

THE GREAT BIBLE STORY

The stories of the Bible retold in 128 steps
in simple language for daily reading

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The Great Bible Story #1

In the beginning, God

Even before God created time, He was there. He is God, without beginning or end. He exists independently of everything else, and nothing exists today that He has not created. In eternity past, when there was nothing else apart from God, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit enjoyed a wonderful relationship together. When we think about it we can understand that this one and only God, even when there was nothing else besides Him, was not lonely because they were together, the Father, the Son and the Spirit! This mysterious existence, where the one and only God exists as a trinity -- three different persons, is not something any man has thought up, but this is something God has revealed to us from His side. We know it is beyond our small mind to understand what this really means, or how it works out in practical details, but we believe it because that is what God has told us through His word, the Bible. Now we know the Son by His name Jesus. But He was not called 'the Son' because He was God's son through a mother, but because He was designated as the Son. The Father, the Son and the Spirit are all equally God, and together they are but one God. They work together with individual roles without clash of personality or opinion. There is a oneness of heart and mind in this relationship that is the pattern for human beings to seek after, who are different as individuals but who are to aim to become one in heart and mind.

Everything we see around us was created by God from the nothingness that was there at one time. God is almighty, infinitely so, and He can do whatever He chooses to do. His character is perfect in every way, lovely in all its details -- righteous, just, impartial, loving, merciful, patient and compassionate. Like light without any darkness at all. Obviously He will never do anything that is contrary to His nature. He is a spirit being, meaning that He does not have any material form. He is unconstrained by space and time, meaning He is everywhere at the same time. He knows everything, and since He created time along with everything else, and He Himself is outside of time, we can see from our point of view that He knows everything about the past, the present and the future.

He is perfect. Whatever He does is perfect, without fault. Nothing He does can be done better. In other words, we can be sure that He will always do what is most perfect. Once we know this, it is easy for us to trust Him and His word.

The Great Bible Story #2

Angels and demons

One of God's first creations was angels. They are invisible spirit beings like God with their own personalities, able to think, feel and make choices. They have no material bodies (no wings!), even though they can appear, if they want, in forms we can see. They have supernatural powers compared to us, but they are only created beings with limitations. They are subject to God, and He holds the limits to what they can do. They have to move from place to place and can't be everywhere at the same time like God, and they don't know everything. God has sometimes used them to bring messages to people (even though He now prefers to speak to people directly). Angels are countless in number, and there are also ranks among them such as archangels, cherubim and seraphim. They are involved in the worship in heaven and carrying out different tasks God gives them. God uses them to help us in miraculous ways, but we don't usually see them.

Lucifer was the leader of the angels at one time as an anointed cherub, with beauty and wisdom surpassing others. But then he began to think he could be equal, higher or independent of God. He was immediately thrown out of God's presence. By then he had managed to get nearly one third of the angels on his side, and they too were sent away with him. He is now known as Satan, and all the angels who followed him are called demons. Now they have turned their whole fury against people whom God created later, and especially against those who choose to follow Jesus Christ. They try to deceive and oppress us, and turn us to sin or away from God.

God has put a wall around those who belong to Him, and demons cannot touch us without His permission. In very rare cases God may allow them to oppress us in order to test us. But what we need to be careful is not to open our life to them, because then they can gain control over us in different degrees. If we continue in sin without repentance, get knowingly or unknowingly involved in occult practices, or worship idols, those are ways in which demons can get an access to our life. The worst form is demon possession where a man has lost control entirely to demons. Those who belong to God cannot be possessed by demons, but they still need to be careful not to give the devil any place in their life.

We don't have to live in fear of demons because Jesus has already defeated them. If we belong to God through faith in Jesus, God has given us authority over Satan and all his demons.

The Great Bible Story #3

Setting the stage for man

Now God was ready to create His masterpiece, man. Man was going to be like Him, with the ability to think, feel and make decisions independently, and he was going to be able to have fellowship with God. So God started with the creation of a place and environment for man to live in. There was nothing material till now because God and the angels were all spirit beings. God created the 'heavens' with all the galaxies and stars, and He created the earth as a planet in the solar system -- all out of nothing. The earth had its sky, air, sea and land. The earth rotated on its own axis with respect to the sun so that there could be day and night with warmth, light and rest, and the earth revolved around the sun with a tilted axis so that it could experience different seasons of cold and heat. The distance from the sun was just right, not too cold or too hot. The whole place was also beautiful to look at with multiple colours, different terrains of mountains, valleys and plains, a variety of animals, birds and fish, and a choice of delicious fruit to eat from. The water from the sea evaporated into the air, was carried over in clouds over land, and poured out through rain, filling up the lakes, flowing down through the rivers making the land fertile and finally getting back to the sea. God created animals, birds and fish breathing oxygen producing carbon dioxide, and trees and plants releasing oxygen from carbon dioxide. When everything was ready, He created the first man and woman, the parents of all human beings.

God shaped man's body from the mud of the ground and breathed His spirit into him. So this first man Adam was different from all animals because he had a spirit in addition to mind and body like animals. Now he could communicate with God who is spirit. In this way man is not an animal at all, but a special creation of God, superior in intelligence, and connected through his spirit to God and able to manage the whole earth. Another way in which man was similar to God was his ability to relate to other people. In spite of the fact that Adam had all the world to himself to do what he liked, God knew that he needed a companion. God had not completed His creation. He made a wife for Adam called Eve, using one of Adam's ribs. They were made to complement each other, physically as well as with two minds supporting each other. God's blessing was that they would have children and enjoy life with Him and the other people on the earth.

The Great Bible Story #4

The test and the fall

When God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden they were 'innocent'. They had done no evil nor seen any evil. They were naked but felt no embarrassment. They had an open fellowship with God and spent much time with Him. At that time God gave them just one test to see what they would choose. They could eat from any tree in the garden, including a special tree called 'the tree of life', but they were forbidden from eating from 'the tree of knowledge of good and evil'. He warned them that if they ate from that tree they would die the same day. Satan saw this as a great opportunity to get back at God, and so he approached Eve in the form of a snake and started talking to her. He said, "Has God forbidden you to eat from the trees in the garden?" "No, only from one tree which is in the middle of the garden," she replied, "God told us that if we ate that we would die." "O no!" Satan said, "Surely you won't die! God knows if you eat that you would become like Him, knowing good and evil." So Eve fell for the talk, thinking that the fruit looked delicious and attractive, and that she could become godly by eating it. She not only took it and ate it, but she also gave one to Adam.

Just as God said, they died on the spot, not physically but in their spirit they became disconnected from God. They became afraid of Him and ashamed and guilty themselves. They became aware they were naked, and tried to cover themselves with fig leaves. What they didn't realise at that time was that by choosing to neglect what God had told them, disobey Him, and yield to Satan, Satan had now become their spiritual father. All their children would now be born as 'children of the devil' with a sinful nature.

God knew what had happened. He called out to Adam who was now trying to hide from God. How different history would have been if at this time Adam and Eve had owned up their sin and repented before God! But Adam blamed Eve for giving him the fruit, and Eve passed on the blame to the snake! God told them that now they would both find life on earth greatly difficult and also have problems with each other. Their bodies also began to experience degeneration till one day they would die.

But even at this point God did not destroy them. He gave them clothes to cover their shame. He also revealed to them that one day a Man born to a woman would triumph over Satan. When God gave man freedom of will He knew man could go wrong, and He had already planned the remedy.

The Great Bible Story #5

The fall continues headlong

When Adam and Eve sinned they lost their fellowship with God. God put them out from the Garden after they sinned. Now men had to struggle with work in order to provide for his family, and childbirth became very painful for women. Relationship between husband and wife became sour, with the wife seeking to dominate her husband and the husband lording it over her. All creation experienced corruption, with ageing, sicknesses and calamities beginning to come up. Animals, fish and birds began to prey on one another.

The first two children Adam and Eve had were Cain and Abel. As they grew up, Cain took to cultivation and Abel to rearing sheep. Adam and Eve may have learned during the course of their interaction with God after the Fall, the practice of offering sacrifices to God when they felt guilty, thankful, needy, etc. Cain and Abel too brought their sacrifices to God, Cain from the grain he got from his field and Abel a sheep from his fold. God who had been observing these boys from their childhood was not happy with Cain, and He did not accept his offering. But He accepted Abel and his offering. This seemed to be unfair to Cain and he was very jealous and upset with his brother Abel.

God could see what was coming and He tried to warn Cain. He suggested that Cain should examine why he was angry with his brother and deal with it, because otherwise it was going to get the better of him. God was trying to give him an opportunity to overcome it. But Cain could not understand this, and he went on to get Abel alone into a field where he turned on him and killed him.

God took Cain to task for what he had done, and told him that from then onwards he would be a wanderer on the earth. This was an attempt from God to wake up Cain and help him to repent, recognising the seriousness of what he had done. But even after this, Cain felt no guilt before God for what he had done to his brother. He shrugged it off saying that he was not obliged to be responsible for his brother. The only thing he felt bad about was that the punishment God placed on him was too much. He hardened his heart, turned away from the presence of God, married his sister (there was no one else to marry at that time), and started raising a family which ultimately became big enough to set up several cities. Violence began to increase.

God started a new line of people from Seth, another son of Adam, and their generations began to seek after Him and call on His name.

The Great Bible Story #6

A total restart

As time went on, people began to leave God aside and become occupied with enjoying themselves and having their way. Immorality and violence became so rampant on the earth that God decided it should not go on like that. But there was one man called Noah whom God found to be faithful to Him. God made a plan to destroy everything on earth with a huge flood, to save Noah and his family and to start anew with mankind with this family.

God asked Noah to make a large boat by which his family could be preserved from the flood. God also told him to take in pairs of animals and birds so that their species could continue. As Noah started building this ark he faced a lot of ridicule from other people because no one had ever seen a flood till then and it had never rained. God's mechanism at that time was to water the earth with a mist, and it was beyond their imagination to accept what Noah told them. However, Noah believed in God and what He had told him, and during the next 120 years when the ark was being built, Noah stood as a witness to the people, warning them about the flood and inviting them to turn to God.

Finally, when the ark was ready and Noah's family (his wife, three sons and their wives) and the animals had entered the ark, it rained till the water covered even the tallest mountain peaks. All people, animals and birds, except the ones in the ark. Then God made the water recede, and everything from the ark came out, and life on earth started again.

God made a promise that He would never again destroy the world through a flood. He created a rainbow, telling Noah that whenever it started raining He would see the rainbow as a reminder of this promise. The Bible tells us that God would finally destroy this earth with fire, after which He would create a new heaven and a new earth. We also read that similar conditions would prevail on earth as in Noah's days, with immorality and violence, before the day Jesus would come to judge the world.

Cultivation started again, and one of the things Noah did was to grow a vineyard. He made wine from the grapes and drank so much that he became drunk and lay partly exposed in his tent. His son Ham happened to see him, and he went and gossiped about it to his brothers Shem and Japheth. These two went backwards into the tent and covered their father. When Noah woke up and realised what had happened he cursed Ham's son Canaan who later became the father of the nations known as the Canaanites.

The Great Bible Story #7

Uprightness under test

There was a man called Job who lived in Uz. He had seven sons and three daughters, and he was a very wealthy man who owned large flocks of sheep, camel, oxen and donkeys, and plenty of servants to take care of them. But what impressed God was that Job was the most upright man on earth at that time. He kept himself close to God with a clear conscience. Whenever any of his children met together with their siblings, Job used to offer sacrifices to God fearing that they might have sinned in their hearts.

One day Satan went to meet with God after having wandered all around the earth, and God asked him if he had ever seen any man as faithful to Him as Job. Satan's reply was that Job was faithful only because God took great care of him, putting a fence of protection around him. He dared God to take off that protection and see how Job would turn and curse Him. God accepted this challenge but set a condition that Satan would not touch Job himself.

Satan put all his power into play, and destroyed all of Job's children with a strong wind that brought the house down on them. Some marauders came and took away the oxen, the camels and the donkeys, and a fire from the sky killed all the sheep and the servants. Job was horrified to the core. But by faith he stood up and blessed God saying that He had every right to do whatever He wanted.

Satan came back before God and stated that sometimes people would bear with everything that did not touch them personally! So he asked God to take off the fence around Job himself. God was so sure of Job that He agreed, on condition that Satan would not take away Job's life.

This time Satan afflicted Job with boils all over his body, with itching and painful sores. His wife incited him to curse God and then to commit suicide, implying that there was no point continuing in faith. But Job's reply was that we should be willing to take whatever God gave us, whether we considered it good or bad.

When three of Job's friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about what had happened to him, they came from their places to comfort him and to show their care. When they saw him from a distance they could not even recognise him because of the effect of the sickness. As was the custom of their days, they tore their robes and threw dust over their heads as a mark of sympathy. Then they sat quietly with him without speaking for seven days, identifying with him in his trouble.

The Great Bible Story #8

Friends or enemies?

Job could not make head or tail of what was happening to him. He had been so faithful to God and had done everything he could to help people. But he now found himself in a heap of unbearable calamities. He felt God was not being fair to him, treating him like this without giving any explanation and not giving him any opportunity to argue his case. He had no idea what exchanges had taken place in heaven between Satan and God, and how he himself was the key player in God's plan to display the grandeur of His character and nature to all the world and to put Satan down.

Job's three friends had only a limited knowledge of God and His ways. According to their thinking, God was very exact in His rewards and punishment, rewarding the righteous with blessings and punishing the wicked with calamities. Looking at it in the reverse direction, it seemed to them that if a man was suffering that was due to his wickedness because righteous people would receive only blessings from God! So they insisted that there must be some sin in Job's life that caused him to receive all this wrath from God. This kind of thinking is responsible, even in the present times with the potential for much better knowledge of God, for much judgmental attitudes and passing of critical opinions about people who are going through sicknesses or other difficulties in life.

