

August 1

Ezekiel

Ezekiel 2:4-7

They won't listen

Ezekiel was God's prophet to the Jews, who had been taken captive by the Babylonians. God had allowed them to be taken as slaves to a distant country so that their sinful hearts would turn back to Him.

However, the hearts of the people were hard, and it would take years for the people to turn back to God.

So God encouraged Ezekiel and told him, "Do not be afraid of the people, though their threats surround you like thorns and their taunts sting like scorpions. Just keep telling the people whatever I tell you," God said, "whether they listen, or not."

What if my friends won't listen when I tell them about Jesus?

The Lord does not expect you to convince your unbelieving friends about the truth of the Bible, but simply to tell them that Jesus loves them and wants to be their Savior and friend.

Avoid getting into an argument with friends who don't believe what the Bible says. Instead, tell them what you know about God—His love and forgiveness, and about our sinfulness. But be careful that your friends don't feel judged. Tell them that everyone has sinned and needs Jesus to save them from sin. Also, let your life be an example they will want to follow as they see your love in action.

Pray for your friends before you speak to them and keep praying for them afterwards. By doing that, you will be planting the seed of God's Word in their hearts and watering it with prayer. The Holy Spirit will carry on working in the hearts of your friends to make the seed grow.

You should never feel guilty if someone doesn't listen to you. You are not responsible for someone else's decision. Remember, your friend may need time to think about what you said. So be patient—you may not see a change straight away.

Verse for today

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. 2 Timothy 4:2

August 2

Ezekiel

Ezekiel 33:30-33

Let's pretend

The Lord told Ezekiel that the people to whom he was preaching were only pretending to be interested.

"They are talking behind your back saying, 'Come let's go hear what the Lord has to say to us today.' Then they come and listen to you as though they really want to hear, but they don't do what you tell them. They talk about the Me as though they really love Me, but their hearts are greedy and they only think about money and wealth. You entertain them like one who sings love songs, or one who plays a musical instrument.

They hear your words but they don't put them into practice. But when I punish the people for their sins, they will know that a prophet was here among them."

How can I make a Bible lesson more meaningful to me?

Some people go to church every Sunday, yet they show little spiritual growth. There are no exciting changes in their lives because they don't put into practice what they hear.

Here are some things you can do to keep growing in your faith:

- Pray that God will help you learn something new.
- Respect your teacher and listen carefully.
- Take part by looking up Bible verses.
- Write down words that will help you remember the main points of the lesson.
- Ask questions to find out how this lesson fits in with other parts of the Bible.
- Think about how your life is similar to that of the Bible characters.
- Ask God to help you practice what you have learned. Then look for the opportunities He sends—which may come in the most unexpected ways.

Verse for today

But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. Luke 6:49

August 3

Ezekiel

Ezekiel 15:1-5

Dead wood

One day, the Lord asked Ezekiel, "What use is there for the wood of a dead vine? It can't be used for carving something useful, and it doesn't even make good firewood! Trees of the forest are much better for that.

When you do use it for firewood and the wood becomes charred, it is even more useless than before.

Just as a vine that does not bear fruit is cut up and burnt, so I will remove Jerusalem and punish the people because they have chosen to be unfaithful to me. I will turn their country into a desert."

Am I bearing fruit?

We face many choices each day. Some choices are important, some are not. Some choices can be made for us; others can only be made by us. Some decisions can be changed, some cannot.

God's people had made their choice—and it was an important choice. Unfortunately, it was the wrong choice. They had chosen to be unfaithful to God. They had not slipped up in a moment of weakness or temptation; they were stubbornly holding onto a sinful way of life. They had decided to worship idols, and their hearts were filled with greed instead of love for God.

A vine is not grown for its wood like a pine tree in the forest. A vine is grown to keep blessing people with its fruit year after year, while a tree is eventually chopped down for its wood.

Jesus said that God is the Gardener who cuts off every branch that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He cuts back so that it becomes even more fruitful (John 15:2). We have been chosen to bear fruit—not to end up as firewood!

Verse for today

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Matthew 21:19-20

August 4

Haggai

Haggai 1:1-11

The return to Jerusalem

After seventy years in Babylon, many Jews who had been slaves there started returning to Jerusalem. God was bringing His people back to their own land as He had promised.

Yet as the people settled in their home country, their main concern was to build beautiful houses for themselves while no one paid attention to the Temple of the Lord, which still lay in ruins. "It is not the right time to start building the House of the Lord," they said.

But the Lord spoke through Haggai the prophet, saying, "Think about what is happening. You have sown much, but harvested little. You have food, but not enough to fill you; you have clothes, but not enough to keep you warm. Can't you see why this is happening?"

Now go up to the hills and get wood to rebuild the Temple and I will be pleased."

Can one become too busy?

The Bible has quite a lot to say to those who are lazy (see Hebrews 6:12 and Ecclesiastes 10:18). God does not want us to be like a lazybones who never tries anything, does anything or achieves anything.

Yet, rushing from one activity to another and working like crazy is not what God had in mind for us either. One of the sins that the Israelites had struggled with before they were taken to Babylon was their constant longing for more money and things. Now that they had returned to Jerusalem, they again became so busy with their own things that they started leaving God out of their lives. They must have looked like ants rushing around; gathering and carrying, weaving and building.

So this is what God said to them; "Go and get building material and start rebuilding the Temple so that I can meet with you again."

