous one. Back in chapter 10, we read the parable of the good Samaritan. Now we read about ten lepers who are cured by Jesus. Only one returns to thank Jesus, and this one is a detested Samaritan. Talk about being an outsider. First, he has leprosy, which means he is automatically shunned and avoided. Then he is a Samaritan, which means he is automatically shunned and avoided by all Jews. Yet it is this man, the ultimate outsider, who comes back to fall at Jesus's feet, who is full of gratitude. Why is Luke so intent on portraying Jesus as the one who reaches out to the most marginalized? In many ways, the early Christians Luke was writing for were also outsiders.

Think About . . .

Make a point of being grateful today, and expressing your gratitude, especially to those people who often go unnoticed by others.

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 18

By now you have probably figured out that Luke loves to show how earthly standards and expectations are reversed by God. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is another prime example of Luke at his best. Clearly the Pharisee is doing everything right and following the Law. And just as clearly, the tax collector, by his profession, is collaborating with the Romans, the enemy. Imagine how shocked the Pharisee would be to learn that God favored the tax collector! The theme of humility appears again as well. Really, who can brag about being good before God, who knows us better than we know ourselves? People who are convinced of their own righteousness end up losing out to those who admit before God that they have a long way to go.

Think About . . .

Why is it that some people who call themselves good Christians often become so judgmental of others? What is the attitude of a true follower of Jesus?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 19

Jesus is getting very close to Jerusalem and his final days. He is passing through Jericho, the last town before his triumphal entry into his city of destiny. It is there that he encounters an interesting little man named Zacchaeus, who is determined to catch a glimpse of the now famous Jesus. However, it seems a bit much for someone of Zacchaeus's profession and wealth to climb a tree. That's the point. Even though Zacchaeus is small in stature, he clearly has a big heart. Jesus senses this and once again confounds everyone around him by inviting himself to Zacchaeus's home. Zacchaeus is happy with and touched by Jesus's attention to him. It's almost as if Jesus has radar for the big sinners who have big hearts. Though everyone grumbles, Jesus has just expanded the Reign of God a little further.

Think About . . .

What role has determination played in your life so far?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 20

Jesus is now in Jerusalem for Passover. In verses 1–8 and again in verses 19–26, Jesus is confronted by the Jewish authorities, who try to undermine him. They ask him loaded questions, hoping to trap him. It doesn't work, of course. Both times Jesus gets the better of them, either by asking them a question in return or by refusing to be forced into a simple answer, as in the case of paying Roman taxes. Keep in mind that these confrontations occur in public places in a crowded city, so many people hear the exchange. It is not hard to see why the authorities are getting so frustrated with Jesus. His cleverness and refusal to be backed into a corner are impressing people. He's clearly the man of the hour.

Think About . . .

- How have you dealt with confrontation?
- Would you handle it differently next time?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 21

This is a challenging chapter, as Jesus speaks of destruction and suffering and the Son of Man. It's important to realize that Luke wrote his Gospel sometime after AD 80, which is after Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. In verses 7–19, Jesus speaks words of encouragement for his followers. Rough times are ahead. Lots of people will hate you. You'll be arrested and imprisoned. But don't worry about a thing. It's going to be okay. Hang in there. All of us need to hear those words at times, but imagine how much they mean to the early Christians, who are surrounded by hostile forces.

Think About . . .

What advice do you think Jesus would give to his followers today?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 22

Let us focus our attention on Luke's version of what is commonly called the agony in the garden. For Luke, the theme of prayer is very prominent here. The word *prayer* is mentioned several times in the seven verses that describe the scene. Clearly this episode, more than any other in the Passion stories, shows Jesus's humanity. He prays hard that he can accept his Father's will. We see the intensity of prayer with Jesus's sweat becoming like drops of blood on the ground. Sweat is a sign of deep anxiety, and to sweat this much proves that Jesus is indeed struggling with what lies ahead. He prays to prevail, and he does. But notice that it is in prayer that he accomplishes the strength to go on. At the beginning and end of the scene, he tells his disciples to pray so that they can avoid temptation.

Think About . . .

We usually turn to prayer during times of great stress. Why is that? Is that true for you?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 23

Let us focus on Luke's account of the Crucifixion and death of Jesus. Notice the words of Jesus in verses 27–46. They are all words of compassion and forgiveness and prayer. There are no words of despair or sorrow. Luke is showing us a Jesus and a Messiah who is in control until the end. He survived the temptation to back away from his fate, and now he surrenders to his Father's will. Luke downplays Jesus's suffering so that even at the moment of his death, Jesus is able to cry out to his Father in a loud voice before taking his last breath. As soon as Jesus dies, a Roman centurion is the first to acknowledge his innocence. This is important because the Christians that Luke was writing for were mainly Gentiles, or non-Jews, so he is conscious of Jesus's being recognized as the Messiah by all people.