Job tried to explain to them how he was innocent, and how unfair life was. But they could not be convinced because their understanding of God and His ways was limited to a narrow view. For every argument Job made, they would only bring on more accusations concerning Job's hidden sins and proud attitudes.

Job himself could not resolve the confusion in his mind, and sometimes he would express his faith and confidence in God, but at other times he would be overcome by his perplexity.

Finally God stepped into this heated discussion by declaring to Job how He was far above anything man could understand or manage to do. Even though God did not answer Job's questions directly, what God did was to bring out the fact that if man wanted to relate to God it would have to be on the basis of trust rather than understanding.

God scolded Job's friends for accusing Job without cause. Job himself humbled himself before God for daring to question Him. God asked Job's friends to go to him for prayer for them. And then God blessed Job double for what he had lost, and he had another seven sons and three daughters.

The Great Bible Story #9

From chaos to faith

As people increased in number and became several small nations on the earth, they still spoke the same language. God thought that if people felt comfortable about themselves and their situation even while they were away from Him, they would never think of turning to Him. One day a group of people started building a tower in a place called Shinar, aiming to make it so tall that it would reach into the sky and get them a name and fame. God stepped into that situation and confused their language in a supernatural way so that different people began to speak in different languages which others could not understand. There was so much confusion there that the place itself began to be called Babel (meaning confusion). It was from this place that the nation of Babylon came up later. Naturally, people who spoke the same language grouped together, and moved and settled down in different places on the earth.

People soon began to forget God. Even though the elders passed on some stories about the creation of the world, the flood and such events, people did not connect well with God through them. Over a period of time these stories themselves got distorted, and people began to make idols representing their own concepts of God. Some began to worship the elements of nature such as lightning, wind, sea, river, etc., of which they were scared and which they tried to appease, and some others created stories about supernatural beings. They forgot the Creator and began to worship created things and creatures of their own imagination.

Among the descendants of Shem, son of Noah, was a man called Abram. His father's name was Terah. Abram was also one who worshipped idols in a family of idol worshippers. His wife's name was Sarai. In His sovereign plan for the restoration of man to Himself, God chose this man Abram to start a new work after His attempts with Adam and Noah had failed. He called Abram to come away from his family and his native place, promising him to take him to a place He would show him. With this short acquaintance Abram had with God, he became willing to obey Him by leaving his parents, home and hometown and start his journey towards the Promised Land, even though he did not even know where it was! This is the man who trusted in God so much that people later called him the father of faith. At this time, Abram's nephew Lot also joined him and Sarai as they started on his journey. Abram and Sarai did not have any children at this time.

The Great Bible Story #10

Abram, the ordinary man

Abram was seventy five years old when he left his hometown along with Sarai, his wife, and Lot, his nephew. As he passed through different places on his journey, he started making altars and offering sacrifices to God as a way of calling upon God. There was a famine in the land and so he went to Egypt where food was available. We do not know if this was a part of God leading him on the way to the Promised Land, or it was out of Abram's own plans. Anyway, when they reached Egypt he saw the condition of people there and feared that one of the men might kill him in order to take his beautiful wife, Sarai. So he schemed with her that if any man asked her, she should tell him that she was Abram's sister. In other words, he seems to have been willing to lose his wife rather than get killed.

Pharaoh, as the king of Egypt was known, came to know about Sarai when some of his men reported about her to him, and he took her into his harem. He treated Abram well because of Sarai and gave him plenty of gifts. But God was watching over Abram and Sarai, even though they had strayed from Him, and He took steps to protect them. God began to send sickness into Pharaoh's family to warn him. Somehow Pharaoh realised why this was happening, and he called Abram and rebuked him for not telling the truth about Sarai. Pharaoh also warned other men in Egypt not to give any trouble to Abram and Sarai.

But it seems Abram did not learn enough from this experience. Later on, when they were staying in a place called Gerar, he told Sarai to use the same guile. Abimelech the king of Gerar took Sarah. But that night God spoke to him in a dream and told him that Sarai was married. Abimelech replied that he did not know that, and he had done this in innocence. God told him that He understood that, and that this was why He had prevented him from doing any harm to Sarai. The next day when Abimelech questioned Abram, he replied that Sarai was also his half sister from his father's side. So Abimelech returned Sarai to Abram, along with many gifts. Then God healed the sicknesses that had come on Abimelech's family.

Abram was just beginning to know God and His ways. He had come from a family of idol worshippers, and he still had many things to learn. As we can see later, God took an ordinary man like this, with all his weaknesses, worked on him, and transformed him finally to a place where he was called the father of faith and an example to all people! That is grace.

The Great Bible Story #11

By sight or by faith

On the way back from Egypt to Canaan, Abram and Lot, his nephew, found themselves in a serious situation. Their flocks had become so large that it was difficult to accommodate all of them in the same place. Some of the men in charge of their flocks began to quarrel among themselves over this matter. Abram became very unhappy about this, and he told Lot that such things should not happen between them as they were 'brothers'. He told Lot to decide which way he wanted to go, so that he, Abram, could go in the opposite direction so that both of them could avoid this conflict in future.

The fact was that it was to Abram that God had promised the land, and Lot had just tagged along. Abraham was also the senior man. He could have kept his nephew in his place, so to speak, but he chose instead to treat him as a brother. Strictly speaking, Abram was not obliged to give Lot anything, and he could have pointed that out. But with great magnanimity of heart, Abram asked Lot to choose whatever land he liked. Peace between brothers was more important to him than land or wealth, and he trusted in God to fulfil His promise and to take care of him.

When Lot looked around, he saw a land that was very fertile, and he figured out that this was likely to fetch him great returns in the future. One thing he did not take into account was that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were in that direction. The people in these cities were notorious for their wickedness, especially for homosexuality. Lot chose that land anyway, even though, in fact, he was choosing material prosperity at the risk of moral decay. He was so blinded by the prospects of wealth that he ignored the great moral risks to him and his family. He may have imagined that as a righteous man he would manage to keep his family from getting influenced by the people around them.

After Lot went his way, God appeared to Abram and reiterated His commitment to the Promised Land. He asked him to look around in every direction and said that He would give all that he could see to him and his descendants. He would not lose out because of his decision to honour God, but God's presence and blessings would make up for everything in the end.

What happened was that Abram chose to honour God and put His values above all, but Lot chose material wealth above godly values. Abram walked by faith, while Lot walked by sight. God who was watching both of them rewarded them each according to their choices.

The Great Bible Story #12

Abram fights to save Lot

When Lot and family were staying in Sodom, some kings came to fight with the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the middle of the battle they took Lot, his family and his goods as loot along with others. One of the fugitives from this battle went to Abram and informed him about what had happened to Lot. Abram had three hundred and eighteen men with him who were trained for war. Abram took them with him, and went in pursuit. He divided the forces, attacked the kings by night, and defeated them. He took back Lot, his family, his goods and all the other captives back to Sodom.

At this point a man called Melchizedek came and met Abram. He was the King of Salem (meaning peace), and his name could be translated as 'righteousness'. He was also a priest of the Most High God. Apart from this there is no record of who he was and where he had come from suddenly at this point. Because of this some Bible scholars are of the opinion that Melchizedek was actually Jesus, the Son of God, appearing briefly on the scene to bless Abram. Melchizedek blessed Abram and reminded him in this time of great victory that it was God who owned all the heaven and earth, and that it was He who had given Abram the victory. In this way Abram was prevented from thinking high thoughts about himself by taking credit for the victory. Out of a sense of reverence towards God and gratitude, Abram responded by giving one tenth of all he had to Melchizedek. There is no record that tells us about God having given any command for paying the tithe (one tenth) at this point in time. Melchizedek himself did not ask for it. It may have been Abram's spontaneous response, or it may have been a practice among some people at that time. Melchizedek received this from Abram as the priest of God. The Bible also tells us that Jesus is a High Priest after the order of Melchizedek, which also points to the possibility that this was Jesus.

The King of Sodom met Abram after the battle and proposed to Abram that he could keep all the goods he had got from the battle if he would give all the captives to the king. But Abram had just been reminded by Melchizedek that it was God who was the owner of everything in heaven and earth, and he was not going to be greedy for the spoil of the battle. He told the king that he would not take even a thread or a sandal strap or anything that belonged to the king because he did not want it to be said later that it was the King of Sodom who made Abram rich.

The Great Bible Story #13

Abram and the promise

God spoke to Abram after seeing how he had dealt with Lot and the land, and the spoil from the battle. He told him that his reward would be very great because of his faith and faithfulness. But Abram wondered what good the reward would be without an heir, since he did not have any children. He was trying to reconcile in his mind with the thought that his servant Eliezer would become his heir. But God had great plans for Abram. He took him outside, and showed him the stars in heaven and teased him, asking him to count them. God said Abram's descendants would be more in number than the stars!

This was a great moment of Abram's life. He believed God and in what He said, even though he and his wife were old. God recognised this simple trust in Him and responded by declaring Abram as one who was acceptable to Him. This has become an outstanding example to all human beings to show that it is faith -- our trust that relies on God and yields to Him -- is the one that gets us a right standing with God.

Abram wondered how God was going to give him the Promised Land. God asked him to make an animal sacrifice cutting the animals into two halves. As Abram watched in awe, God made as if a smoking oven and a flaming torch passed through the sacrifice, between the cut pieces. There God renewed His promise to Abram that He would give the land from Egypt to the River Euphrates to his descendants.

As time passed by and Abram and Sarai did not get any child, they started wondering. Sarai suggested that perhaps they could have children if Abram would take Hagar, her Egyptian maid, as his wife. Abram did not give up his faith in God, but he may have thought that perhaps this was how God was going to fulfil His promise. In that moment of weakness Abram agreed, and took Hagar also as his wife. But when Hagar became pregnant she began to despise her mistress, Sarai. This became a problem for Abram and Sarai, and Abram found himself helpless trying to deal with both women. Sarai began to treat Hagar harshly. Hagar ran away to the desert in despair. But God was watching her and spoke to her saying that she should return and submit to Sarai at this time. He said that she would have a son whom she was to call Ishmael. Ishmael would be a wild man -- he would be against everybody, and everybody against him. So Hagar returned to Abram and Sarai, and gave birth to Ishmael, the first son of Abram. Abram was eighty six years old when Ishmael was born.

The Great Bible Story #14

Promise and covenant

God came to Abram when he was ninety nine years old, reminded him about His promise to bless and multiply his children, and made an everlasting covenant with him and his children. He wanted Abram to walk and live before Him blamelessly, and He would bless him and his descendants so that he would become the father of many nations. He would be their God and they would keep His covenant. He would give the land of Canaan as an eternal possession to Abram's children. In order to signify this, He changed his name from Abram (meaning 'exalted father') to Abraham (meaning 'father of a multitude') and also his wife's name from Sarai (meaning 'dominative') to Sarah (meaning 'princess').

At this time God instituted the practice of circumcision for all the male members in Abraham's household, including his servants. This was to be a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham's extended family. In obedience to God, Abraham had all the men and boys who were older than eight days to be circumcised.

As we look at history we can see that the family of Abraham broke this covenant with God several times. God warned them, rebuked them and punished them so that they would come back to Him. Even when they went after other gods in idol worship, He never stopped loving them. His correction and punishment were all signs of His love for them which wanted them to return to Him in repentance. But because of their failure, they lost many blessings from God, they had to face much sufferings including long periods of slavery, and they were unable to keep the whole of the land which He had promised. But we can also see that from God's side, His love, care and protection are still with them.

Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised along with his father Abraham and all the other men with them. But God made it clear that it was not through him that He was going to fulfil His promise, but through a son whom Abraham would have through Sarah. By now many years had passed since God had made the promise of a son and many descendants to Abraham. Abraham had become very old as had Sarah his wife who was ninety years old at this time. Abraham had reconciled himself to accept Ishmael as his heir and he pleaded with God to recognise Ishmael as such. But God was very clear. He had promised Abraham and Sarah a son, and Ishmael was not the one He had promised. The one God had in mind had to be one born to Abraham and Sarah in fulfilment of His promise.

The Great Bible Story #15

Abraham, God's friend

One day Abraham was sitting in front of his tent when he saw three men coming towards him. We don't know if he was just following the custom of hospitality of the day or if he realised there was something special about these men. Two of them were actually angels and the third one was God Himself, all appearing as men. Abraham got up quickly, invited them to share a meal with him, and asked Sarah to prepare some bread, beef and yogurt for them. He himself hurried to make the calf ready.

As they were eating sitting under a tree, God asked Abraham where Sarah was, and he said she was in the tent. God told him then that by next year Sarah would have a son. By this time Sarah was beyond the age of child bearing, and so when she heard this inside the tent she laughed to herself! She was thinking how it was possible in her condition, and even her husband was old. God asked, "Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for God?" Sarah was scared to see that God knew what she had done, and tried to cover up by bluffing that she had not laughed. But God told her He knew she had laughed.

After food, the men got up, looking towards Sodom. God said to Himself that since Abraham was going to become the father of many nations he should be told about something major that He was going to do. He told Abraham that He had seen the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah, and that He was going there to deal with it. Abraham figured out that God might destroy those places in judgment, and thought immediately of Lot and family there. He asked God if He would destroy the cities if there were at least fifty righteous people there. God obliged Abraham by assuring him that in such a case He would not destroy the cities. But the reputation of these cities was so bad that even Abraham was not sure there would be fifty such people there. He reduced the number gradually to forty five, then forty, thirty, twenty and finally ten! He knew he was taking some liberties with God, but God gave him that freedom as His friend. God promised him that even if there were ten righteous people, He would desist from destroying those cities. After this He sent the two angels towards Sodom and Gomorrah.

When they reached the cities, it was almost night time. They were planning to sleep in the city square when Lot saw them and invited them to stay in his house for the night so that they could leave in the morning. They agreed when Lot insisted and went inside his house.