In the same way, God does not want our lives to be filled with so many things that there is no time left for Him! With all the things going on, it is important to set aside a special time to spend with the Lord each day; whether it works best for you in the morning, the afternoon or the evening.

Verse for today

Come near to God and he will come near to you. James 4:8

August 5

Haggai

Haggai 1:12-14, 2:15-19

A promise of blessing

When Haggai told the Jews who had returned from Babylon that God wanted them to rebuild the Temple, they obeyed straight away. And as they began working on the Temple, the Lord encouraged them.

The Lord said, "Before you started working on the Temple you would expect a big harvest, but there would be very little. I sent winds and hail to ruin everything you tried to grow. Today you have finished laying the foundation of the Temple. See what will happen now!"

Although there is no grain left, and the grapevines and fig trees and olive trees have no fruit, I will bless you from this day on."

Do I have to do things to be blessed?

It is only as the people started rebuilding the Temple that the Lord promised to bless them. At this stage they had only laid the foundations and already God was just waiting to pour out His blessing on them. He had wanted to bless them for so many years, but their disobedience had kept His blessing away. Now the trees would start bearing fruit again and the crops would grow tall. God's blessings would fall on them like showers of rain.

Does that mean we have to do things to be blessed? God was not rewarding the people for what they did—but for being obedient! God had kept back His blessing so that the people would turn away from sin. Now that they were obedient and walking in His ways, the blessing He had been holding back could flow again.

It is your obedience that is important—whether it is to stop doing something wrong, or to start doing something that God has been telling you to do.

Verse for today

I will bless them and the places surrounding my hill. I will send down showers in season; there will be showers of blessing. Ezekiel 34:26

August 6

Ezra

Ezra 1:1-3, 3:6-13

Rebuilding the Temple

In the first year that King Cyrus became Emperor of Persia, he encouraged the Jews still living in Babylon to go back to Jerusalem and help rebuild the Temple.

The Jews who went back were very excited about rebuilding the Temple. They gave money to pay the stonemasons who cut blocks of stone and laid them in place, and also for the carpenters who did the woodwork.

They had dug deep trenches and laid a strong foundation. However, when some of the older priests saw the foundation of the new Temple, they were really disappointed because they remembered how much bigger the first Temple had been. But there were others who shouted and sang for joy because the foundation was the start of their return to worship.

Why are foundations so important?

Have you ever watched concrete being poured into a deep trench and thought, what a waste to dig a deep hole only to fill it again. Even though a foundation cannot be seen once the building is built, it has a very important purpose because the whole building rests on it. Without a foundation the building would crumble into a heap of rubble.

When our lives go through troubled times, we also need a solid foundation to hold us up and keep us strong. If our faith rests on Jesus, the Rock, we have a sure foundation. Those who do not know what they believe are on shaky ground. When trouble comes, they don't know what to believe or what to do. They suddenly feel weak and helpless—and their lives fall apart (Matthew 7:26-27). It is scary not to have someone mighty to depend on in times of trouble. Rely completely on Jesus. He is the Rock that will keep you standing firm in times of trouble.

Verse for today

*For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.
1 Corinthians 3:11*

August 7

Ezra

Ezra 4:4-5, 6:6-8, 13-14

The Temple is finally finished

The Jews, who had returned from Babylon, were excited about rebuilding the Temple. But soon, a troublemaker who had stayed behind, and some others who did not believe in God, became jealous and tried to stop them. They even sent messages back to the king of Persia saying that these Jews were planning to rebel and not pay taxes to him. And because of this, all the work on the Temple stopped.

Years later, when King Darius came to power in Persia, he searched through the records of King Cyrus and found the scroll where Cyrus had ordered the Jews to rebuild the Temple.

Then King Darius ordered that no one was to interfere with the building of the Temple, and he even commanded the troublemakers to help. He also said that taxes were to be used to pay for the work. And at last the Temple was completed, and the people dedicated it to God.

How should I pray for our country's leaders?

God had worked in the heart of King Cyrus who sent many Jews back to Jerusalem, and he helped them with the Temple. When they became discouraged and stopped building, God used King Darius to get them going again. God used these kings to help rebuild their place of worship. When we pray for our leaders, God is able to do great things through them too. Pray that God will help...

- leaders to make wise decisions. The decisions they make are very important because they affect many people.
- judges and rulers to know what is the right and proper thing to do so that justice is done.
- those in authority who have the power to make laws that affect our freedom to worship God.
- those who enforce the law; that they will know how to deal with wrongdoing so that we can live peaceful lives.

Verse for today

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone--for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 1 Timothy 2:1-2

August 8

Ezra

Ezra 7:1-7, 8:21-23

Ezra also returns home

Some years after the Temple was built, Ezra left Babylon with a second group of Jews returning to Jerusalem. Ezra was not a prophet, but a scribe—someone whose job it was to write documents. He studied the Law, which the Lord had given to Moses, and taught it to others.

At that time Artaxerxes was the king of Persia. He allowed Ezra and others to go back to Jerusalem and gave him gifts of gold and silver for the Temple.

Then Ezra gathered all those who wanted to return with him. He told them to fast and pray that God would give them a safe journey. (Ezra did not want to ask the king for soldiers to protect them from enemies along the way because he had told the king that God blesses those who trust in Him.) So they prayed for the Lord to watch over them and their children.