Think About . . .

Spend some time reflecting on Jesus's last words in verse 46. Why is this a powerful prayer for all Christians?

Today's Scripture Passage

Luke, Chapter 24

Luke is at his best here. The heart of the story is that these two disillusioned followers of Jesus recognize him, finally, in the breaking of the bread. At that moment, their eyes are opened and their hearts are burning, knowing they have had an encounter with the risen Lord. So why does Jesus vanish at that moment of recognition? What is the message to Luke's readers, and to us? Most of us are so used to the Eucharist that we don't give a lot of thought to what it really is and what it means. Even though Jesus is not physically present in our lives, he is nonetheless very much with us, as he was with the early Christians. Often the Eucharist is described by Catholics as the "Real Presence." This is a powerful way of saying the truth of this story. In the sharing of the Eucharist, Jesus is with us.

Think About . . .

Consider a time when your eyes were opened, when you realized a truth you had not grasped before. What opened your eyes?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 1

With the books of Samuel, we start a study of the beginning of the monarchy in Israel. David, who reigned from about 1080 BC to 1040 BC, is at the heart of these books. But first we learn about the prophet for whom these books are named. The first chapter of 1 Samuel tells us about Hannah, one of the wives of Elkanah. She is unable to bear children. Throughout the Bible, infertility is considered a curse. Hannah prays hard, and finally her prayers are answered. She gives birth to Samuel, and she dedicates him to the Lord. Because of that, she leaves her very young son with the priest Eli at Shiloh, which was the most important shrine in Israel at the time. This may seem strange to us, but it is Hannah's way of thanking God for the long-awaited gift of her son. She knows he will always be in good hands because he is in a holy place. Hannah never gives up, and her persistence in prayer pays off.

Think About . . .

What are you praying for these days? How persistent are you?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 2

Hannah's prayer is significant for several reasons. You may have noticed how similar it is to Mary's prayer (the *Magnificat*) in Luke 1:46–55. Both begin with praise for the Lord and then go into a series of parallel verses that contrast the have's with the have-nots, and how God will reverse their situations. They emphasize the raising up of those who are poor. Hannah speaks from her heart because she was unable to have children and now has borne a son. As we find out later in the chapter, she is graced with five more children because of her faithfulness to God. The rest of the chapter deals with the contrast between the goodness of young Samuel and the evil actions of Eli's two sons.

Think About . . .

Reread Mary's prayer and note the lines and phrases that are almost identical to Hannah's prayer. Notice the confidence and joy both express.

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 3

The story of Samuel's call is a beautiful one, placing Samuel in the great tradition of other prophets who received calls, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The fact that Samuel gets his call while sleeping places him in another biblical tradition: that God at times speaks to people in their dreams. The fact that Samuel does not at first recognize the voice of God, that Eli is the one who counsels him to respond by addressing the Lord directly, shows that Eli, as Samuel's mentor, realizes that this marks the end of his own importance and the beginning of Samuel's vocation as a prophet. Indeed once Samuel responds directly to God's call, he is given a prophetic message. This is also a reminder that we often need others to help us discern God's call in our own lives.

Think About . . .

Make Samuel's simple response to God's call (see verse 10) your own prayer today. Or maybe even for the rest of your life!

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 4

In this chapter, we read about the death of Eli, his two sons, and his daughter-in-law, plus many Israelites in battle. But the real tragedy, and the one that leads to Eli's death, is the news that the ark of the Covenant has been captured by the Philistines. It is hard for us to imagine what a tragic event this is for Israel. The ark is the holiest object in the Jewish faith; it represents God's abiding presence with the people. That is why they always bring it with them into battle, to ensure that God will be with them. This is the ark fashioned during the time of Moses to hold the Ten Commandments. The fact that the enemies of the Israelites have stolen the ark is almost too much to bear, certainly for Eli. The last words of Eli's daughter-in-law at the end of the chapter sum up how everyone feels.

Think About . . .

What in your life represents God's holy presence for you?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 5

It doesn't take long for the Philistines to realize that maybe taking the ark from the Israelites wasn't such a great idea after all. The first part of the chapter is basically a contest between deities. The Philistines place the ark near Dagon as a sort of offering, but they discover the next day that the idol Dagon has fallen before the ark. The following day, the same thing happens, but this time the head and hands are broken off too. The implication is clear: Dagon is no match for the God of the Israelites. They decide to move the ark, but wherever it ends up, the people are stricken with tumors (some Bible translations say they were hemorrhoids). The writers of the First Book of Samuel are clearly showing that the Philistines are suffering the effects of their actions. They steal the ark, expecting it will solidify their victory over Israel. Instead it brings them nothing but trouble.