The Great Bible Story #16

God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah

When the wicked people of the city saw that two new men had come to Lot's house, they asked him to bring them outside so that they could have sexual relationship with them. This was the special wickedness that characterised these two cities. Lot tried to plead with them, but they tried to break down the door and get inside the house. One of the angels pulled Lot inside, shut the door and made the men outside blind so that they could not locate the door!

The angels told Lot that God was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness, and asked him to get his family together so that they could escape from the place. Lot had two daughters who were to marry two men in that city, and so Lot went out and told them to come away with him. But they didn't take it seriously but only laughed at him.

Early in the morning, the angels told Lot, his wife and two daughters to run away from the place as fast as they could towards the mountains and not even to look back. When Lot hesitated, these angels caught hold of their hands and forcibly pulled them outside the city out of concern for their safety. As they went, Lot's wife could not resist taking another look at their house and what they had left behind, even though God had told them not to do it. She immediately turned into a pillar of salt. Lot and the daughters went up the mountain into a cave.

God destroyed these cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by raining fire and burning sulphur on them. Everything was burned to ashes, and it is believed that the present Dead Sea is located in that same area.

The two daughters were shocked at what had happened, and staying in that remote cave without anyone near them they feared that they might never be able to get married. So they schemed together between them and decided to become pregnant from their father. They made Lot drunk with wine on two consecutive nights and slept with him. They did become pregnant, and gave birth to sons called Moab and Ben-ammin. These two boys later became the ancestors of two nations of people called the Moabites and the Ammonites.

This is what happened to Lot after he chose to go after wealth and prosperity at the risk of getting wrongly influenced by the immoral people of Sodom and Gomorrah. He lost his wife finally, and he had to see his two daughters grow up without any sense of morality and falling into incest.

The Great Bible Story #17

The child of promise

When Abraham was a hundred years old his wife Sarah gave birth to a son. It was now twenty five years since God had called him out of his hometown and promised him that his descendants would inherit the Promised Land. Sarah had been barren at that time. But now God fulfilled His promise, by giving a child to this old couple in a miraculous way. Through these long years as he was waiting on God for the promise to be fulfilled, Abraham did get doubts at times about how this was going to happen. At one time he had thought that perhaps he was to have a son through Hagar, Sarah's maidservant. But he did not give up on God and held on to his faith in God, and now he was able to see that God had not disappointed him. Sarah was so thrilled that at ninety one years of age she would have her own baby, that she laughed and remembered how God had caught her laughing when He gave her the promise and told her to call her son Isaac meaning laughter! When Isaac was eight days old, Abraham took him and circumcised him as the mark of the covenant between God and his family.

But their joy got marred because Ishmael, Abraham's son through Hagar who was now fourteen years old, was mocking Isaac. Sarah could not bear this at all, and she began to compel Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. This made Abraham very sad and perplexed because they were his wife and son! God assured him that it was Isaac who was the son of promise and that it was he who was going to be his heir inheriting all the promises He had made to him. God also comforted Abraham by saying that Ishmael would also become the head of a nation. Later we would learn that Isaac and Ishmael represented two ways of life, one by promise from God and the other by our own human effort. Only what we receive from God by faith will last.

Abraham got up in the morning, gave some bread and water to Hagar, and sent her away with Ishmael. As they walked through the desert, the water gave out, and Ishmael was suffering from severe thirst. Hagar put him under a bush, went a short distance from there and started crying. God was watching this, and He asked her why she was distressed, because He had told her He would take care of them. She looked and suddenly she saw a well of water nearby. She took the water and gave to her son. Later they both settled down in the desert areas. God was watching over them specially for Abraham's sake. Ishmael became an expert archer. From his family came the Arabs.

The Great Bible Story #18

The greatest sacrifice of all

Some years went by and Isaac became a young teenager who was Abraham's beloved. One day God tested Abraham by asking him to take Isaac and sacrifice him on a mountain He would show him in the land of Moriah. By this time Abraham knew God so well that he didn't even question Him or argue. He got up early in the morning, got two of his servants, cut some wood for the sacrifice and started going towards the mountain God directed him to. It took them three days to reach the foot of that mountain. There he told the servants to wait, saying that he would go up, worship God and return, and asked Isaac to go up with him carrying the wood. Abraham himself walked up carrying a knife and fire.

On the way up, Isaac asked his father where the lamb was for the sacrifice because they had only the wood and the fire with them. Abraham's cryptic reply was that God would provide the lamb.

When they reached the top, Abraham arranged the wood, and then tied up Isaac and put him on the wood. Then he raised the knife and was about to strike when an angel of God told him to stop. God said that now He knew how Abraham valued Him more than his own son, even though he was his only son. God showed him a ram caught by its horns in the nearby bushes, and Abraham took it and offered it in worship as a burnt offering to God. Abraham named that place as 'Jehovah-jireh' meaning 'God will provide'.

Of course, God was only testing Abraham and never intended that Abraham should offer a human sacrifice as might have been common in those days. God did provide a 'lamb' for this sacrifice, as Abraham said to Isaac. But Abraham's words had a prophetic meaning in that one day God was going to offer His only Son as a sacrifice to pay for the sins of the world -- our sins. This was the greatest sacrifice of all, demonstrating how much He loves us. Jesus was the Lamb without blemish, sinless as the Son of Man and perfect as the Son of God. The picture of Abraham offering up his beloved son as a sacrifice stands for that of God the Father offering His beloved Son for us. This was God's plan to save mankind, which He made even before He had created the world!

The place where Abraham made the sacrifice was one of the mountains in the land of Moriah. The temple of Solomon was later built on Mount Moriah. Jesus was crucified outside the city of Jerusalem, away from the Temple, on Golgotha (or Calvary). This may well have been the place of Abraham's sacrifice.

The Great Bible Story #19

Choice from heaven

Sarah died, and Abraham buried her in a cave he bought. Now in his old age he felt he should make arrangements for Isaac. So he called his faithful servant and asked him to find a bride for Isaac from his relatives. But he warned him that he should not take anyone from the Canaanites, and not to take him back to the place they had left behind.

The servant set out towards the city of Nahor, Abraham's brother, with camels carrying gifts for the bride and her family. By evening he reached a place outside the city where people used to gather for watering the camels. As he thought of the great task that had been entrusted to him, he prayed to God asking Him for a sign to know when he met the right girl. He would ask a girl for some water to drink, and if she offered to water the camels also, then he would know this was the right girl. Even before he had finished praying, Rebekah, the granddaughter of Nahor came with her camels to give them water. She was beautiful to look at and also unmarried. Abraham's servant asked her for a drink, and as she gave him water she also offered to water his camels. She poured water into the trough for the camels to drink. The servant could not hide his surprise for the miraculous way in which his prayer was answered. He asked her who she was and if there was place in her house to stay overnight. She told him that she was the daughter of Bethuel the son of Nahor. Then he bowed himself to the ground and worshipped God!

Rebekah ran to her house and told them about all this. Her brother Laban came running to see who this man was, and then took him to the house. The servant told him that before anything else he wanted to tell them about his mission. When Bethuel and Laban heard it they exclaimed that this was from God, and gave him permission to take Rebekah to Isaac. He gave them the gifts of gold, silver and clothes he had brought.

In the morning the servant told them that he would take Rebekah and go immediately to Isaac. When her family tried to persuade him to stay on for some more days, he said he could not wait to complete his mission. When they asked Rebekah, she was also willing to go. Then they blessed her and sent her with the servant along with her maids.

In the evening Isaac saw the camels coming. Rebekah saw him from a distance and when the servant told her it was Isaac, she put on a veil and got down from the camel. Isaac welcomed her gladly and took her to be his wife.

The Great Bible Story #20

Two nations start

Rebekah was unable to have children, but when Isaac prayed to God for her, she conceived twins. God told her that two 'nations' were in her womb, and the nation coming from the younger son would be stronger than the other. The first son was born hairy and reddish and so they called him Esau and the younger son came out holding on to his brother's heel. They called him Jacob, meaning grabber. God would later say that He loved Jacob and 'hated' Esau. This was not really about these two individuals but about the sovereign choice which God had made for the nation of Israel which would come from Jacob. Since God loves everyone He creates, He did not have any hatred for Esau. These words 'love' and 'hate' were used here in a comparative way.

As the boys grew up, Esau became an outdoor man and a skilful hunter of animals, and Jacob was one who liked to stay quietly at home. Isaac and Rebekah made a mistake of choosing their favourites, and Isaac liked Esau for the tasty food he brought and Rebekah liked Jacob who was with her at home. This caused problems between the two brothers too. One day when Esau came back from hunting he was famished, and he saw that Jacob had prepared some lentil stew which gave out an inviting aroma. He asked Jacob if he could have some. Cunning man that Jacob was, he said that he would give Esau the stew if Esau would give him the birthright (that stood for his position as the first born and which entitled him to his father's blessings and inheritance according to the custom of those days). Esau was so hungry he didn't care for the birthright. He gave it away and took the stew from Jacob.

Isaac was getting old and he could hardly see. One day he asked Esau to hunt and make some food for him saying then he would pass on his blessings to him. Rebekah overheard it, and she told Jacob to pretend to be Esau and get the blessing. Jacob was scared he would be found out, and so she covered his hands with goat skins to imitate Esau's hair. She prepared the food and he took it to Isaac. Isaac was doubtful if this was Esau, but Jacob assured him he was. So Isaac blessed him with great blessings.

Later Esau came with his food and discovered that Jacob had stolen his blessings from Isaac. He was so mad with Jacob for taking away his birthright and now his blessings, that he wanted to kill him. Rebekah understood this and sent Jacob off to Laban, her brother, telling Isaac that Jacob needed to get a wife from there.

The Great Bible Story #21

Jacob's meeting with God

When Jacob was on his way to his uncle Laban's home, it became night and he slept there using a stone as pillow. In a dream he saw a ladder between the earth and heaven and angels going up and down. On the top was the Lord, who identified Himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac, and told him how He would bless him and give the place where he was sleeping to his descendants. Jacob woke up and said to himself that God was there and this was the gateway to heaven. So he called the place Bethel and promised God that if He took care of him and brought him back safely then He would be his God. That was all the knowledge of God he had at this time, but it was a beginning.

As he moved on, Jacob came to a watering place for cattle. He asked around to see if anyone knew Laban. To his surprise he was told that Laban's daughter Rachel, Jacob's cousin, was coming with her sheep. He was very moved when he saw her, kissed her and told her who he was. She ran and told her father about him. Laban came promptly and took him to his house. There Jacob met the family including Leah, Rachel's elder sister. As they were making plans for Jacob Laban asked him what he wanted as salary for working for him. Jacob's reply was that he would work seven years if he could get Rachel as his wife. He had fallen in love with her, and the years went off fast as he waited for her.

When the time was up, Laban arranged for the wedding. But he stealthily gave Jacob Leah as wife instead of Rachel. Jacob was very angry with Laban for cheating him. But Laban's explanation was that it was customary to get the older girl married first. But he tried to compensate by saying Jacob could have Rachel also if he worked for another seven years! The wily Jacob had met his match! After a week with Leah, he got Rachel also.

Leah gave birth to Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah. But Rachel was unable to have children. So she gave her maid Bilhah to Jacob thinking she could have children indirectly. Bilhah gave birth to Dan and Naphtali. When Leah saw this she gave Jacob her maid Zilpah who gave birth to Gad and Asher. Then Leah had two more sons called Issachar and Zebulun and a daughter called Dinah. Finally God healed Rachel and she had a son called Joseph.

At this time Jacob told Laban that he wanted to go back home with his family. But Laban had noted that God was blessing him since Jacob came, and so he offered a plan for sharing the profits. But God was with Jacob.

The Great Bible Story #22

Encounter with God

When Jacob began to prosper, Laban's sons felt that he was taking away their father's wealth. Jacob thought it would be difficult to stay there any more, and decided to take his family and return home. He called Leah and Rachel and told them how their father had tried to cheat him several times and how God had helped him to get all his wealth. His wives were with him on this, and they were quite happy to leave.

Jacob left Laban secretly, put his wives on camels and drove away with all his cattle. It was three days before Laban came to know what Jacob had done, and he rushed after him. But God spoke to Laban on the way and warned him not to do any harm to Jacob. When Laban caught up with Jacob he scolded him for running away without telling him and taking away his daughters. Jacob's reply was that he was afraid Laban would not let go of his daughters. Finally Laban and he agreed to part peacefully.

Jacob then sent some messengers to Esau to say that he was returning from Laban and how God had blessed him with much. His messengers returned to him saying Esau was coming to meet him along with four hundred men! This drove Jacob into a panic, and he immediately prayed to God to deliver him. He also began to make a plan to defend himself and his family from Esau. He decided to send a huge gift of animals for Esau to go in front of them, followed by Leah and her children and then Rachel and her son.

In the night when Jacob was alone, a man came and wrestled with him. Though it went on the whole night, Jacob would not yield. Then the man touched Jacob's thigh and dislocated it. Jacob realised this was God Himself and said he wouldn't let go unless He blessed him. There God blessed him and changed Jacob's name to Israel meaning a prince with God. This scheming man had finally found his blessing in his weakness.

The next day Jacob saw Esau coming. But when he came, he embraced and kissed Jacob, and they both wept. Esau was not keen to take all the gifts from Jacob because he too had plenty, but Jacob was still scared in his heart about Esau and insisted that he should take them. Jacob tried to flatter Esau by saying that seeing him was like seeing the face of God! When Esau suggested that they could both travel together and get back home, Jacob excused himself saying he would follow slowly because of the children. But after Esau had left, Jacob went off in another direction! He settled down in Shechem and built an altar for God.