The Lord kept them safe, and when they arrived in Jerusalem, Ezra gave the gifts of gold and silver to the priests of the Temple.

Why should we pray before going on a journey?

Hasn't God promised to look after us and protect us all the time? (2 Thessalonians 3:3). Why then should we pray for something the Lord has already promised to do? Surely that would show that we don't really trust God's promises.

Paul asked others to pray for his protection. He knew that while we are in the world there will always be an unseen war between good and evil (Romans 15:30-32). Through prayer and by faith in God, we strengthen our side and allow the Lord's will to be done here on earth. By asking for protection we also show that we are trusting in God - not in our own ability.

Because we live in a world where things do go wrong and where people do make mistakes, we should pray for God's special protection when we travel, and remember to thank Him when we arrive.

Verse for today

*But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray.
Acts 21:5*

August 9

Nehemiah

Nehemiah 1:1-6, 2:1-3

Bad news

King Artaxerxes reigned in Persia for twenty years and Nehemiah served as his personal butler.

One day, Nehemiah found out that things weren't going well in Jerusalem. One of his brothers brought news that the Jews who had gone back to Jerusalem were being made fun of by the other tribes. He also found out that the wall around Jerusalem was still lying in ruins from when Nebuchadnezzar had invaded the city. For days, Nehemiah was so sad that he didn't even eat.

One day, the king noticed that Nehemiah was not his usual self. "What's wrong, Nehemiah?" he asked. "Why are you so sad?"

Nehemiah replied, "Why should I not be sad when the walls of the city where my people live are broken down?"

Why was Nehemiah so sad about a broken-down wall?

How would you feel if you found out that a friend you had not seen for months was being teased about her clothes because her mother had become ill and they had to sell most of their belongings to pay for the medicine? You would probably feel the same kind of sadness Nehemiah felt.

Although Nehemiah served in the king's palace, his heart was with his people back in Jerusalem. The problem was not only the wall; it was that the people acted as though they had been defeated. They did not have the will or courage to defend themselves against the ungodly lifestyle of the wicked tribes. Besides, some of these tribes were already living among them, and were even marrying them.

Living in disgrace among the ruins was not what God had promised His people. Nehemiah's heart wept for them because they were weak and unprotected—like sheep without a shepherd.

Verse for today

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Matthew 9:36

August 10

Nehemiah

Nehemiah 2:4-15

During the night... when all was quiet

When Nehemiah told the king why he was so sad, King Artaxerxes said, "You should go to the land of Judah and rebuild the walls of the city where your people live."

The king then gave Nehemiah a letter for the keeper of the king's forest to supply him with wood for the city gates. He even sent along army officers to protect the group of Jews traveling back with Nehemiah.

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he did not tell anyone why he had come. After three days, he and a few close friends sneaked out at night to inspect the broken wall. They stumbled around in the dark, going from one broken gate to another, looking what needed to be done to rebuild the wall. Then they went back home.

How should I go about tackling a big task?

You are not likely to be asked to build a city wall, but you may have a school project or task that seems like a wall. For Nehemiah, building a wall with heavy stones all around the city was going to be a big task—too big to just rush into without careful planning.

Here are thoughts that will help you get started with your task.

- Pray for God's help before you get started.
- Ask God to give you good ideas and to guide you as you work.
- Set goals. If the project has to be completed by a certain day, divide the work into tasks for each day. Remember, it usually takes a bit longer than you think.
- Plan the task. What materials will you need? How much will it cost? Will you need help? What could go wrong?
- Do your best. God is honored by a job well done.

Whether you need to complete a huge task or make an important decision, don't rush into it. First talk to the Lord about it, and He will make your plans succeed (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Verse for today

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? Luke 14:28

August 11

Nehemiah

Nehemiah 2:16-20, 3:1-3

Get stuck in!

Nehemiah's plan was taking shape. He had gone out to inspect the broken-down wall around Jerusalem. Now he was ready to tell the leaders of his plan.

When they heard of his plan to rebuild the wall, they were excited and said, "Let's start building right away!" But some leaders were not happy about Nehemiah's plan. First they laughed at him, then they accused him of rebelling against the king of Persia.

But Nehemiah answered, "The God of heaven will help us. We are His servants—and we are going to build the wall!"

Then Nehemiah divided up the work so that small groups of people and families would be responsible for building a specific section of the wall.

Can anyone be a builder?

What does one need to become a builder? Do you think one would need to have special skills and do a building course?

Well, most of those who were given the task of rebuilding a certain part of the wall were not trained builders: they were just ordinary people doing ordinary jobs. There were priest, perfume makers, goldsmiths and traders. Even the children helped! The daughters of Shallum and the sons of Hassenah helped repair their section of the wall.

Just as the people in Jerusalem had different jobs, we have different talents and gifts. Yet when we serve God, we should be prepared to help with the ordinary tasks too. Helping with chairs or tidying up are things we can do—even though we may be gifted in other ways.

Each one should do his or her bit to build up the church. Every person should work together with the person next to them to ensure a strong wall that has no gaps where the enemy can break through.

Verse for today

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. 1 Corinthians 3:10

August 12

Nehemiah

Nehemiah 4:7-21

Rubble and other problems

As the people started rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem, Nehemiah's enemies became angry and teased the workers, saying, "Even a fox could knock down that wall!"