Think About . . .

When have you been forced to deal with the consequences of your actions?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 6

After seven months with the ark, the Philistines have had enough. They consult with experts on how best to return this holy object they stole from Israel. They end up giving gifts of gold in the shape of tumors and mice. This has led some Scripture scholars to connect the suffering of the Philistines with a plague carried by mice. The Philistines also send the ark in a cart pulled by cows, without any human intervention, to determine whether the God of Israel is indeed responsible for what happened to them. The cows go toward Beth-shemesh—that is, toward the Israelites. The Philistines get their answer. When the Israelites see the ark, they rejoice and sacrifice the cows as a burnt offering to God, a common practice in biblical times.

Think About . . .

The people of Old Testament times believed very much in the necessity of sacrifice as part of worshipping God. We no longer sacrifice animals. What are other ways of sacrificing?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 7

Samuel is the last of the judges of Israel; however, the term *judge* as it is used here is very different from modern-day usage of the word. A judge at this time in biblical history is actually a type of tribal leader and often a military hero as well. At this point in their history, the Israelites have no unified nation. There is no one ruler. Judges arise whenever Israel is attacked, and they lead the people in battle. We have already been introduced to Samuel as a prophet. He also takes on the role of judge to lead the people against their persistent enemies, the Philistines. The last verse indicates that Samuel administers justice in his home at Ramah, so he also serves in the role of judge that we are familiar with. Samuel serves as a bridge between the time of the judges and the time of the kings.

Think About . . .

Who are the leaders you know (or have read about) that demonstrate a variety of skills?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 8

At the heart of this chapter is a basic conflict, which isn't quite resolved. The people want a king, but Samuel tries to convince them that is a bad idea. By desiring a king, they are in effect rejecting God as their king, and that is a problem for Samuel. All the other nations have kings to lead them, so why shouldn't Israel? Samuel tries to warn them that by having a king, they will have to give up a lot, especially the independence and freedom they are used to. But Samuel's detailed list of what will result fails to dissuade the people. So they get their way; God tells Samuel to appoint a king over them. It is clear that neither Samuel nor God is pleased with this development.

Think About . . .

Recall a time when you got something you really wanted, only to discover later that it wasn't all that great. Why does that happen?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 9

In this chapter, we are introduced to the man who will become the first king of Israel. He introduces himself as Saul from the Tribe of Benjamin. Because Benjamin is the youngest of Jacob's sons, the tribe is considered "the least" of the tribes. This indicates, as happens so often in Scripture, that Saul is not an obvious choice to be king. Yet early in the chapter, we are told that Saul is handsome and tall, both typical "kingly" characteristics. His journey to find the lost donkeys has an epic flavor to it. It could almost be a whole novel in itself, as Saul encounters Samuel, who has been told by God that this young man is the one God has chosen to be king. Saul is then treated like a king with a special feast given in his honor.

Think About . . .

A journey undertaken to seek something and then ending up with something very different is a common theme in literature and stories. Reflect on why this is so.

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 10

Things get a little confusing in this chapter. It is almost as if the story of Saul starts over in verse 17. What is going on here? Most likely, there are two versions about how Saul becomes king. The author is probably familiar with both, and tries to reconcile them here. The first part continues the hero story that begins in chapter 9 with the Spirit's rushing upon Saul, a sure sign of God's favor. The second part resumes the theme from chapter 8 about the uneasiness Samuel feels about choosing a king. Nevertheless, Saul is clearly God's choice, and the ritual of anointing is the Jewish equivalent of crowning a king today. Being anointed means having oil poured on one's head. The chapter ends by setting the stage for Saul's first challenge: defeating the brutal Ammonites.

Think About . . .

How is oil used today in religious ritual? Why do you think oil is still used as a symbol of God's Spirit and anointing?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 11

Here Saul has the opportunity to prove himself as a warrior and hero, essential traits for an ancient king. He is actually taking on the role of the judges who preceded him as he attempts to unite all the tribes through battle. The action of cutting the oxen into pieces and sending them around Israel as a warning may strike us as strange, but this is a graphic way of getting across the message that everyone is needed and better show up to fight the Ammonites. And so they do. Saul is successful and is then made king. Wait . . . isn't he already the king? This episode seems to indicate that at this point, his kingship is made public and is accepted by the people. And now everyone seems happy. King Saul is the man of the hour!

Think About . . .

