

Through The Bible In One Year

The Adventure of Many Lifetimes

Unpublished Work, December 2005, David W. Shockey.

Daily Devotional Companion

Week 25

Day 169. Read 1 Kings 19.1-21; Acts 12.1-23;
Psalm 136.1-26; and Proverbs 17.14-15.

Thoughts & Questions For Reflection:

Kings: Even a prophet like Elijah will have a pity-party now and then. “Take my life,” he prays to the LORD “for I am not better than my ancestors.” That means, as good as dead. That means, as useful as a dead man. How can he who stood so tall all alone, fall so far so soon? Fresh from the victory in a head-to-head competition with 450 prophets of the false god, Baal, Elijah now flees for his life, as the Queen vows to take his life in retribution. He has forgotten the lesson the LORD gave Israel through him. God has pity on his pity-party. Sitting alone in the desert in the shade of broom tree, weary Elijah falls asleep and awakens to find...a miraculous meal set out for him: a cake of bread and a jug of water. His depression is so deep, he falls asleep a second time and wakes again...you guessed it. There is the miraculous meal, bread and drink. What is God telling him? What is God showing him? In the strength of that food, he travels forty days and nights until he arrives at the mountain of God. Some meal! Marathon runners would kill for such bread or just a sip of such water. He has questions for God, no doubt; but God has one for him first: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” This is more than a rhetorical question. It is a loving rebuke. God knows full-well both the circumstances and the motivation for Eliajah’s fleeing for refuge to God in the wilderness: the threat against his life and his depression. Elijah justifies his coming, even as he clarifies the motivation: “I have been zealous for you, God, but look where it has gotten me. I am the only prophet left, and they are trying to kill me!” He hasn’t learned the lesson yet, so God gives him another: himself. God passes by in all his glory. Not in the cyclone, nor the earthquake, nor even the fire. In a voice. A still, small voice that could hardly be heard over the wind and earthquake and fire. And the Voice asks simply, “What are you doing here?” A Voice comes only from a person, and to be a person means to have will; and God’s will is...something different than what Elijah was seeking...or even thinking about...in his self-pity. When Elijah repeats his self-justification, the Voice sweeps it aside: ‘Go back. Anoint a new king over Israel and a new prophet for Israel, in your place. And by the way, there are seven thousand, faithful people still in Israel. You are not the last, as you suppose.’ Elijah is finished. He has taken himself out of the game. What a pity. What would have happened if he had stayed and stood tall, trusting in God, despite the threats against him. What would God have done

then? What new and more wonderful sign would God have given of his power and his love? **Questions:** 1. What causes me to get discouraged in my discipleship and following of Jesus? What effects does that discouragement have on my service to my Lord? On his work and mission to transform people in the world? 2. When I am discouraged or disheartened in my faith, what helps rekindle my faith, energy, and joy? What ways has God given to strengthen me and all his people, like the bread and water God gave Elijah in the wilderness? 3. How does God reveal himself and his will to me today through his Voice, his speaking to me? What can I do to be better attuned to his 'still small voice' so I can hear it clearly, especially in the storms and earthquakes of life?

Acts: The powerful give up their power, grudgingly at best. Herod, to win some political friends, arrests some Christ-followers and kills one of the original twelve apostles, James, the brother of John. It works. The world doesn't want apostles, doesn't want people "sent" from God as the word 'apostle' means. Flush with his popularity, Herod puts Peter in prison—the deepest dungeon, in fact—intending to win some more friends by putting Peter to death. The stage is set for a face- to- face, toe- to- toe, battle of powers. Herod has the weight of the world on his side. The church is... praying. The night before the execution, Peter is...sleeping. I imagine I would not be; but he is, chained between two soldiers. An angel rouses him rather roughly, hustles him through the open door, into the streets and freedom, all before Peter can come fully awake and realize it is not just a dream. So Peter goes to the home where the disciples are gathered praying and knocks on the door. One of them answers, sees Peter, and stammers in a stunned tone, "Peter is at the door!" "You are mad!" they tell her. There is indeed something crazy going on. The powerful are being put in their places. The prisoner is being set free. And the prayers—the disciples who were engaged in praying for Peter's deliverance at the very moment he was knocking on their door—learn a lesson about the power of prayer...and about the God who hears and answers prayer. When Herod discovers Peter has escaped, he sentences the whole squad of soldiers guarding him to suffer his punishment. Someone must be made to pay. The powerful of this world will demonstrate their power on someone, to their destruction. But the Power behind the world- the One who is this world's Redeemer—has the power to deliver people from the power of this world. **Questions:** 1. When I am under intense pressure from circumstances or from serving Christ, do I tend to rest comfortably like Peter or worry and stay wide awake? 2. When I pray, do I pray like the disciples did for Peter, being surprised when God answers my prayers? Do I pray with confidence and expect God to answer? 3. How has God helped deliver me from the oppressive power of this world? How can I share the deliverance God has given me with others who still need to be delivered?