However, the people carried on building, and soon the wall was half its full height. Then Nehemiah's enemies planned to attack Jerusalem and cause confusion. But, Nehemiah prayed, and God let him find out about their plan. So from that time on, Nehemiah had half the people building the wall, while the other half guarded them.

How can I keep from being defeated?

The enemy will try everything to keep us from doing what God has called us to do. He tried to stop Nehemiah's work in two ways.

Firstly, he got some people to plan an attack on the workers. Ungodly people can hinder and obstruct our work for God.

Secondly, he tried to discourage them. Discouragement takes away our energy and enthusiasm to do good.

This is how Nehemiah handled the attack.

- Nehemiah prayed (verse 9). God answered Nehemiah's prayer and helped him find out about the enemies' plan (read Ephesians 6:11).
- Nehemiah expected trouble (verse 13). He made sure he would not be caught off guard, and was ready for action at all times (read John 16:33).
- Nehemiah was practical (verse 13, 16). He placed armed guards around the workers (read Ephesians 6:16-17).
- Nehemiah knew the importance of unity (verse 19-20). He told everyone to stand together in times of trouble (read Romans 15:5).

Verse for today

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you." Deuteronomy 31:6

August 13

Nehemiah

Nehemiah 5:14-19, 6:15-16

Leading by example

King Artaxerxes made Nehemiah governor of Judah; and as governor, Nehemiah and his relatives were allowed to ask the people of the land for food and money.

However, Nehemiah did not take money from the people or ask them for help because they were struggling to survive on the little they had. Nehemiah worked on the wall like everyone else, and he even fed a hundred and fifty people and their leaders every day.

In just over fifty days, the wall was finished and Nehemiah's enemies realized that the work of rebuilding the wall had been done with the help of the Lord.

Why should a leader be like a servant?

Have you ever played 'follow-the-leader'? What is everyone supposed to do? The followers must watch the leader and do everything exactly the way the leader does it—because that is what followers do.

In real life, being a leader is a responsible job that should not be taken lightly because people watch their leader and follow his or her example.

Nehemiah knew the importance of being a good leader, so he didn't demand food and money from the people. He knew that the other leaders who respected him would soon be doing the same. Taking food and money from people who were struggling was not right. Nehemiah had come to Jerusalem to help them, not to have an easy life and boss everyone around.

Jesus had the same attitude. He—the King of kings—humbled Himself and willingly became a servant so that He could come and live among us and help rebuild ruined lives (Philippians 2:5-8).

Verse for today

But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. Luke 22:26

August 14

Esther

Esther 1:1-4.10-12, 2:5-7

The beautiful orphan

By now, many Jews had returned to Judah, while some had stayed on in Babylon, a city in Persia. King Xerxes became the new ruler of Persia, and in the third year of his reign, there were great celebrations. On the last day of the celebrations, the king (who was drunk) ordered his wife, Queen Vashti, to be brought to him. But she refused to come. The king was furious and gave an order that the queen was not allowed to see him ever again.

But after some time, when the king's anger cooled down and he realized that he would never see Vashti again, he became moody. So the king's advisors suggested that they find a suitable woman to take Vashti's place.

There was a beautiful young woman named Esther whose people had been brought to Babylon as slaves by Nebuchadnezzar. She was an orphan, and her older cousin Mordecai had adopted her and raised her as his own daughter.

Can God care for an orphan like a father?

There are children whose father and mother have died. There are also children who have been separated from their parents during a war and there is no way of finding their parents. These children are orphans. Some children may not have a father in the home, and although they are not orphans, it is just as sad.

God the Father has promised to take special care of orphans and the fatherless by being a father to them.

Even though God doesn't read you a story at night or check that your teeth are brushed, He makes sure that there is someone to take care of your everyday needs. God sees to it that His children are cared for.

If you don't have a father to talk to, or if he is away and you long to talk to him, talk to God as though you were talking to your dad. You can tell Him anything that is on your heart. You won't hear Him talking back to you, but you will know that He is holding you like a shepherd holds his lamb... and sometimes you may even feel His gentle love and comfort surround you (Isaiah 40:11).

Verse for today

A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. Psalm 68:5

August 15

Esther

Esther 2:8, 10-11, 15-18

Esther becomes queen

King Xerxes had ordered the officials in his empire to find the most beautiful women in the country and bring them to his palace in the city of Susa. Esther was one of the chosen women.

She was brought to the royal palace where she and the other women were given pretty clothes to look good for the king. Meanwhile, Mordecai, a cousin who had adopted her, advised her not to tell anyone that she was Jewish.

Everyone admired Esther, and when the time came for her to be presented to the king, he liked her more than any of the other women. He fell in love with her! He put a royal crown on her head and made her queen in Vashti's place. The king gave a great banquet to honor Esther, declared a holiday and handed out gifts.

Can God use me for great things if I am just 'ordinary'?

Esther grew up as a ordinary child. In fact, her people had been brought to Babylon as slaves—and she was an orphan.

God often uses ordinary people rather than great people whose hearts are filled with pride. Jesus said, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14). Do you remember how God used ordinary people like Joseph, Gideon, David, and Daniel to do great things for Him?

Esther may have thought about the message that Jeremiah had sent the people in Babylon: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

For years, life had been hard for Esther; yet God had blessed her and put her in a place where He could use her to bring hope and a future to His people.