One of the essential traits of a leader is to unify his or her people. How do leaders accomplish that in our nation? in our world? in our Church?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 12

This is Samuel's farewell speech, although for the time being, he isn't going anywhere. He is "passing the torch" to Saul, the new king, and ending an era. The time of the judges in Israel is now over. The people have requested and received a king. Again Samuel points out that there really is no need for a king because God has taken care of them and has appointed leaders when needed. But because there is a king now, the people need to make sure they remain faithful to God and the Covenant. If they do that, things will go well. If they don't, the opposite will happen. It's that simple. Samuel will remain in their midst as a prophet and as someone who prays for them. In his prophetic role, he will serve as an intermediary between God and the people.

Think About . . .

Try to regularly pray for groups of people—in your neighborhood, your school, and your church, for example. What other groups can you pray for?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 13

Saul's main duty as king is to defend his people against their enemies. However, as Saul is preparing for battle with the Philistines, something happens that changes his destiny forever. The tradition is that only the prophets and priests can offer sacrifice before battle. Samuel has told Saul to wait seven days for his arrival, but when Samuel doesn't show up on time, and his troops are getting restless, Saul performs the sacrifice himself. When Samuel finds out what Saul has done, he tells him that because he has disobeyed, he has lost favor with God. Saul's dynasty would have lasted forever, which is typical of kingship—that it passes on in a family. Because of his actions, however, that will not happen. The point is that Saul disobeyed the Lord. He has therefore doomed his own reign.

Think About . . .

When have you disobeyed and had to deal with the consequences?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 14

It is clear that Saul's son Jonathan is a brave and shrewd warrior, as demonstrated in the first part of chapter 14. Later on, however, Jonathan eats some honey, unaware that his father has forbidden the troops to eat before evening. When the soldiers see this, they are fearful. What it finally comes down to is that even though he did not know he was doing wrong, Jonathan did go against his father's orders, and when, through a process similar to drawing lots, Jonathan is shown to be guilty, he readily admits his guilt and his willingness to die. The soldiers step in and ransom him, mainly because of his courage and success. What is the meaning of all this? Perhaps to show that because he also disobeyed, Jonathan is not fit to be king. This does support Samuel's prophecy that Saul's sons would not succeed him.

Think About . . .

We often hear the phrase "Ignorance of the law is no excuse." Does this make sense to you? Why or why not?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 15

Saul really blows it this time. Samuel tells him to utterly wipe out the Amalekites for their opposition to the Israelites when they left Egypt. But Saul sets aside some of the best sheep and cattle for sacrifice to God, and he spares Agag, the Amalekite king. This is the final straw. Samuel tells Saul, in no uncertain terms, that because he has rejected God through his disobedience, God has rejected him. What Saul does may not seem so bad to us, but the fact that he has disobeyed is the issue. At this point in biblical history, obedience is of the utmost importance and is the truest way of being faithful. Because Saul has disobeyed a command, he is finished. When Saul accidentally rips Samuel's robe, Samuel tells him this symbolizes how God has torn the kingdom of Israel from him.

Think About . . .

Why is obedience so important?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 16

Because God rejects Saul, Samuel is sent to anoint the next king. The only problem is that Saul is still alive, and as long as he is alive, he remains king. Nevertheless young David is the one chosen to succeed him. Like Saul, David is not an obvious choice. He is the youngest of many brothers, and he is not even present when Samuel comes to Jesse's home to choose the next king. Remember that the oldest son always inherits the title and possessions of his father. Verse 7 reminds us that it's what is in the heart that counts, and only God knows that. David is seen as a man after God's own heart. There is irony in the fact that shortly after, David ends up being Saul's musician and then his armor bearer. At this point, Saul does not know David has already been anointed, but this gives David an opportunity to shine in several ways.

Think About . . .

Look into your own heart for a moment. What do you see there? What do you think God sees there?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 17

The story of David and Goliath is one of the best known in the Bible. The message is obvious: With God on our side, we can face huge challenges and overcome them. David displays here all the marks of greatness—unusual courage, military skill, and a deep, unwavering faith in God. The story seems to confirm him as the right choice to be the next king. If you read the text closely, you may notice that parts of this story seem to contradict what happened in the previous chapter. It's as if David just wandered onto the battle scene, with no previous connection to Saul. Most likely, there are two different oral traditions about David. Today editors are careful to make sure a story has consistency and flow. The ancient writers of the Bible did not think that way. They had no problem putting two stories side by side, with contrasting details. This happens fairly often in the Scriptures.

Think About . . .