Prayer: God, you want to deliver me from the chains and bars of my prison. I pray to you for deliverance; but so often—I confess—I don't really believe you want to...or will...or even can. It is no wonder my prayers often sound so hollow. They are. They are empty of trust in you. Your word says you will deliver me. You put it there. It's your promise. Let me trust totally in you, in the dark times of discouragement and trials, in

the tough times when you call on me to stand tall for you—at all times, let me seek your will and trust you will do it according to your time and purposes. Amen.

Day 170. Read 1 Kings 20.1-21.29; Acts 12.24-13.15;
Psalm 137.1-9; and Proverbs 17.16.

Thoughts & Questions For Reflection:

Kings: Kings should choose carefully with whom they pick fights. A neighboring king picks a fight with the king of Israel. Give me your silver and gold, your wives and children. ‘Okay,’ the king of Israel responds. Appeasement never works. The king ups the ante. He insists on sending his own officials to spy out the valuables of the king and all the officials. Personal insult to personal injury. Counselors advise the king of Israel to resist. So the fight begins. Through a prophet, God directs Israel to victory. Not just once. Not just twice. Again and again. They fight in the hills and lose; so the enemy says, ‘Their God is strong in the hills; we will win when the battle is on the plain.’ So God gives Israel victory on the plains, too, in order that Israel (and the enemy) might “know that I am the (only) LORD.” The exterior enemy is defeated, but then the real enemy is revealed...the enemy within. Coveting a vineyard he cannot have, the king of Israel himself throws a tantrum, and his wife throws a trial: the vineyard owner is accused by false witnesses of blasphemy against God, unjustly condemned, summarily executed. The king of Israel has picked a fight against a greater power: the God who protects the powerless and takes the part of the oppressed. The king himself is condemned to die for using his power against the powerless. When he humbles himself, God relents and decrees that the inevitable consequence of the wrong will fall...on the ones who take up power when the king himself has gone to be judged by God in eternity. **Questions:** 1. Remembering that Jesus said to ‘love your enemy,’ who is my worst ‘enemy’ right now—the one who makes my life most difficult? 2. How can I call on God’s wisdom to learn how to ‘defeat’ this ‘enemy’ by showing him or her God’s love? 3. To whom have I acted like an ‘enemy?’ What must I do to repent and make amends?

Acts: Despite resistance from the world and the evil one, the word of God continued to grow and spread. God was raising up leaders willing to be used by him wholeheartedly. In Antioch, prophets and teachers were rising. While they were worshipping and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Consecrate Saul and Barnabas for the work to which I have called them.” With this command from God, they fasted and prayed some more, laid hands on the two, and sent them off. They sailed to island of Cyprus, to the city of Salamis, where they proclaimed the word in the synagogues. On their journey they encountered a Roman official who wanted to hear the word of God...and a sorcerer who opposed them and tried to turn the official from the faith. Saul announced God’s judgment: for the man who would blind others to the light - blindness! Immediately mist and darkness struck him; and he groped about as one blind, seeking someone to lead him. This symbolized his life

of groping about blindly, missing the way and making others miss it, too, as the blind sought to lead the blind. When the Roman official saw, he believed. And when he believed, he saw...the truth, for the first time in his life. Barnabas and Saul traveled on. As these willing workers followed the Spirit's leading, the word of God continued to grow and spread. **Questions:** 1. As Saul and Barnabas fasted, prayed and worshipped to hear and discern God's call to action, what do I do to set aside time and space in my life to focus on discovering God's leading and purposes for my life? 2. How was I 'blind' before I came to truly know, love, and follow Christ? How have I been 'blind' at points in my faith development and following of Jesus since I became his disciple? 3. To whom have I helped spread the word of God? Whom do I know who needs it now? How can I be in prayer about them, serve them in Christ-like ways, and use the right opportunity to share faith in Jesus with them?