Verse for today

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. 1 Corinthians 1:26-27

August 16

Esther

Esther 2:19-23, 3:1-2

The murder plot

King Xerxes married Esther, and Mordecai her cousin became one of the king's officials. Esther had not told anyone that she was Jewish.

One day, two officials who guarded the entrance to the king's rooms became upset about something the king had done, and they planned to kill him.

Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who went to tell the king about it. When the king found out that the two officials had planned to kill him, he had them hanged. Then the king ordered that the whole story be written in a book in which the history of the empire was recorded.

When should I tell on someone?

"I'm going to tell mom what you said!"

"Well then I'm going to tell her about the vase you broke last week!"

What should you do when you know about something wrong that someone has done? You should first ask yourself why you would want to tell on that person. Are you threatening to tell on someone because it makes you feel powerful, or because you want something from the other person?

Before you tell on someone, think about what it will do to your friendship with that person. Rather encourage the person who did wrong to own up. In this way he or she will be in control of the situation and it will keep your relationship friendly. A tattletale is never popular! We all slip up and make mistakes sooner or later, and no one wants to get into trouble.

However, if someone does something dangerous; keeps doing something wrong in secret; or is planning to do something wrong, you should let an adult know about it. In this way you can help the person and keep something bad from happening to him or her.

Verse for today

But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. Matthew 12:36

August 17

Esther

Esther 3:2-6

The VIP*

(*Very Important Person)

Mordecai had saved King Xerxes from being murdered, and although the details of what happened were written in a book, the king soon forgot about it.

Some time later, the king promoted a man called Haman to a position above all the other officials. The king ordered that everyone should bow down to Haman as a sign of respect. But Mordecai would not bow down to him or honor him in any way.

The other officials asked Mordecai why he refused to bow down to Haman, and tried to persuade him to obey the king's command. But Mordecai refused to bow or kneel before Haman. So the officials went and told Haman to see if he would let Mordecai get away with it. But when Haman found out about Mordecai's disrespect for him, he was furious and started thinking of a way to kill him as well as getting rid of all the Jews.

Is it wrong to bow to an important person?

In some cultures, when greeting someone or leaving a gathering of people, it is polite to bow. For some, bowing is as common as shaking a person's hand, while for others bowing is something you would only do if you entered the throne room of a king.

Bowing to a person is a sign of respect. However, when we bow before God in prayer, it is more than a sign of respect; it is an act of humble surrender. It is a way of showing that we accept God's authority.

The Bible does tell us not to bow down to idols and gods (Leviticus 26:1), but it does not forbid us to bow down to a person. Yet it is just as wrong to bow down in adoration of a person as it is to bow down to an idol. Only God deserves to be worshipped because He is the King of kings and Lord of lords!

Verse for today

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. Psalm 95:6

August 18

Esther

Esther 3:8-15

Revenge on a nation

Haman's dislike for Mordecai turned into a deep hatred; not only for Mordecai, but for all the Jews still living in Babylon. It all started when Haman was made the chief official, and Mordecai refused to bow to him.

Haman went to the King and said, "There is a certain group of people scattered all over your kingdom. These people have customs that are not like ours and they don't obey our laws. It would be best for you to give an order to kill every Jew in the empire. If you do this, I will pay you loads of silver for you to use as you wish."

The king was convinced. He took off the ring used for signing official laws and gave it to Haman, saying, "The people are yours; do whatever you like to them."

Why do certain groups of people dislike each other?

How would you feel if a hockey player (from a team that was known for cheating) asked to borrow your hockey stick? Would you be glad to help him out?

To be honest, we are all guilty of judging the whole group by the actions of some individuals within that group. When someone goes to a certain school, we may find ourselves acting differently towards that person because we don't like that school.

Jesus doesn't treat people differently because of the group they belong to. Every person is special to Him! He healed a leper who was treated as an outcast; He spoke to a Samaritan woman who was born into a hated tribe; He made friends with Matthew who was known as a dishonest tax collector.

People sometimes judge others unfairly by thinking things that are not true. That is called prejudice, which means *judging before*. Be careful that you don't get caught in the prejudice trap!

Verse for today

*Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.
Luke 6:37*

August 19

Esther

Esther 4:2-14

For a time like this

When Mordecai heard about the king's order to kill every Jew in Babylon, he tore his clothes in despair. As the message spread from town to town, the Jews fasted and wept.

At first, Esther didn't know about the king's order, so she sent her assistant to find out from Mordecai what all the fuss was about. Mordecai sent back a message asking her to beg the king to have mercy on her people.

Esther was afraid of going to the king because by law, anyone who went to speak to him without being invited could be killed. But Mordecai said to her, "If you keep quiet at this time, God will use someone else. And who knows, maybe you were made queen for a time like this."

Is there such a thing as coincidence or fate?

Do things just happen by chance, or is there a plan and purpose for everything in life? If you were to throw a tennis ball into a crowd of people, one person is likely to get hit, and that person may ask, 'Why me?' We could say that the person just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

However, when it comes to the everyday events in our lives, God leaves nothing to chance! We are far too precious for God not to be in control of our lives every minute of every day.

Esther was in the right place at the right time. God had everything under control when King Nebuchadnezzar brought her people from Jerusalem to Babylon. God planned that King Xerxes would banish Queen Vashti when she refused to appear before him. God made sure that the king wanted a new queen and that Esther was chosen. Then God used Mordecai, Esther's cousin, to tell her exactly what to do.