What is a Goliath in your life right now? How can your faith in God help you overcome this challenge?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 18

David's star is shining brightly. His best friend and closest ally is Jonathan, Saul's son. He marries Michal, Saul's daughter. He is successful in battle; the people love him. Clearly David is the man of the hour. Saul is overtaken with jealousy and by the end of the chapter becomes David's sworn enemy. Surely Saul senses that, as promised by Samuel, God's favor has departed from Saul and is now with David. Seemingly, David can do no wrong, and Saul can only watch as David wins over his son, his daughter, and the love of the people. We can understand Saul's feeling threatened by David's fame and success. Who wouldn't be? But Saul lets his own insecurity overtake him. He becomes obsessed with destroying David and, in the process, will destroy himself.

Think About . . .

When have you found yourself in a position where nothing seemed to go right for you, while someone else got all the breaks? How did you handle that?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 19

Saul's obsession with David is played out in this chapter. First, Jonathan tries to convince his father that David has done nothing to harm him. In verse 6, Saul actually takes an oath not to put David to death. But after David's next victory over the Philistines, Saul hurls a spear at David while David is playing music. From then on, David stays out of Saul's sight. Determined to kill David, Saul sends messengers to David's house, but Michal uses deception to help her husband escape. David flees to Ramah and stays with Samuel. The rather strange ending to the chapter seems to indicate that even the Spirit of the Lord keeps Saul from David. Saul gets caught up in a prophetic frenzy and ends up naked, possibly a symbol that he has been stripped of his authority as king.

Think About . . .

Why is deception a bad choice?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 20

There is perhaps no stronger example and expression of deep friendship in the Bible than that between David and Jonathan. The love they share is clear when they say goodbye to each other at the end of the chapter. Adding to the significance of their friendship is the realization that, if not for David's anointing, Jonathan would become the next king of Israel. Jonathan has every reason in the world to resent David and to be as jealous as his father. Saul even points this out to Jonathan in verse 31. But Jonathan's loyalty to his friend outweighs any personal ambition he might have toward the kingship. He now knows that his father is determined to kill David, and he must take sides. He takes David's side against his own father. Jonathan and David have made a covenant of friendship that no one can break. True and lasting friendship is a rare thing.

Think About . . .

What can you do to deepen and strengthen the friendships you have?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 21

Two important developments occur here. Ahimelech, the high priest of Nob, gives David and his men holy bread to eat. This is unusual, because at the time the sacred bread was given to priests only. David also receives the sword of Goliath. By his receiving both of these, it is as if David is also receiving the approval of the priests, the holy men of Israel. This is another important step for the future king. When David arrives in Gath, he pretends to be mad so he will not be harmed by the Philistines, especially when they see him with Goliath's sword. David makes up a story to get the holy bread, and here he pretends to be crazy; both are acts of deception, which seem questionable, except that the writer seems to imply that because David is fleeing Saul, he is justified doing what he can to survive.

Think About . . .

At times a leader needs to be shrewd in order to survive. What examples can you think of when Jesus was shrewd?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 22

Recall how in chapter 15 Saul spares the king of the Amalekites. Now, however, he has no qualms about slaughtering all the priests of Nob, along with the entire city. In effect, he has wiped out the priesthood of Israel, all to take revenge on Ahimelech for helping David. Notice how the king's servants will not carry out Saul's orders. However, Doeg, the Edomite who was in Nob and told Saul about what happened, has no problem murdering hundreds of innocent people. One priest does escape, of course, and flees to David. This is important, because now the priesthood will survive with David's help, another blow to Saul's authority.

Think About . . .

What is it in humans that allows them to turn off their moral compasses and commit evil acts? Is "I was just following orders" a legitimate excuse?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 23

By the end of this chapter, Saul is clearly closing in on David and his troops. Only an unexpected attack by the Philistines diverts Saul and allows David to escape. Before this Jonathan once again swore his loyalty to David and told David he is very content to be his number two man. And so they renew their covenant of friendship with each other. Notice how many times in the chapter David turns directly to the Lord for help. Notice also that he receives guidance each time. This is important because it shows that David stays connected to God as he plans what to do next. By the way, the ephod in verse 6 refers to the garments a priest would wear. Abiathar, the only surviving priest, brings the ephod with him into David's presence.

Think About . . .

Do you turn to God before making decisions in your life? How have you experienced God's response?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 24

In this key encounter between David and Saul, David definitely has the upper hand. He has the perfect opportunity to finish off Saul, but instead he cuts off a corner of Saul's cloak without Saul's knowledge. As soon as David returns to the back of the cave, however, he is filled with remorse for doing even that. But the piece of Saul's cloak enables David to confront Saul and prove that even though he had the chance, he did not harm the Lord's anointed one. David even bows low to the ground to show his respect for Saul. When Saul realizes the truth of David's words, he cries and acknowledges that David has done the right thing. He states clearly that he knows David will be the next king, and he actually pleads with David not to kill his descendants, so that his name will not be entirely wiped out. This is a big step for Saul, as he faces up to the truth of his destiny.