Prayer: God, I was an enemy and you made me a friend by forgiving me the wrongs I have done...and still do. Only now can I see how blind I was, when I thought I saw so clearly. Thank you for your Word which makes me see. Though it shows me sides of myself I would rather not see...or even know about...thank you for the very grace that helps me see myself, makes me more compassionate and forgiving of others...even my 'enemies' who are really just like me, but for your forgiving grace. Help me see myself...and others...as you see, through your eyes. Amen.

Day 171. Read 1 Kings 22.1-53; Acts 13.16-41;
Psalm 138.1-8; and Proverbs 17.17-18.

Thoughts & Questions For Reflection:

Kings: 'Make sure you tell them what they want to hear!' the messenger told the prophet of the Lord. Two kings were wondering whether to go to war together against a common enemy. 'First seek the counsel of the Lord,' the king of Judah advises. So the king of Israel calls together the prophets of the northern kingdom, around 400 of them, and asks, 'Shall I go to war, or refrain?' No sweat! It's unanimous. As one, they all say, 'Go!' 'No,' the king of Judah seems to say, unsure himself, 'I said, ask a prophet of the Lord, not your personal prophets of the god you worship, Baal. Isn't there a prophet of the real God to ask?' Groan. 'Not him! There's only one...and he never says anything good about me, only doom and gloom!' the king of Israel replies. One of Baal's prophets made horns of iron and was saying, 'With these you will gore the enemy and destroy them.' All the others were saying, 'Go! Go! Go!' The messenger told the prophet of the Lord to go along, but he says, 'As the Lord lives, I can only say what the Lord tells me.' When he stands before the king he says... 'Charge! You're sure to win!' The king of Israel is suspicious. Why is the prophet of the Lord predicting a good outcome, when he always predicts doom and gloom? 'How many times do I have to tell you,' he tells the prophet, 'to say nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?' The truth? Do you really want to hear it? 'I saw all Israel

scattered like sheep on the hills, because they were without a shepherd.' Shepherd means 'king.' 'See! Didn't I tell you!' whines the king of Israel. But he goes to battle anyway, after first putting the prophet in prison. 'I'll deal with you when I get back,' he warns. 'If you come back, I am no prophet,' quips the prophet in reply. The king of Israel even puts on a disguise and uses the king of Judah as a decoy. An anonymous archer shoots his arrow at random and...it strikes the king's armor at the exact point it is weakest and ...he dies. Imagine that. The prophet of the Lord predicted it. In fact, God is sovereign over all that happens in this world. A religious revival happens in Judah when a good son follows as king his good father. The son not only walked in the ways of his father but in ways pleasing in God's sight. He even rid the land of male, shrine prostitutes involved in the fertility religions of Baal and Asherah. In the kingdom of Israel to the north, a bad son follows a bad father; and the nation drifts from bad to worse. **Questions:** 1. When I have a big decision to make, do I tend to look for people who will agree with me; or do I find the most spiritually- mature person I know who will 'speak the truth in love' and say what I need to hear? Who is that person? 2. In what ways did my parents influence me spiritually for good? For ill? 3. How am I influencing my 'kingdom'—the people and actions I can influence through the relationships God has put me in at home, at work, in my neighborhood and community? What am I doing that is 'right in the eyes of the Lord?' What should I change ?

Acts: Everyone matters to God, but no one can come to God...through their own actions. Paul talks first to people of faith...Old Testament faith...but also to the foreigners who worship God with them in their synagogue. Paul builds a bridge to them by rehearsing for them the history of God at work in the world through the chosen people, the children of Abraham. Only after retelling the scripture story so that his hearers would know his faithfulness to the God of the Bible, does he add the crucial new chapter in God's story: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the key turning- point of the whole story, for which everything before has been but a prelude and preparation. Through faith in Jesus, what could never and in no way happen has finally become possible: there is justification for the one who believes in Jesus. Through the Law and one's own works, no one could ever be justified and set right with God. 'Don't miss the opportunity God offers you right now!' Paul warns. Take God up on his offer. Though it cost him the life of his Son, it is free to you. The only 'catch' is, it will cost you your whole life and being, because you love him so you want to give everything to the one who gave everything for you.