When you live close to God, nothing can go wrong with God's perfect plan for your life!

Verse for today

The LORD Almighty has sworn, "Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand." Isaiah 14:24

August 20

Esther

Esther 4:15-17, 5:3

Fast and pray

When Queen Esther got Mordecai's message asking her to speak to the king, she sent this message back: "Gather all the Jews in the city and get them to fast and pray for me. Don't eat or drink anything for three days. My servant girls and I will do the same. Then I will go to the king—even if I must die for doing this."

After the three days, Esther put on her royal robes and went to stand at the entrance of the throne room. When the king saw her, he invited her in and said, "You may ask for whatever you wish and I will give it to you."

What is a fast?

A fast is not the opposite of 'a slow'. To fast means to go without food for a while. A food fast could last for a day, or even a few weeks. You are probably wondering why anyone would want to go without food. Well, there is a good reason and it has nothing to do with dieting.

- Fasting helps our hearts draw closer to God because our hunger keeps reminding us about Him.
- Because fasting makes us weak, it helps us to be humble before God (Ezra 8:21).
- Fasting is a way of showing repentance—sadness for sins (Jonah 3:3-9).
- Fasting helps us find out God's will when we ask Him to show us what to do (Acts 13:2-3).
- Some people fast when they pray about something that is very important to them (2 Samuel 12:16).

Although some people, including Jesus, have fasted for forty days (Luke 4:1-2), a fast could be as short as skipping a meal. You could also decide to go without something else you might have enjoyed. The main thing is that a fast is between you and the Lord; it is something you want to do—a decision that comes from your heart.

Verse for today

So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer. Ezra 8:23

August 21

Esther

Esther 6:1-13

The king can't sleep

That night, the king couldn't sleep, so he ordered his servants to read his official diary to him. When they got to the part where Mordecai had saved his life, the king asked whether anything had been done to reward him. His servants answered, "No, nothing has been done."

Just then, Haman walked in; so the king asked him what he would do to honor someone. Thinking that the king wanted to reward him, Haman said, "The person should be dressed in royal robes and led through the city on horseback by the most important official."

"Good idea," the king said. "I want you to lead Mordecai through the city on a horse, crying out; 'This is the way the king honors those who honor him.'"

So Haman had to do as he was told. Afterwards he went home very angry and embarrassed.

Will mean, unfair people get punished?

Do you sometimes wish the worst on your 'enemies'? Everyone feels like that towards those who make life unbearable for others—especially the weak. One of God's characteristics is His justice (fairness). Because we are made in His image, we too have a sense of right and wrong and know that those who hurt others should be punished. But God does not want *us* to take revenge.

God is a fair Judge and knows all the facts! He knows about the things that have been done to you and the times you have been treated unfairly and said nothing. You can be sure that anyone who has been mean and hurtful to you will not get away with it.

So rather do what the Bible says; "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" Romans 12:19. God will take care of it for you. He will see to it that justice is done!

Verse for today

*For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.
Matthew 23:12*

August 22

Esther

Esther 7:1-6, 8:3-6, 10:3

Esther's request

Queen Esther had prepared a special banquet for Haman and the king. At the banquet the king asked her, "Tell me what you want and you shall have it."

"All I ask is that I and my people may be allowed to live: someone is planning to kill us!"

"Who would dare do such a thing?" the king asked.

"Our enemy and persecutor is this evil man," Esther replied pointing to Haman. The king was furious and had Haman hanged that same day.

Later, Esther went to speak to the king again and fell at his feet, weeping. The king held out his golden staff to show that she was welcome in his presence. So Esther asked if there was a way to stop her people from being killed. But, because of the country's law, the king could not change the order he had signed. Instead, the king gave Mordecai permission to do whatever he could to help the Jews defend themselves, which they did.

In this way, Esther and Mordecai put a stop to the killing of God's people, and the king put Mordecai in charge of his whole kingdom.

Will God allow me into His presence?

Do you think that a mighty king would allow dirty, noisy kids to run into his throne room?

God does! God loves having children around Him, and although we aren't in heaven yet, we can go boldly to God in prayer and talk to Him about anything. The Lord is loving and merciful, and even though we don't deserve to come into His Holy presence, He lets us come right up to His throne in heaven because Jesus has washed us clean.

Verse for today

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4:16

August 23

Malachi

Malachi 3:1-4

A Messenger from God

The Jews who had returned from Babylon to Judah had restored the Temple in Jerusalem and rebuilt the wall around the city.

But as time passed, they started slipping back into their old sinful ways. They were unfaithful to God and untrue to their husbands and wives.

But God wasn't giving up on them.

This is what the Lord said through the prophet Malachi: "I will send my messenger to prepare the way for Me. Then the Lord you are looking for will come to His Temple—the Messenger you long for will come and proclaim My covenant. He will come to purify His people."

Who was this promised Messenger?

Weren't all the prophets messengers of God who took His word to the people? How would this Messenger, whom Malachi spoke of, be different? God had sent many prophets, but the people had not listened to their message. Now God was going to send one more—His very own Son (read Mark 12:1-8).

The first messenger Malachi spoke of (in verse 1) would only prepare the way for Him. In Matthew 3:1-3 we read that John the Baptist was the one who prepared the way for Jesus.

The second messenger is the One everyone was waiting for—Jesus. He is the One who would declare God's promise in the Temple.