Think About . . .

How do you balance respect for authority with your own disagreement or dissatisfaction with that authority?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 25

Nabal's name means "fool," and he does seem to live up to his name as he foolishly refuses David's request for hospitality. David swears vengeance, but Abigail, who is just the opposite of her husband, intervenes. She brings gifts to David and his men and begs him not to take revenge on her husband. David listens to her wise request and backs down. He admits that her good sense has prevented him from committing a bloody act of revenge without consulting the Lord. After Nabal's death, David takes Abigail to be his wife. He also marries Ahinoam, and we learn that he has given Michal to another man. This says a lot about how women were regarded in biblical times. David's marriages probably helped him gain political support in the territories of both women.

Think About . . .

Why is helping to make peace between two people an important role for followers of Jesus?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 26

Does this story sound familiar? Once again, as in chapter 24, we read an account of David's sparing Saul's life. As happens so often in the Bible, we probably have two different versions of a single event. The writers include both, and there are some key differences. Here David actually goes to where Saul is, rather than the chance encounter in chapter 24. Here Abishai offers to kill Saul, which would technically absolve David of his death. Again David resists but directs Abishai to take Saul's spear and water jug, much to the embarrassment of Abner, his bodyguard. So once again David declares his innocence and refuses to take Saul's life, even though he is given the chance. Again Saul relents and blesses David.

Think About . . .

Responding to evil with goodness is challenging, and yet it is what we are called to do. Think about some practical ways to do that in your own life.

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 27

Deciphering the meaning of this chapter is a bit of a challenge; even Scripture scholars struggle with it. What happens is quite clear. David leaves Israel to get away from Saul and serves Achish, a Philistine king. In turn he is given Ziklag, which remained part of Israel after that. From there he raids three of Israel's enemies and leaves no one alive. What he tells Achish is that he destroyed Israelite settlements. Clearly David is deceiving his host. And no one is left alive to report what really happened. Why does David do this? Most likely, he is preparing for his own kingship by destroying the enemies of Israel, and by deceiving Achish, he is protecting himself in exile. This is certainly not David's finest hour.

Think About . . .

There are hundreds of thousands of people living in exile right now around the world. What exiles are you aware of? Take a moment to pray for all people who are living in exile.

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 28

The main part of this chapter is about Saul's desperation. He is frightened by the upcoming battle with the Philistines. He has asked the Lord for help in all the traditional ways, but he has gotten no response. So he consults a medium. He has to leave Israel because mediums and wizards are forbidden there, as a violation of God's law. Saul goes to Endor and asks the medium to call forth Samuel. And so the ghost of Samuel appears, upset at being disturbed. Saul asks Samuel what he should do. The answer is no surprise. We know by now that Saul has been rejected and abandoned by God and so there is no hope for victory. In fact, the ghost of Samuel tells him he will die in battle the next day along with his sons. All that is left now is for the tragic events to play themselves out.

Think About . . .

Recall a time when you asked God for something and God did not grant your request. What did you receive instead?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapters 29–30

David is spared the dilemma of having to fight against his own people because the Philistine commanders refuse to go into battle with him and his troops. He returns to Ziklag only to find it has been plundered by the Amalekites, and all the women and children have been taken captive. Before deciding what to do, David consults with God. God tells him to pursue the Amalekites. Thanks to a servant of the Amalekites, David finds out where they are and swoops down on a celebration to recapture all that has been taken, including his two wives. His final act is to ensure that all who are part of his military force are treated fairly, whether they actually see combat or not. By the end of the chapter, David receives tribute from many parts of Israel. He is ready to become king.

Think About . . .

Based on all you have read, what kind of king do you think David will be?

Today's Scripture Passage

1 Samuel, Chapter 31

Saul comes to the end of his days. It is difficult not to feel some compassion for him, despite all he has done wrong. His three sons are killed, and Saul himself is badly wounded. He asks his armor bearer to finish him off, but the armor bearer refuses, out of respect for Saul. So Saul takes his own life. The Israelites are defeated and flee. And to make things even worse, the Philistines cut off Saul's head and attach his body to a wall for all to see. However, some of his loyal subjects come and take his body and those of his sons and give them a proper burial. What a tragic ending for this first king of Israel, who had so much potential. David, on the other hand, is victorious over the Amalekites and saves the lives of his family members. The contrast couldn't be sharper.

Think About . . .

We are advised often not to speak ill of the dead. Why is that?