Questions: 1. If somebody asked me to tell the story of God's working in the world in a brief way, could I? What would I say? What would I say about Jesus' death and resurrection? 2. As Paul uses scripture to bolster his explanation and invitation to people who don't yet have a saving relationship with Jesus, what scriptures would I use to help persuade people of Jesus' love for them? 3. Which three scriptures, like John 3.16, would be most helpful; and will I memorize them, so I can be ready when any opportunity arises?

Prayer: God, I am so thankful that some precious people spoke your love into my heart and life. God, help me to prepare for the opportunities you give me, so at a moment's notice I will be ready to speak of your love for someone who needs to know you care for

them personally. Let my mind and lips be ready with your story and the story of how you have shown your love in my life. But first, let my eyes be open to see the other person's need, my ears open to hear what their heart is saying, and my hands open to serve and embrace them. Then let me speak. Of you. For you. To them, the ones more precious to you than they even can imagine. Amen.

Day 172. Read 2 Kings 1.1–2.25; Acts 13.42-14.7;
Psalm 139.1-24; and Proverbs 17.19-21.

Thoughts & Questions For Reflection:

Kings: Will the king of Israel survive after a fall? Inquiring minds want to know—especially the king's. He orders messengers to consult the foreign god, Baal-Zebub, the local god of a foreign city in Philistia. He has not only fallen and hurt himself physically, he has fallen in faith and is spiritually ill. We can imagine it must have been a super-secret mission for the messengers, the kind the king would not want anyone to know about. But God knows already. God sends a messenger—we call them angels—to send the prophet Elijah on a mission to interrupt the messengers of the king with a message from the King of the universe. 'Are there no gods in Israel that you have to go searching for one in a foreign country? Because you have done this, you will never leave the bed you are lying in. You will die.' The king's messengers come back too quickly to have accomplished their task. When asked why, they responded simply: A man met us and told us to come back.' And they delivered God's message sent through the angel through the prophet, through the king's messengers. How could it be that they happened to meet this man? God not only knew what their mission was but where they would be so his prophet could find them. Some God! The king was...unhappy, to say the least. He sends a captain and a company of fifty men to capture him. They perish, as God answer his prayer and protects his prophet. Fire falls from heaven and consumes them. Literally, lightning strikes! A second captain and company are sent. Same result. And then a third set are sent. Only this captain, instead of demanding, asks nicely: please respect my life and the lives of my men. God tells Elijah to go with them and not be afraid of the king. So the prophet stands before the dying king...and repeats God's message in person, word for word what the king has already heard. And it happened, just as the Lord had said. Elijah is taken to God as well, not by an accident, or even by death. He is taken by a whirlwind, alive. What a ride that must have been! Elisha, his prophet understudy, inherits a double share of the Spirit in Elijah. God's powerful, life-changing Word must continue here on earth. What a God!

Questions: 1. When I am considering some course of action or wondering might happen, do I consult God; or do I look for assurance from something other than God? 2. Which of the following ways do I use to consult God: ___ Prayer ___ Scripture Reading ___ Meditation ___ Worship to listen to the message ___ Talk with a wise & mature believer ___ Share with my small group ___ other: _____ 3. Is there anyone who needs to hear 'bad news' (how they are living a destructive lifestyle, for

instance) from me, so they can hear the ‘Good News’ that God has a better plan and future for them through a relationship with him? What am I waiting for? Can I look for an opportunity to show them kindness first and then speak the truth in love to them?

Acts: By word of mouth, news travels fast. Good news travels faster. After Paul and Barnabas share the Way to eternal life in the synagogue, many follow him to hear more, even some of the devout converts from paganism. They want to hear more. The result? The next Sabbath, almost the whole city comes to hear the word of God. Not everyone is happy, of course. The religious folk who were content with the status quo are jealous of the success and say the Good News is bad news. Okay. Now for something really different! Since the religious insiders will have none of it, all of it will go to the outsiders—the foreigners they would have nothing to do with. Quoting the Good News to the effect that Christ was sent as a light for the outsiders, to ‘bring salvation to the ends of the earth,’ they turn to those very foreigners who were hampered from entering the Way. Many foreigners gladly heard and more gladly accepted the invitation. The word of God spread throughout the whole region. So did persecution. News about the troublemakers spread quickly. Paul and Barnabas were expelled from the region, but that only meant they had new opportunities to share the Good News to other people in other places. They spoke boldly and many believed, but people were divided for and against. Persecution in the form of a plot to abuse and stone them is discovered and discreetly dealt with: they flee to two neighboring towns. And proclaimed the Good News. News travels fast. The Good News travels fast—and best—by word of mouth. **Questions:** 1. Of my friends and acquaintances with whom I am trying to share Christ, who fits in which category: 1) gladly hearing more about life through Jesus; 2) Open but non-committal; 3) Tuned out and turned off (they need much more loving from Christ first). 2. What specific things are needed for my various friends in their various places spiritually to help move them closer to life in Jesus? 3. When I meet resistance or even rejection in sharing Christ with someone, do I feel more like backing off, moving on, or trying again? Why? When is it right to back off? Move on? Try again?