When Jesus started teaching and preaching, He went to the Synagogues and told the people that God's promise had now come true (Luke 4:18-20). Jesus, the Son of God, is the Messenger who came to bring the good news of healing and freedom for all who believe in Him. Only He can wash away the dirtiest sin and make our hearts as pure as shiny gold (Isaiah 1:18).

Verse for today

And this was his (John's) message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." Mark 1:7

August 24

Malachi

Malachi 3:13-18

The list

The Lord spoke to His people through His servant Malachi, saying: "You have said that it is useless to serve God and do what is right because it is the proud who are happy. It is the wicked who become richer and are not punished for their evil deeds."

When those who loved and respected the Lord heard Malachi's message, they started talking to each other about it. Then the names of those who honored the Lord were written in a book: the name of every person who loved the Lord was written down.

This is what the Lord said about those who loved Him: "They shall be Mine for they are My treasured possession. Once again my people will see the difference between what happens to the godly and the wicked; to the one who serves Me and the one who does not."

Is my name in God's book?

Have you ever stood in front of a Roll of Honor—a panel that lists the names of people who are honored for their achievements? Wow! What an honor to have one's name listed with those top achievers and heroes. As you stare up at the beautifully printed names, have you secretly wished that your name were among those on the list?

Would you like your name to be on the most important list of all? It may be on there already! If you have asked Jesus to be Lord of your life, your name is already written in the Book of Life. This is God's book, kept safely in heaven for that important day when those whose names are written in the Book of Life will be allowed to enter heaven and spend eternity with Him.

Verse for today

He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.

Revelation 3:5

August 25

Zechariah

Luke 1:8-18

"I am too old"

For four hundred years, the Lord had not spoken to the people of Israel. There were no prophets—just a promise of someone who would come to save people from their sins.

There was a priest named Zechariah. He was married to Elizabeth. They were good people who loved the Lord; and although they were old, they did not have children because Elizabeth could not become pregnant.

One day, while Zechariah was in the Temple burning incense on the altar, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. Zechariah was surprised and afraid.

The angel said, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah. The Lord has heard your prayers. Your wife Elizabeth will have a son."

Zechariah answered, "How do I know that this will happen, for I am old and my wife is also old?"

Will God answer a prayer I have forgotten about?

When we ask God for something specific, there is no way we can know for sure *how* He will answer, or *when* He will answer. When we pray, and there seems to be no answer for a long time, does it mean that God has said 'no' to our prayer? Or can it be that He will give us what we have asked for, but that we may have to wait weeks, months, or even years before our prayer is answered?

Who knows how long Zechariah had been praying for a child. Now that he was old, he may have wondered whether he should stop praying, for it seemed as though God had a different plan.

Is there a point at which we should simply accept that God has answered our prayer, but not in the way we expected?

Until God shows you that He has already answered—keep praying! As long as it is important to you—keep praying. As long as the Holy Spirit keeps reminding you to pray—keep praying. If God has given you a specific promise—keep praying!

Verse for today

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. Colossians 4:2

August 26

Zechariah

Luke 1:18-25

Zechariah is speechless

While Zechariah was busy in the Temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that his wife would have a son. But because Zechariah was old and his wife could not have children, he doubted the angel's words.

Then the angel said to him, "Because you have not believed what I have told you, you shall not be able to speak until this promise comes true."

The people outside the Temple were wondering why Zechariah was taking so long. When he eventually came out, he could not speak, so he made signs with his hands to explain what had happened to him.

What is faith?

How would you have felt if you were Zechariah—having exciting news to share, yet not being able to speak?

Zechariah had been praying for a son for a long time. Now that his prayer had been answered, Zechariah doubted, even though an angel had given him the good news! What had happened to his faith? Zechariah may have been praying the same prayer year after year, but he had lost hope and no longer expected God to answer. Is praying for the impossible not a way we show our faith? True faith is kept alive by hope!

Faith in God is trusting and depending on the Lord completely: believing in His power and relying on His faithfulness. The Bible puts it this way: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" Hebrews 11:1.

Have you wanted to ask God for something, but because it seems impossible, you have never prayed about it. Or have you prayed, but not really expected an answer. Ask God, and if it pleases Him to give you what you have asked for, the answer to your prayer will come at the right time.

Verse for today

But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. James 1:6

August 27

Mary

Luke 1:26-38

A heavenly visitor

During the time that Zechariah's wife Elizabeth was expecting her child, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, a young woman engaged to Joseph. Joseph was a descendant of King David.

Gabriel said to Mary, "Peace be on you. The Lord is with you and has chosen to bless you." Mary was troubled by the angel's words and wondered what he meant.

"Do not be afraid, Mary," the angel said. "You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God."

"But how can this be?" Mary asked. "I am not even married yet."

"The Holy Spirit will come on you and the power of God will be over you like a shadow," Gabriel replied.

"I am the Lord's servant. Let it be as you have said," Mary answered.

Could Jesus have come to earth at any other time in history?

God chose a specific time in history to send Jesus to earth. There are many reasons why *that* time was the best time for Jesus to be born on earth. The Bible says; "When the time was right, God sent His Son..." (Galatians 4:4).

All who put their faith in Jesus have eternal life because Jesus took their guilt and punishment on Himself when He died on the cross.