Today's Scripture Passage

2 Samuel, Chapter 1

The Second Book of Samuel picks up where the first book left off, but the account the Amalekite gives of what happened to Saul is very different from what we just read in the final chapter of 1 Samuel. The most likely reason for the discrepancy is that the Amalekite is lying, hoping to gain favor from David for bringing the news that he killed Saul. It may well be that he came upon the dead Saul and took his crown and armband. Because of his lack of respect for Saul, David has the Amalekite killed. The last part of the chapter contains David's lament over what happened to his king and to his best friend. There is genuine grief in David's moving tribute to these two men who have been so much a part of his life.

Think About . . .

David's expression of grief displays his skill as a poet and a musician. Why are poems and songs so often used at wakes and funerals?

Today's Scripture Passage

2 Samuel, Chapter 2

This chapter gets rather confusing as it progresses. What is noteworthy is this: David becomes king of the cities of Judah (the northern kingdom) and Ishbaal, Saul's son, becomes king of all of Israel (the southern kingdom). David asks the Lord what he should do, and God tells him to go to Hebron. He settles there with his wives, and the people of Judah anoint him king. Abner, the commander of Saul's army, appears to have considerable clout and makes Ishbaal king of Israel. Thus the stage is set for battle between Judah and Israel. Joab is one of the sons of David's sister, Zeruiah. In the next few chapters, the conflict between north and south plays itself out with scenes of revenge and bloodshed. All of this leads to David's eventually becoming king of a united north and south.

Think About . . .

Notice how often wars are fought between various factions within a nation. Why is civil war so hard on a nation and its people?

Today's Scripture Passage

Book of Jude

With only twenty-five verses, Jude is the shortest book of the Bible. You may not even have heard of it before. Not much is known about it either. It is clear, however, that the writer is upset with what is happening in some communities of believers. A few people seem to have caused a lot of problems by doing and saying all sorts of things that create division and lead people astray. Every Christian community, every church and parish, has to deal with individuals who put themselves first and think they are above the law. These people need to be dealt with so that the community does not end up destroying itself. Though the Book of Jude may seem rather negative in tone, verses 20–21 offer some great advice on how to stay on the right path. The book ends with a beautiful passage of praise to God.

Think About . . .

What is the best way to deal with difficult people within a community or organization?

Today's Scripture Passage

2 Samuel, Chapter 3

Verses 1 and 36 in this chapter are key verses regarding David. David's house grows stronger, and the people are pleased with everything he does. You may have been surprised by the listing of David's wives and offspring. By the end of the chapter, he gains back his first wife, Michal. Realize that it is common at this time for men, especially powerful men, to have several wives. This is one way of society's making sure all women are taken care of, as they have virtually no rights of their own. It is also a way of cementing political alliances, a common practice with monarchies throughout history. Also, note that even though Abner switches to David's side, he is still killed by Joab as an act of revenge. Even so, David remains innocent of bloodshed and actually shows deep respect for Abner. It seems David can do no wrong.

Think About . . .

Reflect on the qualities that make David such a good king.

Today's Scripture Passage

2 Samuel, Chapter 4

This is a rather gruesome story of Ishbaal's murder. With Abner gone, Ishbaal's confidence also disappears. The two brothers, Baanah and Rimmon, apparently think assassinating Ishbaal will put them in good standing with David because Ishbaal represents the last obstacle to David's becoming king of all of Israel. In a particularly ruthless manner, the brothers kill Ishbaal while he is taking a nap. They behead him and proudly present the head to David, who reacts just the way we have come to expect of this leader who is always so respectful of other kings: he is very upset and, just as with the Amalekite who reported he had killed Saul, David has the two men killed and treated as ruthlessly as they treated Ishbaal. Note that in verse 4, we learn that Jonathan has a son named Mephibosheth or Meribbaal who has a physical disability. He appears again in a few chapters.

Think About . . .

How do you show respect for those in authority? How could you improve in this area?

Today's Scripture Passage

2 Samuel, Chapter 5

With this chapter and its events, David secures his position as king of Judah and Israel. Several important points are raised. David is thirty years old when he begins his reign of forty years. He has several more children, including Solomon, who eventually will succeed him. He conquers Jerusalem and makes it the capital of his newly united kingdom. This is strategic because Jerusalem is a fortified city on a hill, so it is easy to defend. It also lies on the border between Israel and Judah, and because it belonged to the now defeated Jebusites, it is a neutral city, which makes it the ideal choice for a capital. From this point on, Jerusalem is known as the City of David. The Philistines try twice to attack David and both times are defeated. Verses 10 and 12 pretty well sum it up. David's reign becomes firmly established.

Think About . . .

Why is Jerusalem so sacred to Christians?