Prayer: God, how you must feel! I hate rejection. It hurts. How you must feel, when I reject you...or reject what you want me to do for you, like share your Good News with the people you’ve put around me. Give me courage to share, but especially give me love that loves so strongly it will risk rejection...or even experience it...and keep on loving. Take away my fickle human love, and replace it with your supernatural love. Give me your love, so that I may love others as you love me...enduringly. And may others experience your love in my actions and words, so they come into the Way to life with you. Amen.

Day 173. Read 2 Kings 3.1-4.17; Acts 14.2-28;
Psalm 140.1-13; and Proverbs 17.22.

Thoughts & Questions For Reflection:

Kings: The dance goes on between northern and southern kingdoms divided over God. One king falls and another rises, taking up the dance...leading in one of two directions: following God or falling further away from God. Through every generation, as though through song after song in a dance, God holds out his hand to his people. He hopes to have a partner. Some danced closer, others danced farther away. Joram, king of Israel, danced away, but not as far as his father. Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, danced closely with God. When a vassal country, Moab, rebelled, Joram asked Jehoshaphat if he would attack the rebel with him. After a week-long roundabout march through the desert, their troops were worn-out and thirsty. Had the Lord of the dance called them to die in the wilderness? Jehoshaphat, who danced close to God, asks: Isn't there someone who can call God's tune for us? One of his prophets? Elisha is near. The Word of God is with him,' King Jehoshaphat says. Elisha turns a deaf ear. "What have we to do with each other?" he asks the king of Israel, who won't follow the Lord's leading. He relents only because he respects the king of Judah, Jehoshaphat, who does follow God's leading. "Bring me a harpist," he commands; and as the music is filling the air, a message comes to him from the Lord. A battle plan, in fact—a very strange one. Dig ditches. Make the desert valley full of ditches; and though there will be neither wind or rain, the valley will be filled with water. The next morning the ditches are filled with water. Their soldiers and animals have more than enough to drink; and what is more, God delivers their enemy into their hands. The enemy army sees the sun rising red on the waters and mistakes it for blood. Believing the armies of Israel and Judah have fought each other, they rush headstrong to take the spoil, only to be destroyed. God continues weaving his music, even in rebellious Israel. Empty jars are mysteriously filled with oil to feed a widows family. A barren, rich woman who shows kindness to God's prophet is given a son. The dance goes on. When will Israel follow God's leading? **Questions:** 1. How can I work with and minister to people God's put me in relationship with who are not following God's lead in their life, without being compromised in my faith and following of Jesus Christ? With whom is this most difficult right now? Why? 2. In the dry, desert times, when circumstances are difficult and resources seem too limited, what helps me to trust God rather than becoming unsettled or dejected? 3. What has been the most difficult of those tough times in my life? How did God provide? How can I share that story with others I know who need encouragement right now? How can I be God's means to help them in their difficult time?

Acts: It was his stare that tipped off Paul to what God was going to do. His eyes 'bored holes' in Paul. Lame from birth, he had never walked a day in his life. Seeing his faith in his eyes, Paul said the words he longed to hear: 'Stand up!' Stand up? He *jumped* up. He walked around. The people around are amazed. They can be forgiven for the mistake they made. They almost got it right. 'The gods have come down among us!' they shout, as they scurry to offer sacrifice...to Paul and Barnabas! Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, we must imagine, Paul and Barnabas decide to do the latter. They tear their clothing, a sign of mourning, rush into the crowd and shout, "We are only human beings like you, bringing the Good News and telling you to turn from worthless ways to the living God who loves