The Great Bible Story #23

Joseph the dreamer

God told Jacob to stay at Bethel where he had seen his dream and to erect an altar there for Him. He blessed him with the promise He had given to Abraham and Isaac, and said that the land of Canaan would be given to his descendants and they would become a great nation. Rachel gave birth to another son called Benjamin, but passed away with the childbirth. This completed the list of the twelve sons of Jacob who became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Now Jacob had his favourite son, Joseph, to whom he gave a multi-coloured robe, and all his brothers began to dislike him. When he was seventeen years old he was with his brothers shepherding their father's flock. But then he saw a dream in which all of them were binding their sheaves into bundles, and his brothers' sheaves bowed down to his. In another dream he had, the sun, moon and eleven stars were bowing down to him! This was enough to tick off his brothers who now began to hate him.

One day, when Joseph's brothers were pasturing the sheep in another place, Jacob asked him to go and see if they were all right. When they saw him coming, they thought it was now their opportunity to get back at him. They wanted to kill him, and took off his robe, but Reuben convinced them not to do that to their brother. He suggested putting him in a dry pit thinking that later he would return him to the father. But when Reuben was not there, these brothers sold him off to some traders going towards Egypt. Then they killed a lamb, dipped Joseph's robe in its blood and took it to Jacob saying that perhaps some wild animal had killed him. Jacob's sorrow had no limit.

In Egypt, Joseph was sold as a slave to Potiphar, a high official with Pharaoh, the king. Joseph was so faithful there that Potiphar handed over the complete charge of his house to Joseph. But Potiphar's wife was attracted to Joseph and invited him to sleep with her. But Joseph was clear that he could not do that against God, and tried to avoid her. Once when he was alone in the house, she caught him by his dress and tried to force him. But he ran away, leaving his coat behind. She was so furious at being frustrated that she screamed and started saying he had tried to rape her. When Potiphar came to know about this, he had no option but to put Joseph in jail. Joseph was faithful even there, and soon the jailer put him in charge of the other prisoners. God was with him, and so he found favour with others around him.

The Great Bible Story #24

God exalts Joseph

While Joseph was in jail, Pharaoh's baker and cup bearer were thrown into the jail. The jailer put Joseph in charge of them. One morning he found both of them gloomy, and found out that they were troubled by dreams they had seen. He asked them to tell him their dreams so that he could ask God to tell the meaning. The cup bearer had seen a vine with three branches, which bloomed and bore grapes and then he crushed them and gave the drink to Pharaoh. Joseph's interpretation was that in three days Pharaoh would restore him to his job. What the baker had seen were three baskets of bread on his head for Pharaoh, but birds were eating from it. Joseph told him he would be hanged in three days and birds would eat his flesh. He told the cup bearer that he was in jail for no fault of his own, and asked him to tell Pharaoh about him so that he could be set free. Three days later it happened to these two exactly as Joseph had said. But after the cup bearer was in the court with Pharaoh, he totally forgot about Joseph!

Two years later, Pharaoh saw two dreams. He was standing by the River Nile and he saw seven fat cows coming out of the river and grazing. But soon seven thin cows came up and ate the other cows! In his other dream, he saw seven fat ears of grains coming up from a stalk, only to be swallowed up by seven shrivelled up ears of grain that came up afterwards. Pharaoh was so disturbed he could not sleep any more. None of the magicians or wise men of Egypt could interpret these dreams.

Then the cup bearer remembered Joseph! He told Pharaoh that he knew a man in jail who could interpret dreams. Joseph was taken out of the jail in a hurry, and then he dressed up to meet Pharaoh. When Pharaoh told him the dreams and wondered if he could find any meaning for them, Joseph's reply was that he didn't have any special powers but God would give him an answer. Joseph told Pharaoh that both dreams meant the same thing, and that God was warning Pharaoh to get ready to face a crisis which was going to come. There would be first seven years of plenty in the land, followed by seven years of severe famine. Joseph's advice was that grain should be stored up during the seven plentiful years and distributed during the famine.

Pharaoh was so delighted with Joseph's conduct and wisdom that he appointed him to be in charge of Egypt, next only to Pharaoh, and to carry out this plan. From the time Joseph was sold off, this was now almost thirteen years!

The Great Bible Story #25

Joseph sees his brothers

During the seven years of plenty, Joseph stored up all the excess grain, and when the famine started he began to distribute it to the people. The famine was so severe that even people from far places came to him. His father and brothers were also hit by the famine, and when they heard that there was grain in Egypt Jacob asked his sons to go and get some for them. But he kept back Benjamin with him fearing that he might come to harm.

When Joseph's brothers came to him, after more than twenty years, he recognised them but they could not. Joseph acted tough and accused them saying they had come to spy on the land. But they described their situation and details about their family. Joseph was glad to hear his father was alive, but he wanted to see Benjamin also. He told them that he would give them grain this time, but he would keep one of them prisoner till they could prove their story by bringing their youngest brother also with them. Simeon agreed to stay, and he was taken prisoner. When they were travelling back with the grain they found that the money which they had paid was in their sacks. They became quite fearful about what would happen to them. They did not know that Joseph was taking care of them.

When they ran out of grain, Jacob asked them to go to Egypt again. They said they could not, unless they took Benjamin with them. Judah said he would stand guarantee for Benjamin's safety. Jacob struggled with this but finally allowed them to take Benjamin. He told them also to take some special gifts for the official in Egypt to make him happy.

When Joseph saw Benjamin, he asked his staff to arrange a big feast for them. His brothers got scared thinking he would make them captives for not paying for the grains last time. They took pains to explain how they found the money in their bags. But Joseph's manager told them that he had received the payment! Then they all sat down to eat, and the brothers were wondering how they were seated according to age. They also noticed that Benjamin got some extra attention. After Joseph enquired about their father's health he was so overcome with emotions that he had to go away for some time in order to avoid letting them see his tears.

Afterwards Joseph told his staff to put back the brothers' money in their bags and also to hide his special silver cup inside Benjamin's bag. When they had just gone out of the city, someone came running and asked them who had stolen the silver cup.

The Great Bible Story #26

Joseph reveals himself

When Joseph's brothers were accused of stealing his silver cup, they pleaded innocence, saying that if any one of them was caught with it that one could be killed. But when they opened their sacks the cup was found in Benjamin's sack! They broke down and went back to Joseph in despair. His verdict was that they could all go, leaving Benjamin as his slave.

These brothers now felt that God was returning to them for what they had done earlier to Joseph their brother. They did not know that Joseph could understand what they were saying (because he used to speak to them through an interpreter). Judah called Joseph aside and told him how their father Jacob had lost one of his sons many years ago, and how he would be unable to take it if he lost Benjamin too.

At this point Joseph could not control himself any more, and after sending out all the others from the room he told his brothers that he was Joseph. They were dumbfounded. He told them not to take it too badly because God had sent him ahead of them to Egypt to be able to take care of them during the famine. He told them to go and bring Jacob and the others to Egypt because the famine was going to be there for three more years.

When Pharaoh heard that Joseph's brothers had come, he called for them and asked them to bring everyone from back home and to settle down in Goshen, a very fertile part of Egypt.

When the brothers came back and Jacob heard that Joseph was alive and was a great ruler in Egypt, he felt as if he had got another life. Joseph had sent wagons for everyone to travel to Egypt. Seeing them Jacob could not doubt any more. As they came to Goshen, Joseph went to meet his father. Jacob's delight knew no bounds as he saw Joseph. Joseph introduced Jacob to Pharaoh who made some of the brothers in charge of his livestock. Afterwards, when it was time for Jacob to die, he called all of his sons together and blessed each of them, leaning on his staff for support.

After Jacob died, Joseph's brothers were afraid that Joseph would now take revenge on them. But he told them not to be afraid. He explained to them that even though they had planned evil against him, God had turned it around for good, for him and for everyone else.

Joseph is now a picture of Jesus who came to save His people, and was misunderstood and put to death by them. But it was His death that became the source of salvation not only for His people, the Jews, but also for everyone else on earth.

The Great Bible Story #27

Years after Joseph

A few hundred years after Joseph, the current Pharaoh did not know about Joseph or how the people of Israel had come to Egypt. By this time these people had increased to a large number and prospered because God was with them. Pharaoh and his people began to wonder if the Hebrews, as they called them, would turn against them and join their enemies if there was a foreign attack. They thought that the best way to deal with them was to make them slaves in Egypt. As a result, the people of Israel were put to heavy labour, building huge buildings for Pharaoh. They were struggling under this bondage and cried out to God.

Pharaoh told the nurses who helped the Hebrew women to give birth that if the baby was a boy, they should kill him and allow only the girls to live. But these nurses respected God and did not do that. (God blessed them for this.) When they were questioned they explained to Pharaoh that the Hebrew women would deliver before they reached them! Then Pharaoh made a law that all Hebrew baby boys should be thrown into the River Nile.

Amram and Jochebed were two Hebrew parents who already had two children called Miriam and Aaron. When Jochebed gave birth to another boy he was so adorable that they didn't have the heart to kill him. To avoid getting punished, they made a small basket, made it water proof with tar, placed the baby in it, floated it in the river among the weeds near the banks, and asked Miriam to stand by watching it. They had obeyed Pharaoh by 'throwing' him into the river!

This happened to be near the place where the daughter of Pharaoh used to come and bathe. When she came as usual for bath in the river, the baby cried, and she sent a maid to see where it was. The maid brought her the basket, and the princess was immediately attracted to the baby. She knew it must be a Hebrew boy, adopted him as her own child and called him Moses meaning 'drawing out' (of the water). At this time Miriam went up and asked her if she wanted someone to nurse the baby. That is how Jochebed got the opportunity to take care of her baby. About three years later, according to the custom, when she stopped nursing him, she returned Moses to the princess. He grew up there as a prince and heir for the throne, getting trained in all the wisdom and knowledge of Egypt. But he knew that he was originally a Hebrew.

The Great Bible Story #28

God calls Moses

When Moses grew up he went to visit his Hebrew brothers in their place. He saw an Egyptian fighting with a Hebrew. In his zeal to stand with the Hebrews, he made sure that no one was watching, killed the Egyptian and buried him out of sight. But another day he saw two Hebrews fighting. He tried to ask them why two brothers were fighting, but they belligerently asked him whether he was going to kill them like the Egyptian! When Moses realised that people knew about his killing, he was scared that Pharaoh would come to know. When Pharaoh knew about this he wanted to kill Moses, and so Moses decided to run away from Egypt altogether.

He fled from Egypt and reached Midian where he sat down near a well wondering what to do next. Seven daughters of Reuel, also called Jethro, a priest of Midian, came to water their flock. Some shepherds there tried to stop them, but Moses intervened and helped them to collect water. When they returned home earlier than usual that day Reuel asked them how. When he heard that an Egyptian had helped them, he asked them to call him home. Moses decided to stay with them and to take care of their flock. Reuel gave him his daughter Zipporah as his wife, and they had two sons there.

In the meantime the people of Israel were crying out to God because of their hardship. He took notice of that and started His plan for their salvation. One day when Moses was pasturing the sheep he saw a bush that was on fire but was not getting burnt! He went near to find out what was going on. Then God called him out of that fire and told him to remove his sandals because he was on holy ground, and to listen to Him. He revealed Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and said that He had seen the trouble His people were going through. He wanted Moses to go to Pharaoh and take His people out of Egypt!

Moses was certainly confused. He was now nearly eighty years old and for forty years he had been keeping away from Pharaoh. He wondered if he was the right man for the job. But God had been training him with forty years of learning in Egypt and forty years of humiliation in the desert! He would not accept any excuse from Moses. He told Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him that 'I Am' had asked him to let His people go. When Moses felt diffident about himself thinking that he was not good at talking, God asked him to take his brother Aaron with him.

But God told him that Pharaoh was not going to let them go easily.

The Great Bible Story #29

God warns Pharaoh

Moses took Aaron with him and went to meet Pharaoh. He told him that the God of Israel wanted him to let them go into the desert to celebrate a feast. Pharaoh became angry with them thinking that they were planning to take the people away from their work. So he commanded his officials not to give the slaves any hay to mix with the bricks they were making but to ask them to bring it themselves. Now the people of Israel found it harder at work, and their frustration was turned against Moses for making this happen. Moses in turn cried out to God. God told him that even though Pharaoh would harden his heart, He would finally bring out Israel from Egypt with great power.

The next time Moses went to see Pharaoh, he tried to demonstrate the power of God, as He had told him to, by throwing down his shepherd's rod on the floor which immediately turned into a snake. The magicians of Pharaoh imitated this. But Moses' snake swallowed up their snakes. But Pharaoh was tough and would not listen to God.

Then God made different types of plagues fall on Egypt. Each time Moses would warn Pharaoh what God was going to do, and tell him to letting God's people go. The water in the Nile became blood, the land was covered with frogs, lice came to bite man and animal, swarms of flies invaded the place, the cattle that belonged to the Egyptians died, the people all got boils, hailstones fell and killed people and animals who defied God's warnings, swarms of locusts came and ate up all the vegetation, and darkness came over the land for three days. Israel was spared. Every time something happened, Pharaoh would request Moses to pray to God and get rid of it, but after it was gone he would take a tougher position against Moses and the God. He also tried to make partial allowances to Moses, saying that people could go without the children or the animals, etc., but Moses insisted that all the people and their cattle had to go. A point came when God found Pharaoh was always hardening his heart, and then He stopped trying to change his heart and just let him go his way.

God told Moses now that He was going to send a last plague on Egypt after which Pharaoh would only be too happy to see them go. One midnight God would send an angel to kill every first born son of the Egyptians, including Pharaoh, and their animals. The people of Israel were asked to prepare themselves so that this Angel of Death would pass over their homes without touching them.