Today's Scripture Passage

2 Samuel, Chapter 6

By bringing the ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, David makes Jerusalem the religious capital of his kingdom, as well as the political capital. The ark, as we know, is the holiest object in Judaism and has accompanied the people since they left Egypt. Because it is so holy, only those who are consecrated are allowed to touch it. This helps explain why Uzzah suffers death for touching the ark, even though he is merely trying to help. This reinforces the idea that the ark is sacred. David's famous dance before the ark in Jerusalem may strike us as rather extreme; after all, David is basically dancing in his underwear! Michal later criticizes him for it, but David simply saw this as the best way to celebrate his deep love for God.

Think About . . .

Could you see yourself worshiping God by dancing? Why or why not?

Today's Scripture Passage

2 Samuel, Chapter 7

The word *house* plays a pivotal role in this important chapter. In Hebrew the word can be used both for *temple* and *dynasty*. David desires to build a permanent house for God, and God responds by promising David an eternal house. This covenant that Nathan reveals to David is critical to salvation history. God is promising David that his line, unlike Saul's, will last forever. Later this promise will be linked to a messiah expected to come from the line of David. It is also revealed to David that his son will build a house for God, as indeed Solomon does during his reign. The Temple will then become the center of worship for the Jews. David responds in his typical way: by praying to God and giving God praise.

Think About . . .

Verse 22 is a beautiful mini-prayer to God. Repeat it a few times slowly. Let it be your prayer today.

Today's Scripture Passage

2 Samuel, Chapters 8–9

The Amtrak train that runs from Chicago to the Pacific Northwest is named the Empire Builder, after James J. Hill, the railroad tycoon. That name is apt for David in chapter 8. Slowly and steadily, he is building an empire in the Middle East, and verses 6 and 14 repeat a recurring theme: the Lord gives David victory wherever David goes. In chapter 9, David fulfills a promise he made to Jonathan in 1 Samuel, chapter 20. He gives Jonathan's son the land that belonged to his grandfather Saul. He also insists that Mephibosheth (in some Bible translations he is referred to as Merib-baal) always eat at his table, a great honor for this only son of Jonathan who is unable to walk. David seems only too happy to do what he can for the son of his best friend. Having a descendant of Saul at his table undoubtedly solidifies his position as king.

Think About . . .

Reflect on what it means to be a true friend to someone, no matter what.

Today's Scripture Passage

2 Samuel, Chapter 10

At times it does get a bit tedious reading about battles and commanders and warring groups. This chapter deals with the Ammonites and Arameans, both apparent threats to David's empire. When David sends envoys to Hanun, king of the Ammonites, the envoys are met with ridicule. By shaving off half of each man's beards and cutting off their garments halfway, Hanun makes them look ridiculous. This is a grave insult to David. The Ammonites, sensing they are in big trouble, hire the Arameans to help them. However, the Arameans quickly flee the scene of the battle when they encounter Joab. They are soon defeated and many of them are killed. The number of soldiers killed in battle is generally inflated to enhance the victory and the accomplishment. Now the only enemy left is the Ammonites. The struggle to defeat them is an integral part of the next episode.

Think About . . .

What is an appropriate response to being insulted and made fun of?

Today's Scripture Passage

2 Samuel, Chapter 11

At the height of David's success, he allows himself to give into a temptation, which proves he is all too human. The great king of Israel, who has many wives and children, spies a woman, Bathsheba, taking a bath and has her brought to him. We are given no insight into how Bathsheba feels about any of this, but we can imagine she would not refuse the king. And so the plot thickens. David and Bathsheba commit adultery, and when Bathsheba becomes pregnant with David's child, David quickly has her husband, Uriah, called home to be with her. However, Uriah proves himself a better man than David: during a holy war, a soldier is forbidden to have sexual relations, so he does not sleep with his wife. David gets desperate, and assigns Uriah to the front line, where he is killed. David then marries Bathsheba. David has certainly lost his way.

Think About . . .

Why is it so important to learn to control our sexual urges?

Today's Scripture Passage

Samuel, Chapter 12

Nathan cleverly confronts David by telling him a story. The story parallels what David has just done, but David is too caught up in the story to realize it. By condemning the man in the story, David condemns himself. When Nathan reveals this to him, David repents of his sin. However, as we know, the damage is done and cannot be undone. All actions have consequences. In verses 10–12, Nathan tells David that his action will unleash a wave of repercussions within his own house and family, and, as we shall soon see, this proves to be all too true. David is also told that his child will die. He pleads with God to not let it happen, but it does. However, a second son, Solomon, is born to Bathsheba and David. He becomes the next king of Israel.

Think About . . .

Even the king learns that his sinful acts have consequences. When have you learned this lesson?