you!’ So shouting, they barely restrained the people from sacrificing to them! The crowd is fickle, though. The memory of the miracle fades fast when some persecutors come and sway the crowd. Paul is stoned, dragged from the city and left for dead. But Paul got up. And went back to the city, back to the city where God had helped a man stand up who had never stood a day in his life. Paul and Barnabas went from city to city where God had raised up believers, appointing people to stand up for God as elders and leaders. Then they returned to Antioch, from whence they had been sent. They had come full circle, and the circle of believers had grown greatly. **Questions:** 1. How has God helped me ‘stand up’ in life—made life richer and fuller for me? 2. When have I faced persecution, even if only in its mildest form of ridicule and been asked to ‘stand up’ for Christ? 3. Has anyone ever mistaken me for someone special because of what God was doing for them through me, through my loving Christ-like actions or words? Why, or why not?

Prayer: O Holy Spirit, you have lifted up a lot of people who have helped me ‘stand up’ in life. You have helped me into the upright relationship with God that you long for me to share: free and tall. I never would have been able to take a single step by myself without you...and your people who lift me up. Use me to lift others up. Through my words and servant deeds of Christ-like love, let others stand up tall and free in the new life you alone can give, becoming the way you always intended them to be: fully free and alive. And I promise, if they ever make the mistake of thinking it is I who lift them up, I will tell them the truth. You alone are God. You alone lift people up...even as you lifted me up. Amen.

Day 174. Read 2 Kings 4.18-5.27; Acts 15.1-35;
Psalm 141.1-10; and Proverbs 17.23.

Thoughts & Questions For Reflection:

Kings: Her accusation is just. Her question is appropriate. In the bitterness of her heart, she brushes past the prophet’s servant and blasts him. Are you toying with me? Did ask you for the son who broke my barrenness, who turned my bitterness to joy, only to drive me deeper into despair when he died? The prophet acts immediately. It is a race against time. He orders his servant to take his staff and lay it on the boy’s head. ‘Hurry’, he says, ‘and don’t let anyone distract you.’ Not good enough for her. As surely as God lives, I will not leave you unless you go with me. The servant runs ahead, lays the staff on the boy’s head as told, but life does not return. He runs back to the prophet who is hurrying on the trail himself. Elisha goes up to the room, prays, stretches his living body over the lifeless body of the boy until the body grows warm. Still no life. Again he stretches himself in close contact with the boy. Is that a...sneeze? A sign of life? Are those lifeless eyes...opening...seeing again? Call the mother! ‘Take your son again. He was dead but now he is alive.’ The army commander of Israel’s main enemy is stricken with leprosy—a wasting disease from which he will ultimately die a terrible death. A slave girl, captured

from Israel in a raid he no doubt led, says, 'It's a shame he can't go to God's prophet in Israel to be healed.' He goes, taking a rich reward and is told, 'Go wash seven times in the dirty, Jordan river.' Is he kidding? Just wash. Yes...in trust and obedience to God's word. He does and is healed...in spirit as well as body, for he becomes a believer. God play with you? Yes and no. Yes, he may ask things that look like nonsense, seemingly ridiculous things, that make no sense at all, like child's play. And no. No, this God doesn't play around. He is deadly serious. This God wants you to play with him forever...to live like a child in joyful trust, even when everything dictates against it. Even if death itself should intervene. He is more powerful than death...and he doesn't play around with it.

Questions: 1. For whom is God using me to restore them to life.? 2. Where am I in the often drawn-out process of being God's instrument to 'bringing to life' that person with God? Warming the body? Seeing them stir and breathe? Restoring them fully alive into relationship with God? 2. Who close to me has died? Am I fearful, dejected, even despairing? Or am I trusting God even in the face of death? 3. Who around me is mourning for a loved one? How can I minister God's love and hope to them?