The Great Bible Story #30

Israel delivered from Egypt

God instructed the people of Israel through Moses that on a particular day, the fourteenth day of the first month in the Hebrew calendar, at twilight, they were to kill a male lamb without blemish and smear some of its blood on the lintel and the door posts of their houses. Then they were to sit down together as a family dressed up and ready to travel, roast the flesh over fire, and eat it along with unleavened bread. That night the Angel of Death from God would pass through Egypt, and wherever he found houses without the blood, he would kill the first born son and the first born male of animals. But this angel would spare the Israelites because they had this blood on their houses. When he saw that blood, he would pass over them.

That was exactly what happened. As the wrath of God moved over Egypt, the first born in every Egyptian house died, and Israel was spared. There was a big cry throughout Egypt when they found their first born dead. Pharaoh lost his own son, and then he realised that he could not hold out against God any more. He called for Moses urgently and asked him to take his people and their belongings, and leave Egypt immediately. God told them to go and collect gold, silver and other valuable stuff from the Egyptians before they left. The Egyptians actually urged the people to go away, giving them whatever they asked for. All the people of Israel got up, got all their belongings together and started off on their journey from Egypt. They were six hundred thousand people apart from children.

Later on, the people of Israel were to celebrate the feast of the passover every year on that day, remembering how God had miraculously saved them from Egypt. The fathers were to relate to their children the significance of this feast in detail so that they too could understand God's love for them. Centuries later, this deliverance from Egypt and the feast of the passover found fulfilment in the death of Jesus the Son of God, the Messiah, the Lamb of God. 'Egypt' represents our life of sin and selfishness from which God delivers us by giving His first born Son as the price. Now whoever comes to God crying out for deliverance from the slavery of sin is offered salvation freely because Jesus has paid the ransom with His blood. This event that occurred way back in history, of God delivering His people from Egypt, stands out as a picture of God's deliverance for all of us people, everywhere in the world.

The Great Bible Story #31

A way through the sea

As the children of Israel were travelling from Egypt to Canaan, the Promised Land, God led them, not through the area of the Philistines but towards the Red Sea, even though that was the shorter route, because He did not want them to get frightened and go back when they saw a battle. As they moved on, God led them using a pillar of cloud in the front during the day and a pillar of fire in the night. The people learnt to follow the cloud; when it stood still they stayed in the place, and when it moved they followed after it. This is a picture of being led by the Holy Spirit.

God wanted to honour His name in a mighty way by displaying His power over the Egyptians in the sight of Israel. So He put a thought in Pharaoh's mind that the children of Israel had got away from his hands. Pharaoh thought that since Israel did not know how to fight, he would send his army after them and get them back to slavery. This is just like Satan not wanting to let people get out of his hands, and going after them to take them back. But God is with them. When the people of Israel were camping in front of the Red Sea they saw the Egyptian army marching towards them, and felt thoroughly hopeless. They cried before Moses and wondered if it would have been better to stay back in Egypt after all. But God told Moses to tell them not to fear, but to stand quietly and watch how God would deliver them.

Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and God sent a huge wind to roll back the water of the sea in such a way that a dry path appeared in the middle of the sea, with water standing like walls on both sides! All the people walked through that path and reached the other side safely.

When Pharaoh's army saw the path the people of Israel took, they tried to follow behind them. As they were getting near the people, God made things difficult for them by giving trouble to the horses and making the chariot wheels swerve! The Egyptians noticed this and said that the God of Israel was fighting against them. Some of them tried to turn back. But then God asked Moses to stretch his hand to the sea, and the water came back together again, completely drowning the Egyptian army, their horses and the chariots. The children of Israel could watch from the other side how majestically God had delivered them. Seeing God's power, they began to fear God and also to put their trust in Him. They also learnt to respect Moses whom God had appointed as their leader.

The Great Bible Story #32

The people complain

The children of Israel had been staying in Egypt for 430 years, and their knowledge of God was very poor. They were more familiar with the gods of Egypt than with God. This became evident from their responses to God and to their circumstances. Even though they were quite excited after the miraculous deliverance through the Red Sea, when they came to a place where there was no water to drink, they began to complain and think of going back to Egypt. They talked about how they used to have bread and meat to the full in Egypt and asked Moses why he had brought them to the desert. They had not really caught the vision that they were on the way to the Promised Land where everything would be like 'flowing with milk and honey'.

God heard their grumbling and said that He would give them meat in the evenings and bread in the morning. In the evening quails flew down to the camp and fell to the ground where the people could pick them up. In the morning they saw white flakes on the ground which they called manna ("What is it?") and which God called 'bread from heaven'. God said that everyone could gather as much as they could eat for the day and cook it. It tasted like wafers with honey. Some people tried to store extra, but then worms would come out!

One day they began to quarrel with Moses when there was no water to drink. God asked Moses to go to a big rock and to strike it with his rod in front of all the people. When he did that, water started flowing out copiously from the rock and everyone was satisfied. In miraculous ways like this God provided them food and water throughout the time they took to reach the Promised Land of Canaan. He also protected them from sicknesses.

In addition to providing food and water for the people of Israel, God was also bringing out a picture of Christ (Messiah, meaning the Anointed One) through His dealings with them. Christ is the One who would deliver people from the slavery of sin and lead them to the promised land of life with God. He would be 'stricken' to death and out of His death would flow out divine life for those who believed. He would feed them with spiritual food and also take care of all their needs.

The people of Israel could not know these things at that time, of course, but God wanted them to learn to trust in Him through the experience of being miraculously provided for. But most of them did not even learn that, and they went on grumbling and complaining all through that time.

The Great Bible Story #33

Israel gets the Law

The reason why God chose Israel was to train them in His ways and to show them as a model to all other nations. Later He would also bring out the Saviour of the world through them.

After leaving Egypt they came to the plains of Mount Sinai. God asked Moses to go up the mountain, and the people to stay away. He showed His presence with fire on the top of the mountain with smoke and quaking. God spoke to Moses at the top and gave him ten commandments for the people which He wrote on two tablets of stone. These commandments became the basis of the covenant God made with the people of Israel.

1. I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before Me.
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work.
5. Honour your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.
10. You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Jesus explained when He came that these commandments were just at the introductory level and that what God really wanted was holiness and faithfulness in our hearts. But this was what God could give to Israel at their level. God also gave them many other laws pertaining to their worship, sacrifices, hygiene, relationships, etc., to teach them to reverence Him and to help them to understand His ways in a symbolic manner. It was only when Jesus came that these commandments rose to their full meaning and purpose.

God established a covenant with the people of Israel saying that if they kept these commandments He would bless them. But He also warned them that if they disobeyed, curses would come upon them. The people promised that they would do

everything that He told them. God's goal was to show them their boundaries to protect them, and instruct them so that they would finally be ready for a new covenant which He would bring up through Jesus.

The Great Bible Story #34

The golden calf

Moses came down from the mountain and explained everything to Aaron and his sons Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel. He erected an altar for God and sacrificed some young bulls on it. After writing down all that God had instructed him he read it out to the people. When the people shouted and said that they would obey God in everything, he took half the blood and sprinkled it on the altar and the other half on the people as the seal of the covenant between God and them. Then God called him back to the top of the mountain to give him the two stone tablets with the Ten Commandments written on them. Moses was there with God for forty days.

When the people could not see Moses for so many days they became restless and questioned Aaron. They said that if Moses was not there to lead them, they would need a god to do that. Aaron gave in to their demand, asked them to give him the gold from their ear rings and made an idol out of it in the form of a calf. When it was ready he told them that this was the God who had brought them from Egypt, and they worshipped it.

As their frenzy built up they broke into singing and dancing without any shame. God told Moses that He had enough with this people, He would destroy them and start afresh with Moses. Moses fell down before God and pleaded with Him to turn His anger away from the people for the sake of the promise He had given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses also reminded Him about how other nations would say that He was not able to keep His promises. God agreed with Moses to hold His anger.

Moses now went down the mountain carrying the two stone tablets. His servant Joshua met him at the bottom wondering if the noise was that of battle. Moses told him that it sounded more like merry making.

When Moses came and saw the golden calf and the people dancing around it, his anger flared up against them. He threw down the tablets in disgust and scolded Aaron for turning the people's heart away from God so quickly. He took the idol, ground it into powder, scattered it over the water and made people drink it.

Moses called out to the people to come forward, whoever was on the side of God. It was only the sons of Levi who came out. God asked them to take their swords and kill everyone, even if they were their close relatives, who had participated in this idolatry. About three thousand people got killed that day. This was the discipline of the Lord which He gives to those He loves.

The Great Bible Story #35

Focus on worship

God asked Moses to carve two tablets of stone and take them to Him on the mountain to replace the ones he had broken. God wrote the Ten Commandments on them again. He proceeded to tell Moses to organise a symbolic system of worship for the people. The tribe of Levi was chosen to be responsible for assisting in all the works related to worship, and Aaron, a Levite, and his children were named as priests. Aaron became the first High Priest of Israel.

People were still living in tents, and they had no permanent buildings yet. As God led them using the pillars of cloud and fire, they had to often pack up and move to a new camp. In order to give the people a concept about worshipping God who is majestic and awesome but without form, unlike the gods they had seen around them, God told Moses to build a tabernacle (a tent where God would stay symbolically) that could be taken apart, moved and assembled again. It was to be at one end of a rectangular place surrounded by a thick curtain tied to supporting poles. The entrance was hidden behind a curtain at the front, and then one entered into an open place called the 'Outer Court' where ordinary people were allowed to come. The first thing they saw was a bronze altar where the priests would offer their sacrifices. Behind this was a 'laver' containing water which the priests used to wash themselves. After this came the entrance to the first portion of the tent called the 'Holy Place'. Only the priests were allowed to enter this place, that too only after washing themselves. The Holy Place had three things in it, a table carrying twelve loaves of bread which would be replaced every day, a golden lampstand with seven spouts which would be burning without break, and a golden altar for burning incense.

Behind this holy place was a 'Most Holy Place' separated with a thick veil. Inside were the 'ark of the testimony' which was a rectangular wooden box covered with gold, and inside it were the two tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments, a pot of manna which would not get spoilt, and (later) Aaron's rod which bloomed. Above this ark was placed a 'mercy seat' made of gold which was as long and wide as the ark, with the form of a cherub made of gold at each end. The 'glory of God' would be seen over the tent as a pillar of cloud or fire. Only the High Priest could enter here, once a year, to bring sacrifices for all the people. The meaning of all this could be seen only after Jesus came.

The Great Bible Story #36

Sacrifices, their significance

Expanding on the Ten Commandments, God instructed Israel through Moses on many different practical rules for personal conduct, relationship with others, etc. They would come to Moses whenever they had doubts, and then he would either clear it up or ask God what was to be done. Moses' father in law once saw how Moses was being pressed down by the demands made on him by the people, and suggested that he should delegate much of his responsibility to elders among the people, and they should bring to Moses only what they could not handle. This brought a great relief to the situation.

God also set up a system of sacrifices which people ought to do along with the priests. They could bring animals or grain to offer to God as a token of their gratitude to Him. The priests would offer these to God on the bronze altar. Sin and guilt offerings were necessary if anyone did wrong, and there were different instructions about how these were to be done. Even if someone had done wrong and came to realise it only later, he still had to bring a sacrifice for it whenever he became aware of it.

We see later that the blood of animals could not really take away any sin. So this arrangement of sacrifices was only to help people to recognise the seriousness of their sins, repent and set things right. It was only the blood of the sinless Son of God who became man that was sufficient to pay for the sins of the world. Till that became available, these animal sacrifices functioned as a picture of the ultimate sacrifice that was to come. At this time God just 'covered' the people's sins when they brought their sacrifices in faith, and finally wiped them away when the blood of Jesus was shed on the cross.

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would make a sacrifice for his own sins and the sins of the people, and take some of the blood into the Most Holy Place and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of it. This represented what Jesus would do later, when He presented His blood before the Father as the ransom for the people. When this happened, the rituals of the tabernacle (and later the Temple) became irrelevant, and this was signified by the veil in the Temple in Jerusalem getting torn supernaturally from top to bottom when Jesus breathed His last on the cross. Now the way to the 'Most Holy Place', the presence of God, has been thrown open to anyone who will go there with the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God.

The Great Bible Story #37

Miriam oversteps

God had picked up Moses to lead the people of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land, overseen his training in Egypt and his spiritual training in the desert place while he was taking care of his father in law's sheep, and led him step by step in his leadership. His elder brother Aaron was now the High Priest. His sister Miriam was a prophetess among them, and she had led the women in singing and dancing after God saved them through the Red Sea. She may have assumed for herself some special position of honour just because she was older than Moses and had been the one who had taken care of him as a baby. Anyway, one day she got together with Aaron and criticised Moses on the point of having married a foreign woman. As she talked about it she mentioned that everybody should recognise that God had spoken through others like her also, and not just Moses.

That was not what God thought about Moses. In His opinion, Moses was the most meek and humble man on earth at that time! Moses had not exalted himself, and God had had to persuade him strongly to accept this position of leadership. Miriam had certainly overstepped her position and assumed things for herself, and she had also influenced Aaron to stand with her at this time. This was something God could let them get away with, not only for their sake but also for the sake of teaching the rest of the people of Israel through example.

God manifested Himself in a pillar of cloud and stood in front of the tabernacle and called Moses, Miriam and Aaron to Him. He told Miriam that Moses was in a special category of people. While God would normally speak to His prophets through dreams or visions, He spoke to Moses face to face. He had shown Himself to Moses in different ways and revealed many deep secrets about Himself. He asked Miriam how she had dared to talk against this Moses.

They could all sense God's anger as He spoke. He went off, and when the cloud was withdrawn from there, they saw that Miriam had become leprous! Aaron was very much distressed, and pleaded with Moses to ask God to heal her. Moses did that. But God replied that she ought to be kept outside the camp for seven days as a matter of discipline. Afterwards she was healed, and she was allowed to come in again to the people. The people of Israel stayed put in that place without moving till she returned.

This was one of the instances where God demonstrated the importance He gave for respect for authority.