Those who lived in Old Testament times (before Jesus came to earth) had to offer an animal sacrifice for their sins. Although that sacrifice could not take away their sin, it was an act of faith in the perfect Sacrifice—Jesus, who was to come. In this way, even the Old Testament people were saved by their faith (in Jesus).

Verse for today

He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. 1 Peter 1:20

August 28

Mary

Luke 1:39-56

Mary's song of praise

After the angel had visited Mary and told her that she was going to have a son, she went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who had also been promised a son—one who would make the hearts of the people ready to follow Jesus.

When Mary came to the house of Elizabeth and greeted her, the baby inside Elizabeth moved. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and said to Mary, "You are blessed more than any other woman, for when I heard your greeting, the baby inside me jumped with gladness."

Then Mary started singing a beautiful praise song to God:

"My heart praises the Lord;

My spirit is glad because of God my Savior,

For He has remembered His humble servant.

And from now everyone will call me blessed

Because of the great things God has done for me.

Holy is His name."

How could I praise God with a song from my heart?

Do you like singing praise and worship songs? Have you ever thought of putting your own words of praise to a tune you know? You could even make up your own tune by first humming it until it sounds right. That is how many wonderful praise songs were written. David wrote in one of the Psalms: "He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God" Psalm 40:3. New songs keep coming from hearts that are filled with praise. How about putting some themes from Mary's song into your own words. Think of:

- God's power and might (verse 52)
- something to praise God for (verse 46-47)
- something He has done for you (verse 49)
- how He chose you and has a plan for your life (verse 48)
- the promises He has kept (verse 54).

Verse for today

I will praise God's name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving. Psalm 69:30

August 29

Mary

Luke 1:57-64, 2:1-7

"Sorry, no room"

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months. When Elizabeth had her baby, everyone thought he would be given the name of someone in the family, but Zechariah wrote his name for everyone to see. As he wrote the name "John", Zechariah suddenly began to speak again.

At that time, Emperor Augustus ordered everyone to be registered in the town of their family tribe.

So Mary and Joseph, who were engaged to be married, left their hometown of Nazareth and went to register in Bethlehem—the birthplace of King David.

When Joseph and Mary got to Bethlehem, the small town was overcrowded because of the many people that had come to register there. The time had come for Mary to have her baby, but there was no room for them to stay in the inn. Eventually, Mary and Joseph found a place for the baby to be born; and Mary wrapped Him in strips of cloth and laid Him in a manger.

Why was Jesus not born in a palace?

Jesus came to earth as a humble servant to show us that God cares for everyone—even the least and lowliest people on earth. Jesus made Himself nothing, and took on the humble position of a servant (Philippians 2:7). He, the King of kings, willingly came to serve—not to be served. Jesus was laid in a feeding-trough for animals to show that God sent Jesus to earth with nothing.

What would you have done if you were the innkeeper the night Mary and Joseph were looking for a place to stay? Would you have cleared out your room and let them move in? What about now? Some people's hearts are so jam-packed with their selfish lifestyle that they have no room for Jesus. Have you invited Jesus in and let Him make Himself at home in your heart?

Verse for today

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. Revelation 3:20

August 30

Mary

Luke 2:8-20

Shepherds in the field

At last the promised Savior had come. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, just as the prophets had said (see Isaiah 7:14 - Matthew 1:22-23, Micah 5:2).

There were shepherds spending the night in the fields nearby, taking care of their flocks. Suddenly, an angel appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone all around. The shepherds were terrified, but the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. You will find the baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger."

Then other angels appeared all around, singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to those with whom He is pleased."

When the angels had gone back to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in a manger. When the shepherds saw Him, they told everyone what had happened.

Why did the angels appear only to the shepherds?

Do you think the angels appeared to the shepherds because they were the only ones still awake, or was it because the angels didn't want to cause a disturbance in the peaceful town?

We can't say for sure why the shepherds were chosen to hear the good news about Jesus; but it may have something to do with the fact that they were shepherds.

Jesus came to earth to be a Shepherd; to save His sheep from the prowling lion (the devil), and to lead us in green pastures of peace and goodness. He came as the Chief shepherd—the Shepherd of all shepherds, and the One who would give His life for His sheep.

Verse for today

And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. 1 Peter 5:4

August 31

Mary

Luke 2:21-32

Jesus is dedicated

A week after Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem. He was to be dedicated and given the name Jesus—the name the angel had given Him.

Joseph and Mary did this to obey God's Law given by Moses, which said that every first born son was to be dedicated to the Lord. They also offered a sacrifice as the Law said they should.

While they were at the Temple, a godly man named Simeon was led by the Holy Spirit to go to the Temple. The Spirit of God had told him that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's promise of a Savior.

When he saw Mary's baby, he took Jesus in his arms and gave thanks to God, saying, "Lord, You have kept Your promise. Now I can die in peace, for I have seen Your Salvation with my own eyes."

What does the name "Jesus" mean?

After the angel had told Mary that she was going to have a baby, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him what would happen to Mary. "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save his people from their sins" Matthew 1:21.

The name Jesus comes from the name "Joshua", which means "God is our Salvation". God saves us through Jesus. Jesus became our Salvation when He died for our sins and saved us from death—eternal death.

When we ask Jesus to save us, He takes away our sin and gives us eternal life. And that means, when we die, we go to live with Jesus in heaven forever!

Verse for today

"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" -- which means, "God with us." Matthew 1:23