Acts: It's hard to learn new ways, especially if they are God's ways, which are so foreign to our own ways of thinking and acting. Everyone must follow the old rules, mustn't they? You know, the ones the Old Testament people had to follow...about what to eat, what and when and how to sacrifice. If you don't you won't be saved, right? Of course! Of course not! It is probably one of the greatest understatements in all of scripture when it says Paul and Barnabas had a 'sharp dispute and debate' with the people saying that. So sharp, in fact, an arbitrator was needed. No less than the apostles and elders in Jerusalem themselves. It must have been quite a scene. 'Foreigners must be circumcised and obey the whole law of Moses!' one side protested. By grace through faith alone, Paul and Barnabas responded. Peter himself clinched it. 'We ourselves, though children of Abraham by birth, cannot keep the Law, so how can foreigners be expected to? It is by grace that we are saved, just as they are!' James, Jesus brother, speaks up finally. From God's word through the prophets, he shows this is the fulfillment of prophecy. And what must be required of them? Only to abstain from food polluted by being sacrificed to idols, refrain from sexual immorality, and from eating the blood of animals. The decision is proclaimed throughout all the churches by messengers sent to encourage all the believers. And Paul and Barnabas and many others taught and proclaimed the gracious word of the Lord. Everyone is acceptable, and the way is through faith in Jesus Christ. **Questions:** 1. How does it change my attitude and actions to know I am not saved by rules, rituals or any works I do, but simply by grace through faith in Jesus Christ? How does that motivate me toward actions? 2. When I have a question or dispute over faith matters, what mature believer or group of faithful people, do I resort to, to help me discern what is the proper course? 3. Whom do I know who needs to hear that the way to life is simply through faith and trusting God's grace, and not through trying to be perfect or even 'good enough'? Who needs to be freed from the treadmill of striving in order to experience the joyful, free life of a child of God?

Prayer: God, I just can't believe it. By grace through faith alone? Not by being good enough. I am so tired of the treadmill. I am weary with trying to be good enough. The bar keeps going higher...the goal keeps receding farther into the distance...and I am left like a runner out of breath, hurting and hopeless. By grace through faith alone. I can't believe it. So you believe for me. Believe in me as though I believe it, and let me one day truly believe it. Let me one day...even if for only one day...live the joyful and free life you want me to live...as a child. As your child. And when those moments come...may others see the child of God in me...and desire to become your children too. I know this, Father, is what will bring joy to your father's heart: to see all your children fully alive and free. Amen.

Day 175. Read 2 Kings 6.1-7.20; Acts 15.36-16.15;
Psalm 142.1-7; and Proverbs 17.24-25.

Thoughts & Questions For Reflection:

Kings: What if you knew every secret of your worst enemy? What if you knew every move they were intending to make before they made them? And what if that enemy suddenly came completely under your power. Wouldn't that be a perfect opportunity...to turn them into friends? Wouldn't that be a great time...to throw a party in their honor?! The king of Aram, a neighboring country that was continually at war with Israel, planned to attack again. He ordered his commanders to move the army to a certain place for a surprise attack. A prophet of God sent word to the king of Israel, 'Watch out, the Arameans will be there!' And Israel avoided the ambush. Time and again it happened. The enemy made plans, and God revealed those plans to the king of Israel through his prophet. What could the enemy king suspect, except treachery? 'Who is the spy among us?' he asks his commanders. Someone speaks up, probably to save his own life, to say 'Elisha, the prophet, tells the king of Israel what you speak in your bedroom.' The king of Aram is smart enough to realize who the true opponent is...almost. 'Send the army to capture Elisha!' he commands. The town where Elisha lives is completely surrounded. When Elisha's servant sees it, he despairs. The situation seems utterly hopeless. 'Don't be afraid,' Elisha tells his servant, 'for our army is bigger than theirs!' Who could he be possibly be talking about?! The servant looks and sees...not one single soldier of Israel anywhere. 'Open his eyes so he may see,' Elisha prayed. God answered his prayer by giving the servant a vision of the true reality: a huge army of horsemen and chariots of fire—the spiritual hosts of God—surrounding the army of Aram. As the Aramean army attacks, Elisha prays 'Strike them with blindness!' The soldiers of Aram are already blinded to the surprise God has for them. Now they are struck with physical blindness as well. 'This is neither the road nor the city you are looking for,' Elisha tells them. 'I will lead you to the person you are seeking.' And he took them straight to...Samaria, the capital city of Israel. Then God opened their eyes again to see...the tables completely turned...themselves

surrounded by the army of Israel. The king of Israel is smart enough to ask Elisha before he does what he intends to do: “Shall I kill them?” Elisha shakes his head, saying ‘You wouldn’t kill soldiers you captured yourself, why would you kill prisoners captured by God? Set food and drink before them, and then send them home!’ So a banquet begins for their enemies. Afterward they are sent home, safe and sound. And the scripture says a most amazing thing: ‘Aram stopped raiding Israel’s territory.’ The enemy was no longer the enemy. **Questions:** 1. When times are tough and days are difficult, do I tend to trust God’s power and providence like Elisha or get worried and hopeless like Elisha’s servant? 2. How can I see better with my ‘spiritual eyes’ of faith, rather than understanding situations ‘at face value’—by physical appearance only? 3. How can I do good to my ‘enemies’ to turn them into ‘friends’ through showing them God’s love? Would it help if I took a lead from this story and invited them to lunch?