The Great Bible Story #38

Israel makes a choice

When the people of Israel were nearing the Promised Land of Canaan, they decided to send some spies into the land to get a report of the place and the people there. So God asked Moses to choose twelve men, one from each tribe, to go out as spies. These men went and they were very impressed with what they saw as the produce of the land. In fact they brought back a single cluster of grapes which needed two men to carry between them on a pole! All twelve agreed that it was indeed a 'land flowing with milk and honey' just as God had promised. But ten of the spies reported that there were some giants in the land before whom they looked like grasshoppers. The sight of these giants took away all their boldness, and they tried to dissuade the people not to venture into Canaan. But the other two spies, Joshua and Caleb, were different. They put their faith in God who had made the promise and said that God would take them into the land, and these giants they had seen there would become like bread before Israel.

The people of Israel were confused. Even though they had started out from Egypt hoping to get into Canaan, the thought of the giants destroyed their faith. They became angry with Moses and Aaron for putting them into this predicament, and they wanted to find some leaders who would take them back to Egypt. Joshua and Caleb did their best to persuade the people to follow God, but the people became so angry that they wanted to stone them.

At this point the glory of God appeared in front of the tabernacle, and God spoke to Moses. He was so angry with the people that He wanted to destroy them right there and lead Moses to become a great nation. Once again Moses pleaded for the people and reminded God about His promise and what other nations would think about Him.

God agreed to spare them. But He decided that all the people who were twenty years or older, who had seen all the marvellous works of deliverance that He had done for them and yet refused to believe in Him, would not be able to enter the Promised Land. Now they would have to wander around in the desert for forty years till they all died. But He mentioned that Joshua and Caleb would surely be able to enter.

The people suddenly changed their mind and decided to go in to Canaan anyway. But they got defeated by the Canaanites and had to come back in defeat.

This teaches us that it is not enough to start out in faith, but we also need to continue in faith till the end.

The Great Bible Story #39

Korah rebels

Not having learnt from observing Miriam's mistake, Korah, Moses' cousin, rebelled against him along with Dathan, Abiram and On. Korah expressed his view that Moses was exalting himself over the people. He said that God was in the midst of Israel and that all the people were holy (set apart) for God. He wondered what made Moses think he was special! Two hundred and fifty leaders of Israel also took sides with Korah. When Moses heard this, he felt so hurt that he fell on his face in humility.

When he got up, Moses told Korah and his friends that God would show them by next morning who were really His. He asked them to take a censer each, put incense in them and burn them before God in the morning. He asked Korah if he was not satisfied with the responsibilities he had been given as a Levite but he wanted to be a priest also. When he called Dathan and Abiram they refused to come, asking Moses how he could lord it over them even after not being able to take them to Canaan.

The next morning, Aaron took his censer and stood with Moses, while Korah got together all the people against them. God suddenly appeared and told Moses and Aaron to move away so that He could destroy all the people with Korah. Again Moses humbled himself before God and pleaded with Him to be merciful to the people.

Moses then told the people to move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram because God was going to bring destruction to them in an extraordinary way. The earth would open up under these three men and their families and they would be swallowed up into the depths alive!

As everyone watched, that was what happened. These three families and all that they had went down into the gaping hole that appeared, and then the earth closed up over them. All the people who saw this cried out in fear and rushed from the scene. God also sent fire from the sky and burned up the two hundred and fifty leaders also who had joined in this rebellion.

God asked Eliezer the priest, son of Aaron, to take up the censers of the people who had perished in the fire, and beat them up into sheets to plate the altar, to serve as a reminder that people should not take it upon themselves to serve God in whatever ways they wished.

But the next day the people grumbled against Moses for killing God's people! This time God sent a plague into the camp and thousands of people died. Aaron was just able to make atonement for them so that no more people perished.

The Great Bible Story #40

Moses and Aaron miss it

God told Moses to collect twelve rods, one from each tribe, and to write the name of the tribe on them, with Aaron's name for the tribe of Levi. These rods were placed in the Most Holy Place overnight, and when they were taken out, Aaron's rod had not only blossomed miraculously but also brought out almonds. This was an indication of who God had chosen as His priest. This rod was placed inside the ark of the covenant as a permanent reminder.

As the people moved on in the desert and came to the place called Kadesh, Miriam died and was buried. The people grumbled loudly because there was no water there to drink. Following the pattern of what God had done earlier, He showed them a rock. Moses and Aaron were asked to gather all the people near this rock and then speak to the rock. Then God would produce water to come out from the rock so that it would be enough for the people and their animals.

But by this time Moses' patience had worn thin. He was upset with the people for their grumbling and shouted at them, calling them rebels. In his frustration and anger, instead of speaking to the rock as God had commanded him, he took his rod and struck the rock two times! God still sent the water abundantly for the people, but He was very upset with Moses and Aaron. He told them they would not be allowed to have the privilege of leading the people into the Promised Land of Canaan. Moses tried to plead with Him, but He was very firm because he had not demonstrated faith in front of the people but dishonoured Him.

The time came for Aaron to die. So God told Moses to take him and his son Eliezer to Mount Hor where he had to take off the High Priest's garments from Aaron and put them on Eliezer. Thus Eliezer became the next High Priest.

God has no favourites. Moses was the best man God had at that time. But when he failed, He would not show him any special favours. Also He always takes the sins of the leaders more seriously, because He has given them much and He expects much from them. In His dealing with Moses in this way, He left an example for everyone to see and learn from.

At the same time, He loved the people and could not let them suffer too much even though their leader had failed. He gave them water in spite of Moses' failure.

Jesus is the Rock which was struck for giving us salvation. Speaking to the Rock the second time without striking it again shows us that the death of Jesus is the way for us once for all.

The Great Bible Story #41

Fiery serpents

As the people of Israel were made to travel around the desert places, they became weary and once again began to complain against God and Moses. They told they hated the food God was giving them and wished they were back in Egypt. This time God sent many fiery snakes among them, and many died from the snake bite. When they realised what was happening, they went back to Moses and admitted that they had been complaining against him and God, asking him to plead with God to take away the snakes. What God did was to ask Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it up on a tall pole. Now whenever someone got bitten by a snake, they had to look at this bronze serpent and they would be healed.

This was also again a symbol God made that would represent how Jesus would save the people. When Jesus was 'lifted up' on the cross just as the bronze serpent was lifted up on the pole, then it became possible for people who had been bitten by sin to look to Him for salvation. Even though the people of Israel who looked at the bronze serpent were saved from death, they did not seem to learn any lesson from it. In fact later on they made this bronze serpent into an idol and started worshipping it! And then it had to be destroyed by a God fearing king!

God continued to take care of them in spite of all these setbacks. As they went on with their journey they came across the Amorites. They sent a message to their king, Sihon, asking for permission to pass through his land. They promised not to cause any damage or to steal anything from the land. But Sihon came out to fight with them instead. God helped Israel to rout the Amorites, and they lived in that place for some time. When they moved from there and tried to go past Bashan, Og the king of Bashan came to fight with them. God defeated them just as He did with the Amorites. These two victories became landmarks in the history of Israel and they used to sing about God giving Sihon and Og into their hands as they sang their praises to God.

The Great Bible Story #42

Moab tries tricks

When the people of Israel came near Moab, Balak the king got worried, because he had heard all about what the God of Israel had done to all the kings of the nations. He didn't want to go and fight with them. He thought that a better way to attack Israel would be to curse them. He thought of a prophet called Balaam to do it for him. This Balaam knew the true God, but he seems to have been making a living out of prophecy rather serving God. When men came from Balak and told him that they wanted him to go with them to curse Israel, he told them he would check with God first. God told him in the night that he was not to go because Israel was a blessed people. Balaam told his guests in the morning that God refused to let him go with them.

When Balak heard this, he sent more important dignitaries carrying greater rewards with them to try and persuade Balaam. When Balaam saw all this, he hoped that perhaps God would change his mind! God was not pleased with him when he went to Him to seek His will. He told him to go, but only to speak the words He would give him.

As Balaam went towards Moab on his donkey God was angry, and sent an angel with a sword against him. He could not see the angel, but his donkey saw him and refused to go further. Now Balaam was angry with the donkey and started beating her. Now the angel went and stood in a narrow place where he was completely blocking their way. Seeing this, the donkey sat down under Balaam. Balaam beat her harder! Now God supernaturally made the donkey to speak, and she asked Balaam why he was beating her like this. He said he was so mad at her he wanted to kill her!

At this point God 'opened' Balaam's eyes and he saw the angel with the sword, and he bowed all the way down to the ground. He told God he had sinned, and was now prepared to turn back. But God told him to go ahead but to speak only what He told him.

Balak took Balaam to different mountains to look down from there on Israel and to curse them. But instead, he only blessed Israel more and more. He said no one could curse them because they were blessed of God. No witchcraft, black magic or sorcery would work against God's people. Balak was so disgusted he sent him away.

But greedy man that Balaam was, he suggested that the best way to curse Israel was to seduce them with Moabite women and then God's blessings would go away! That is what Balak did, and these women managed to turn many men of Israel to other gods.

The Great Bible Story #43

Joshua takes over

After forty years of wandering in the desert, all the people from the generation who had been unbelieving had died except for Joshua and Caleb. When they came to the banks of the River Jordan beyond which the land of Canaan lay, Moses asked God if he could just cross over and take a look at the Promised Land because he was not going to be allowed to lead the people there. As a concession to Moses, God asked him to go on top of Mount Pisgah and look across the Jordan to have a glimpse of the land.

Now the time came for Moses to die, and God buried him in the land of Moab without any man knowing where. The leadership passed on to Joshua who had earlier been serving Moses and had shown himself to be full of faith and also faithful. God commissioned Joshua to lead the people of Israel across the Jordan and to give them their inheritance tribe by tribe. Joshua was to be strong and courageous because God would be with him just as He was with Moses, and he was to take care to follow all the instructions of God.

The tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh (one of Joseph's sons) decided not to seek possession across the Jordan but to occupy the land on this side of it, on condition that they would fight for their brothers against the people of Canaan till everyone had captured their portion of the land.

When Joshua took charge, he told the people to get ready to cross the river in three days' time. He sent two spies to see the city of Jericho which was just across the river. When these spies went there, they stayed the night in the house of Rahab, a prostitute, which was on the city wall. She had come to put her faith in God after she had heard all the stories of how He had miraculously led the people of Israel from Egypt and how great kings could not stand against them. She told them that the people of Jericho were terrified of them. She requested them to spare her and her family when they came to conquer Jericho. The spies left early in the morning down the city wall through her window, asking her to tie a scarlet cord on her window so that they could identify it when they came to conquer.

The spies came back and told Joshua everything, saying what God had done to the people of Jericho to practically hand over the city to Israel. They also told him about Rahab and their promise to her. This was really good news to Joshua at the start of his campaign.

The Great Bible Story #44

Crossing the Jordan

The River Jordan was overflowing the banks at this time. The children of Israel were on the east side of the river, and they were to cross over to the west side to take possession of the land of Canaan as God had promised. When the people had prepared themselves for three days and got ready, Joshua told the Levitical priests to carry the ark of the covenant and go in front of the people, and the people were to follow, keeping a good distance from the ark. God told Joshua that when the soles of the priests touched the water, the Jordan would stop flowing.

Joshua declared to the people what was going to happen. He told them God was doing this to reassure them that He would deliver all the nations of the Canaanites into their hands. God did this also to show the people how He was with Joshua as He was with Moses. So the priests started walking carrying the ark, and as soon as their feet touched the water, the river stopped flowing. The water rose up in a heap for a long distance ahead of them. The priests stood in the river bed with the ark, till all the people walked and crossed to the other side.

Then God asked one man each from every tribe to go to where the priests stood, to each collect a big stone from the river bed, and to carry them to where the people were going to camp. They set up the stones in that place called Gilgal. God told them that whenever any of the children asked them later why the stones were there, they should tell them the story of how God had held up the Jordan for the people to cross on dry ground. Joshua picked up another twelve stones and set them up where the feet of the priests had stood on the river bed. After everyone had crossed over, the priests walked to the other side carrying the ark, and as soon as their feet were on dry ground, the river started flowing again as usual.

The general understanding many Christians have is that the Promised Land represents heaven, and Jordan death through which we pass to heaven. But it could also signify the spiritual life of a believer. After being saved from the life of sin (Egypt) and wandering in the desert (carnal living) which they could have avoided if they trusted God, crossing the river is to choose death to self and life with God. Occupying the Promised Land points to getting victory over the desires of the flesh just as the people of Israel had to fight to conquer the land and then occupy it. If we trust God, we too can avoid carnal living.

The Great Bible Story #45

Jericho and Ai

Jericho was the first kingdom which Israel faced after they crossed Jordan. God wanted to give them a special victory the first time. So He asked Joshua to have some armed men lead a procession of seven priests blowing ram's horns followed by priests carrying the ark of the covenant. This procession was to go around the city wall every day for six days. During this time the people who were watching had to be completely quiet. On the seventh day, the procession was to go around the city seven times. At the end of the last round, when the priests blew their horns all the people were to give a loud shout.

The people of Jericho locked themselves up inside their city wall, watching the daily procession in fear. On the seventh day, when Israel gave a shout, the wall of Jericho came crashing down. Then the army of Israel walked straight in and looted the whole city! God told the people not to take anything for themselves from the city. They were to take the gold, silver and iron to be put into the treasury of God. Joshua instructed the two spies to bring out Rahab and her family. The rest of the people in the city were all killed, along with all their animals, and the city was burnt up.

The next city to be conquered was Ai. The spies reported that it was a small place and only about three thousand men would need to go to fight. But Israel was thoroughly defeated. Joshua and the people were flabbergasted and Joshua asked God why He had given them this defeat. God replied that this was the result of sin among the people. Joshua asked God to show the culprit as they cast lots among the people. Finally one man called Achan was found, and he confessed that he had seen some gold, silver and a precious mantle in Jericho, coveted them, and taken and hidden them under his tent. Joshua and all the people stoned Achan and his entire family to death, and raised a heap of stones over them, in order to avert God's judgment.

Then Joshua sent many soldiers at night to go and stay behind Ai. In the morning, Joshua and some other soldiers attacked the gate of Ai, and as the people of Ai came to fight, they pretended to flee in defeat. The people of Ai left the city and ran after them, at which time the soldiers who were behind came and set the city on fire. Then Joshua and his soldiers turned around and destroyed the people of Ai!

We must know that the power is not in methods but in God! Instead of imitating methods, we need to trust God.

The Great Bible Story #46

Joshua gets deceived

When the people of Gibeon heard about what Israel had done to many kings, they got scared. So they took to great guile to deceive the people of Israel. A few of them got together, put on worn out clothes and worn out sandals, took some torn wineskins and dried up bread with them, and went to meet the people of Israel, pretending as if they had been travelling a long distance. When they came to Joshua and the other leaders of Israel, they narrated a story of long and hard travel from a far distance and said that they had heard about the fame of Israel and what they had done even to kings like Sihon the king of Heshbon and Og the king of Bashan. Now they wanted to make a covenant with Israel and make themselves their servants.

The leaders of Israel believed what they heard because they did not consult with God, and Joshua made a covenant with the people of Gibeon. But three days later the people of Israel discovered that Gibeon was nearby and that they were actually staying in their land at that time! But they could not do anything to the Gibeonites because the leaders had already made the covenant with them. So they made the Gibeonites to be their servants, to cut wood and carry water for them.

Now Adoni-zedek, king of Jerusalem, heard about how the people of Israel had conquered Ai and enslaved Gibeon which used to be a big city with mighty men. So he got together four other kings and incited them to go with him and attack Gibeon. These five kings and their armies went and camped near Gibeon and started fighting against it. The people of Gibeon then sent word to Joshua, reminding him of their covenant and requested him to go and save them from these kings. At this time God told Joshua not to worry but that He would give all of them into his hands. Joshua and his army marched all night and came upon these kings. God fought against these kings by confusing them and Israel was able to kill them in large numbers. When the five kings and their armies started fleeing from the scene, God started pelting them with hailstones. More people died from the hailstones than from the sword.

Joshua made a prayer to God asking Him to stop the sun and the moon in their positions so that he would have enough time to finish the battle before it became night. God answered that prayer by doing this fantastic miracle for Joshua.

Once we realise that it is God who created the whole universe, such miracles won't seem to be impossible.

The Great Bible Story #47

Israel in the Promised Land

Joshua led Israel in victory over the kings of Canaan and occupied their land which God had promised earlier to Abraham and his descendants. Different parts of the land were allotted to the tribes of Israel. But Israel had not taken care in many cases to completely destroy the Canaanites, and so they continued to live among the Israelites. God told His people that because of their disobedience they would always have the Canaanites as trouble makers in their midst. A parallel now is when believers disobey God and get married to unbelievers.

When Joshua died, there was nobody identified to lead the people. So people began to do things as each one wished. Many of them began to worship the idols of the Canaanites, because of which God's judgment had come upon those Canaanites. God chastised them by letting their enemies conquer them. It became a pattern for Israel that whenever they got into serious problem they would cry out to God, and God would raise up someone to deliver them. But soon after they felt safe, they would fall again to idol worship and leave their God who had saved them. This pattern is very common among Christians too, isn't it?

The leaders God raised up to deliver Israel were known as judges. One of the first judges was Othniel, the younger brother of Caleb. The people had rest for forty years under his rule. When he died, the people strayed from God again. Then God sent Eglon, the king of Moab, against them. He took the Ammonites and the Amalekites also with him and conquered Israel. Israel was under him for eighteen years.

When the people cried out to God because of their slavery, God raised up a man called Ehud who went into the palace of King Eglon, killed him secretly and fled from the place. When he reached his people he gathered them and went and defeated Moab. This time the people of Israel were free from Moab for eighty years.

When the people went away from God again, He gave them into the hands of Jabin who was king in Hazor. Deborah, a prophetess in Israel, was judging the people those days. She told a man called Barak that God had chosen him to defeat Jabin's army which was led by Sisera. Barak went only after she agreed to go with him. Sisera fled when Barak pursued him, and went into the tent of a woman called Jael where he thought he would be safe. Jael gave him food and drink, and when he was sleeping, she drove a tent peg into his head. This was how Barak got the victory!

The Great Bible Story #48

The rise and fall of Gideon

When Israel did evil again, God let the Midianites rule them for seven years. When they cried out to God for deliverance, God sent an angel to an Israelite called Gideon who was threshing wheat in a winepress to avoid being seen by the Midianites. He told Gideon that God had chosen him to deliver Israel from Midian. Gideon could not believe it as he felt he was too small to do anything like that. He wanted to see a sign from God. When he brought some food for the angel, the angel asked him to place it on a rock. Then the angel touched it with his staff, and fire sprang up from the rock and consumed it. Immediately the angel also vanished out of sight.

In the same night God told Gideon to pull down the altar of the idol Baal, to erect a new altar and to offer a bull as a sacrifice on it. Gideon got some people and did this secretly in the night. In the morning when the people saw that the altar of Baal was down and that Gideon had done it, they asked Gideon's father to give Gideon up. But he told them that if Baal was really a god, he should take care of himself!

When the Midianites heard about this, they came to fight with Israel. God empowered Gideon with the Holy Spirit, and he blew a trumpet and asked for his people to come together. But he was still not sure of himself. He asked God to show a sign, putting a fleece of wool on the ground and asking God to wet only the fleece with dew while the ground remained dry. When God did this, he asked Him to keep the fleece dry and to make the ground wet. God did that too.

God wanted to show how He would save Israel with only a few people. He asked all the people who were scared of the fight to return home, and 22000 left. But there were still 10000 left. Now God asked Gideon to take them to a river and watch how they drank water. He was to take only those who cupped water in their hands and lapped it up, which came to 300, and to send back all who knelt down to drink. God strengthened Gideon's faith further by letting him overhear the Midianites expressing their awe of him.

Gideon and the 300 men went to the camp of Midian in the night carrying a trumpet and a pitcher with a torch inside. They suddenly broke the pitcher, shone the torch and blew the trumpet, and the army of Midian ran away in fear.

When the people asked Gideon to be their ruler, he asked them to give him their golden earrings. He made an idol with it which the people began to worship!

The Great Bible Story #49

Jephthah makes a foolish vow

Another time Israel backslid and went after other gods, God allowed the Philistines and the Ammonites to oppress them. Then they cried out to God and told Him they were sorry they had left Him and gone after Baals. He told them that since they had left Him in spite of all that He had done for them, they might as well go and ask their gods to save them. But they repented and put away all the idols from their midst. But then the Ammonites came to attack them. There was an Israelite man called Jephthah in Gilead who was a valiant warrior but who had been driven out of his house by his step brothers because he had been born of a harlot. But now all the people came to call him to lead them in their fight against the Ammonites. He agreed on condition that if they won they would make him their leader. But first he sent a message to the Ammonites asking them why they were attacking them. The Ammonites replied that it was because Israel was occupying their land. Jephthah tried to show them that he had not given them any trouble, and that it was God who had given them this land. He asked them why they had not tried to recover the land all these three hundred years Israel had been staying here. But the Ammonites ignored the message and came up to fight. God then empowered Jephthah with the Holy Spirit and he called the people of Israel to come with him to fight the enemies.

As he was going into battle he made a foolish vow to God, without thinking much about it, that if the Lord gave him victory, he would offer whatever came out of his door when he went back home as a sacrifice to God. God did give him a mighty victory and he captured more than twenty cities in this process. But when he returned home, it was his only daughter who came out from the house to meet him. He was so desperate. But his daughter told him that since he had made a vow to God, he had to keep it. The only request she made was that he would give her two months' time to go and spend on the mountain with her friends. She did that, and when she came back Jephthah did what He had vowed to God.

Jephthah made this vow because he did not know God well enough and he was more acquainted with the practices of the Canaanites around him. He did not know that human sacrifice was one of the things that made God angry with the Canaanites. Even when he saw his daughter coming to him and realised his folly he could have repented.

The Great Bible Story #50

God's plans for Samson

When Israel backslid again, God placed them captive under the Philistines for forty years. Then God sent His angel to a woman in Israel to tell her that even though she had been childless till then she would give birth to a child who would deliver the people from the Philistines. As he was to be a Nazirite, set apart for God, she was not to drink wine or eat unclean food. The boy was not to have his hair cut. When she told her husband Manoah about the angel, he asked God to let the angel visit them again so that they could learn what all they should do. The angel came again and gave them the same instructions. Manoah offered the angel some food, but he asked Manoah to offer a sacrifice to God instead. When the burnt sacrifice was being made, the angel went up in the flame and disappeared.

They called the baby Samson. After he grew up he went into the land of the Philistines and saw a woman there whom he wanted to marry. When he was going with his parents to meet her, a lion attacked him on the way. The Spirit of God gave him such strength that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands. Later when he came to take his wife, he saw that there was a beehive inside the lion's body. He took out some honey with a stick and ate it.

As was the custom of the day, Samson made a feast on the occasion and posed a riddle for the young men to solve. "Out of the eater came something to eat, and out of the strong came something sweet." If they solved it he would buy them clothes and if they could not they had to buy him clothes. Even at the end of the seven days of the feast, they could not find the answer, and they compelled his wife to find out from him and tell them. When she pleaded with tears he told her the answer about the lion and the honey. When Samson knew how they cheated him, he went out, killed some Philistines and gave their clothes to these young men. His father in law thought Samson had lost interest in his wife and gave her to someone else.

After some time Samson went to see his wife, but when he understood what had happened he was so angry he went into a field, caught 300 foxes, tied their tails together, put burning torches between the tails, and sent them out into the field, burning up all the harvest. When the Philistines heard it, they burnt his wife and her family to death. Now Samson went out in fury and killed the Philistines ruthlessly.

The Great Bible Story #51

Samson's weak spot

While Samson was staying with the people of Israel, the Philistines came looking for him and asked Israel to hand him over. Samson told his people that they could hand him over, provided they themselves would not hurt him. The Philistines shouted aloud in triumph when they saw him. But the Spirit of God came upon Samson, he took the jaw bone of a donkey and killed a thousand Philistines with it.

After that Samson fell in love with a woman called Delilah. The Philistines came and enticed her with a big offer of money, asking her to find out the secret of Samson's strength and to tell them. He told her that if he was bound with seven fresh cords he would not be able to get free. So she tied him with such cords and then shouted saying the Philistines were coming. He got up, broke the cords and got up. Then Delilah acted sad for his cheating her, and asked again for his secret. This time he said he should be tied up with fresh ropes. She tried that, but Samson broke them also when he was told the Philistines were coming. This time Samson told her that if his hair was tied up in seven clusters and pinned to the ground he would not be strong. She tried this also, but this also did not work. Finally she told him she felt he didn't really love her and he had been cheating her all the time. This time he felt very bad, and revealed to her that if his long hair was cut, he would lose his strength. She realised now that this was the truth, and got his hair shaved off while he was sleeping on her lap.

Now when she cried out that the Philistines were coming, Samson got up as usual, not realising that God's strength was gone from him. The Philistines got him, plucked out his eyes, and tied him with bronze chains in a prison. But in the course of time, his hair began to grow again.

When Samson realised what had happened, he asked God to give him strength one more time so that he could take revenge on the Philistines. On the festival day of the Philistine god Dagon, when large numbers of them were gathered in a big hall to celebrate, they took Samson there to have some fun with him. He asked someone to place his hands on the pillars of that building so that he could lean against them. With a mighty exercise of his supernatural strength he pulled those pillars down, and the building came crashing down, killing all the Philistines there, along with him. In this way, Samson won a great victory over the Philistines for Israel.

The Great Bible Story #52

The story of Ruth

When there was a famine in the land, Elimelech from the tribe of Judah went over to Moab along with his wife Naomi and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Elimelech died there, and the sons married two women of Moab called Orpah and Ruth. After some time these sons also died, and Naomi was left with her daughters in law. She decided to go back to Israel and told them that she could no longer provide for them and that they should return to their fathers' houses. Orpah went back, but Ruth decided to stay on with Naomi, and accept her God as her God. So they both came to Bethlehem. The barley harvest was going on at that time.

The laws of Israel permitted poor people to pick up stray grains during a harvest and that was what Naomi asked Ruth to do for their survival. Ruth happened to go to the field of a man called Boaz who noticed her among his workers and arranged for her to glean grain without obstruction from them. He told her that he had heard about how she had stayed on with her mother in law and been helping her. In the evening when she went home she told Naomi that she had been gleaning from a field belonging to a man called Boaz. Naomi thought that this was something arranged by God because Boaz was one her close relatives. According to the custom of that time, the closest relative had the right to receive the property of a relative who had died. Naomi was hoping that Boaz would do that for her dead husband, and in doing so he might also take the responsibility to marry Ruth.

So Naomi told Ruth to go and find out where Boaz slept at night in the field after the day's harvest, and to lie down near his feet. When Boaz woke up in the middle of the night he was startled to see a woman at his feet. When he discovered it was Ruth he asked her to lie there quietly and to leave early in the morning before anyone else recognised her.

The next day Boaz went to meet another relative who was closer to Elimelech than he, and they met in front of the leaders of the city. Boaz asked this man whether he was interested in redeeming the property of Elimelech and along with it take responsibility for Ruth. That man was not willing. Then it became Boaz's turn to take over the responsibility. So he took Ruth as his wife. They had a son called Obed who later had a son called Jesse. Why we are looking at this story is because Jesse became the father of David whom we are going to meet in a short while!