Acts: Sometimes the Spirit says, ‘no.’ Sometimes the Spirit blocks, in order to open up new and unimagined opportunities. The reasons are murky. Two friends part company over a whether a third should accompany them on their next mission. These are not just any people. These two are not easily parted. The two friends are Paul and Barnabas, both faithful followers of Jesus Christ. They are divided because of a third, John Mark. Paul believed he had deserted them at a critical point in their work. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark. Either Barnabas disagreed about his deserting them ...or he wanted to give him a second chance. The disagreement was so sharp, the two friends parted and went separate ways. Nowhere in Scripture does it say they ever saw or talked with one another again in this world. Barnabas took John Mark and sailed to Cyprus. Paul took Silas and went through Syria. Both went strengthening churches. As Paul traveled through Asia Minor, the Spirit kept him and his companions from preaching the Word. They tried to go into another region, and the Spirit would not let them. One night, Paul had a dream. A man of Macedonia, a region of Greece, was beckoning and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us!’ Paul told the dream to his companions, and Luke, the author of Acts, says simply, ‘We got ready immediately to leave for Macedonia, because God had called us to preach the Good News to them.’ So they cross the Aegean Sea and arrive in Greece. In the major Roman town of Philippi, Paul preaches the word by a river to some women who had gathered there. One, name Lydia, a well-to-do business woman in the lucrative trade of selling purple cloth, cloth the color of royalty, became a believer. The faith of Jesus has reached a new continent because of a conflict. The Spirit blocked the plans of some people, in order to open wide a door through which millions will come to true peace. **Questions:** 1. When I have conflict with other Christ-followers, what do I do to try to resolve the conflict? (see Matthew 5.23-24, and 18.15-17) 2. How does God take the most difficult situations in my life, including the conflicts, and bring good out of them? 3. Am I attuned to the gentle whisper of the Spirit to hear his checking me, or follow his leading? How can I be better attuned to the Spirit?

Prayer: Holy Spirit, forgive my headstrong words and actions. When I blunder about my own business, instead of listening to you and following your guidance, lead me back. Check me in my tracks. Turn me into your way. Open my eyes to see and my ears to

hear your leading every day. Make me so familiar with you that I hear your gentle whisper above all the boisterous busyness of my daily life. Let me look for you and listen for you in every conversation and situation. Amen.

Through The Bible In One Year: Week 25

Sunday Worship Lessons

First Lesson (Old Testament): 2 Kings 6.8-22

Psalm: 139.1-16

Second (New Testament) Lesson: Acts 15.1-13, 19-20.

Theme: Turning Enemies Into Friends

Sunday Scripture Selection and Theme Explanation:

God delights in doing what is impossible for people. The surest sign of God's supernatural power is his turning enemies into friends. In Christ's cross, God was doing just that, by providing the way for fallen people such as ourselves to be restored in relationship with the perfect God. In the Old Testament lesson chosen for this Sunday is a remarkable story of God making peace between two warring enemies. When one army is at the mercy of the other, instead of a bloodbath, a banquet follows, the victor hosting the vanquished. They are vanquished, not by force of arms, but by kindness. In the New Testament lesson, a sharp controversy has arisen in the early church about what foreign converts must do to be saved and included among God's people. Some argue sharply they must fulfill the whole law of Moses from the Old Testament, but Paul and Barnabas insist that all are saved by God's grace through faith and not by their works. A great council is called and debates the problem. The upshot is: all are saved simply by God's grace and not by following rules or rituals. The foreign believers are required only to refrain from eating food sacrificed to idols, sexual immorality, and from consuming blood. The door is opened for foreigners to accept salvation through faith in Christ alone, without having to leap over cultural or historical barriers. Those who were far away have been brought near. 'Enemies' have been turned into friends.