The Great Bible Story #53

God calls Samuel

Eli was a priest in charge of the tabernacle which was then set up in a place called Shiloh. He was old, and he was not acting responsibly towards God or the people. He had two sons who used to steal the best of the offerings people made and even sleep with the women who came there. But even though Eli knew this, he did not do anything seriously to stop it. God began His plan to replace him.

A man named Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Hannah was very sad because she could not have children and Peninnah used to mock her. One day Hannah went to Shiloh and silently prayed her heart out before the Lord, asking Him to give her a son, promising Him that if He did, she would give him back to Him to serve Him. Eli saw her moving her lips without any sound and thought she was drunk. When he began to scold her she explained to him that she was only crying out to God out of the anguish of her heart.

The Lord heard her prayer, and she gave birth to a boy whom she named Samuel, meaning 'God has heard'. She looked after him till he was weaned, and then she gave him to the tabernacle to serve under Eli. God was hardly saying anything to Israel those days.

One night when Samuel was sleeping, he heard a voice calling him, "Samuel, Samuel." He thought Eli was calling him and went to him to find out. Eli said he had not called him, and told him to go back to sleep. But he heard this voice again a second and then a third time. Then Eli figured out that God was calling Samuel, and told him to reply, "Speak, Your servant is listening," if he heard the voice again. So the next time God called him he replied like this. Then the Lord began to tell him how He was planning to bring judgment on the house of Eli because he had the responsibility to judge his people but he did not even rebuke his sons when he knew they were doing evil.

When they got up from their sleep in the morning Eli asked Samuel what God had told him, and Samuel told him everything. But even then Eli did not take things seriously or repent. He simply said that it was for the Lord to do whatever He thought was good.

From then onwards God began to speak regularly with Samuel, and he began to be known as a prophet of God. God was with him, and helped him so that all he said to the people took place without fail.

Even now God is angry with leaders who neglect their responsibilities and He is looking for those who will listen and obey humbly.

The Great Bible Story #54

The ark gets captured

The Philistines came to attack again, and they killed about 4000 men of Israel. The elders of Israel wondered why they had been defeated, and they thought that if they took the ark of the covenant which was in Shiloh to the battlefield they could win the battle. (Following a form is not the same as following God!) All the army of Israel shouted loudly when they saw the ark arriving. When the Philistines heard that Israel's God had come to the battle they got scared. But then they thought that they had to fight their best to avoid becoming slaves to Israel. So again Israel got defeated. The Philistines took the ark and the two sons of Eli were among those killed. When Eli heard that news he fell backwards and died. One of his daughters in law who was expecting a child delivered due to shock when she heard her husband was dead, and called her son Ichabod, meaning 'the glory has departed'.

The Philistines took the ark to their place and put it in front of their idol Dagon. The next morning they found that Dagon was lying on its face on the floor before the ark. After they put it up again, the next day the same thing happened. God also gave trouble to the Philistines by giving them tumours on their bodies.

The Philistines decided that they could not keep the ark without getting cursed. They tried moving it to different places, but trouble was following them wherever it went. Finally they decided they would return the ark to Israel. They put it on a cart with two oxen pulling it, and let the oxen decide where they would go to see whether God would lead them back to Israel. They watched in amazement as the oxen went straight towards Israel.

The cart came and stopped in a place called Beth-shemesh where the Levite priests took the ark down. They took the wood of the cart and offered a sacrifice to God. Some people tried to look inside the ark, and the Lord struck them down. Then the people of Beth-shemesh got scared and asked the people of Kiriath-jearim to come and take the ark. The ark remained in Kiriath-jearim for twenty years!

Samuel told the people that if they removed all the foreign gods from among them and returned to God He would deliver them from the Philistines. So they obeyed him and started worshipping only God. Samuel gathered them in Mizpah and offered sacrifices to God. Then the Philistines came and attacked them. But God thundered from the sky and confused them, and Israel was able to rout them.

The Great Bible Story #55

Israel gets a king

When Samuel became old he appointed his two sons as judges. But they started taking bribes and perverting justice. One day the people came to him and said that they wanted a king just like the other nations. Samuel was not happy with this, and so he asked God what to do. God told him that it was not Samuel that the people rejected but God Himself. From the time He had brought them out from Egypt, they had been regularly leaving Him and going after other gods. So God decided to give them what they wanted, along with the problems that would come with it.

There was a young man called Saul from the tribe of Benjamin who was tall and handsome and whose father, Kish, was a mighty warrior. One day Kish sent him to look for some donkeys that had been lost. Since Saul was unable to find the donkeys, his servant suggested that perhaps they should ask Samuel about it. As they were going to see Samuel, God told Samuel that Saul would be coming to him, and that he should anoint him as the king of Israel. When they met, Samuel told Saul that the donkeys had been found, and asked him to come to a feast he was hosting. After the feast was over, Samuel took Saul to the rooftop, poured oil over his head and declared that God was anointing him as the king of Israel.

Then Samuel called all the people to Mizpah and recounted to them how God had taken them from Egypt to the Promised Land and how they had rejected Him from being king over them. He said that God was going to give them a king according to their wish. He cast lots to identify the man, first taking the tribe of Benjamin, then Saul's family and then Saul himself. But they could not find Saul anywhere! Finally they found him hiding among the baggage because he felt that he was not fit to be the king because of his lowly tribe and family. But when people saw the tall and handsome man in front of them they were quite pleased to make him king.

After this the Ammonites came and surrounded Jabesh-Gilead that belonged to Israel. The people of Jabesh-Gilead sent for help. When King Saul heard about it, the Spirit of God came upon him, he took two oxen, cut them in pieces and sent them all around the land with the message that anyone who did not come to join him in battle, his oxen would be cut to pieces like that. Then they all gathered together and got a great victory over Ammon. This strengthened the position of Saul as king in the eyes of the people.

The Great Bible Story #56

Saul is not obedient

After Saul defeated the Philistines, they gathered a huge army against Israel. Israel became so scared that they began to hide in caves and wherever possible. Samuel had told Saul he would be coming to offer sacrifices and prayers after seven days. But when Saul saw that Samuel was not to be seen, he himself offered a burnt sacrifice. Just then Samuel came and asked him why he had done that. Saul was, of course, king, but he was not a prophet or a priest, and so he had no authority to offer sacrifices like this. Saul excused himself saying that since Samuel did not come in time and he saw people leaving him, he had been forced to do it. Samuel's reply was that if he had kept God's commandments his kingdom would have endured, but now God would look for another man after His own heart to take over as king.

Samuel now told Saul that God wanted him to destroy the Amalekites utterly, man and beast, because of all their sins against Him. Saul went and fought with them and defeated them. But he kept King Agag alive, and he also kept the best of the sheep and oxen alive. When Samuel confronted him about this, Saul said that the people had kept the animals for sacrifice! Samuel told him that God did not have as much delight in sacrifices as in seeing His people obey Him. So now God would take away the kingdom from him. Saul tried to plead with Samuel saying he should not put him to shame in front of the people. But Samuel left him and went.

Now God sent Samuel to Bethlehem to the house of Jesse to anoint one of his sons as the next king. When Samuel saw the eldest son he thought this was going to be the one. But God told him that even though men were easily impressed with outward appearances, His focus was on the inner person. Jesse introduced seven of his sons in this way, but none of them was the one God had chosen. Then Jesse said that there was still the youngest, but he was out in the fields looking after sheep. When Samuel wanted to see him also, Jesse sent word for him and brought him. This was David, and he was young and handsome too. But God said this was the one. So Samuel took out his oil and anointed David with it, and the Spirit of God came mightily on him from that day.

At the same time the Spirit of God left Saul, and an evil spirit began to torment him at times. The people in the court suggested that if they brought David who was good with the harp to play for Saul he could be soothed. That was what they did.

The Great Bible Story #57

David and Goliath

Now the Philistines gathered together on one mountain and the Israelites were on another mountain with a valley between them. The Philistines sent out a champion into the valley and said that if Israel could defeat this man they could have the victory. But this man, Goliath, was a giant more than nine feet tall, with a huge armour, shield, javelin and sword. None of the people of Israel was willing to fight against this man. At this time David's father Jesse sent him to take some food for his brothers who were in the army. When he went there he heard this daily challenge from Goliath. He was also told that Saul had made an offer that any man from Israel who could defeat Goliath would be given his daughter in marriage. David was infuriated with this foreigner Goliath who dared to stand against the living God. When people heard David talking like this, they took him to King Saul.

David offered to the king that he would go against Goliath and kill him. Saul could not believe David could do this because he looked so young and inexperienced in battle. Then David recounted to Saul how once when he was taking care of the sheep a lion came to attack the sheep and another time a bear came he had fought against the lion and the bear, killed them and saved the sheep. He was sure that God would give this Goliath into his hands in the same way. King Saul agreed to try him.

Saul gave David his armour and sword to fight with, but when David tried them he felt so awkward he took them off. He wanted to use a sling he was familiar with, and gathered five smooth stones from a nearby brook and put them in his bag.

When Goliath saw David walking towards him with only a sling and a stick in his hand, he mocked him loudly saying, "Do you think I am a dog that you come to me with a stick?" But David's reply was, "You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord God of Israel, whom you have taunted. Today everyone will come to know that God is Lord." Then he took a stone from his bag, put it in the sling, swung it around and sent the stone hurtling towards Goliath. God directed that stone right to Goliath's forehead, and he fell down dead. David went, took Goliath's sword and cut off his head.

When the Philistines saw that their champion was dead they ran away, and Israel pursued them till they were far out of their land. This was how God gave Israel a great victory that day.

The Great Bible Story #58

David's conflict with Saul

The people were quite excited about David's victory over Goliath. Women started singing praises saying Saul had killed thousands but David ten thousands! This made Saul quite jealous, and he began to want to kill David in order to preserve his kingship. Once he tried to throw a spear at David but missed. Finally David ran away from the palace and began to hide in different places. But Saul started pursuing him with his army.

At one time Saul went into a cave in a mountain to relieve himself, not knowing that David was in the inner parts of that cave! David's friends told him that this was a God given opportunity for him to kill Saul. David just cut off a part of Saul's robe, but afterwards felt guilty that he had tried to attack God's chosen one. After Saul left, David went out himself and shouted out to Saul telling him what he could have done. Saul felt bad that he had been going after such a man like David.

But Saul was back at it soon. One night when Saul and his army was sleeping in their camp, David crept in and took away Saul's spear and jug of water. He shouted out to Saul from a distance and told him what he could have done. This time Saul recognised the virtue in David's heart and blessed him.

The Philistines attacked Saul's kingdom again. Saul was really scared of them, and by this time Samuel was dead too. He had no one to turn to, and so in desperation he turned to a medium to find out what would happen. He asked her to 'bring up' Samuel so that he could find out what God had to say. Now God had given clear instructions not to contact mediums or to try and talk to the dead. It is really not possible to talk to the dead, and if anyone tries, usually what he gets is an evil spirit who impersonates the dead person. But this time God did an extraordinary thing and allowed Samuel himself to appear and talk through the medium to Saul. When the medium saw Samuel, she herself was shocked!

Samuel told Saul that because he had been disobeying God He had taken the kingdom from him and given it to another man. He also said that Saul and his sons would be killed in the battle.

Saul's sons were killed by the Philistines, and he himself was wounded severely. When he realised he was going to die, he asked his armour bearer to kill him. When he would not, Saul fell down on his up turned sword and committed suicide. Israel were thoroughly defeated that day.

The Great Bible Story #59

David as king

Even after Saul died, it took some time for David to be established as the king of Israel. At first only the people of Judah accepted him as king, while someone put up Ishbosheth, son of Saul, as king over the rest of Israel. This led to a civil war and finally two men went and killed Ishbosheth in his house. But David felt this was not right and he was angry with the men who had done this. So he had these men put to death for their crime. After this all the men of Israel came to David and crowned him as king.

When the Philistines came to fight with him, David made the habit of finding out what God wanted him to do, before he went into battle. As a result, God gave him victory wherever he went.

Now David wanted to bring the ark of the covenant to where he was. So he went with the people, made them put the ark on a new ox cart and all the rest of the people celebrated it with singing and dancing. But what he did not realise was that the ark was only supposed to be carried by priests with poles on their shoulders and not on carts. As the oxen walked along they stumbled, and a man called Uzzah thought the ark was going to fall and held it safe. But God killed him right there because of his irreverence. David had mixed feelings of anger and fear towards the Lord that day. So he left the ark there and was scared to move it further. But then people told him that God was blessing the house where the ark was kept, and so decided to move it to his place. This time he arranged for it to be carried on shoulders. David himself was dancing with joy in front of the ark, and when he came home his wife Michal ridiculed him for making himself look cheap in front of the others. His reply was that he did it before the Lord and he was not bothered what people thought.

David now began to think that he should build a house for God's ark because he was himself staying in a palatial house by now. When he shared this with Nathan the prophet, Nathan thought this was a good idea. But later that night God spoke to Nathan and asked to tell David that He did not really need any house to stay in. But He appreciated David's desire to put the ark inside a permanent place. However, since David had been involved in too much bloodshed, God said that one of his sons would be permitted to build a house in His name. David responded by humbly acknowledging that he did not deserve all that God had done for him, and he was willing to abide by His plans.

The Great Bible Story #60

David falls very low

One day when David's army was facing a battle, he was walking on the roof of his house. He saw a woman in another house having a bath. He felt strongly attracted to her and tried to find out who she was. Even when he knew that Bathsheba was married to one of his soldiers, Uriah, he sent for her and slept with her. Perhaps he thought that as a king he was above the common law or that no one would know. But later she sent word to him to say that she was pregnant. David quickly made plans to cover it up. He sent for Uriah from the battle front, gave him food and wine and sent him to his house and wife. But Uriah did not go to his wife to sleep with her because he thought as a soldier on duty he had to keep away from such pleasures. David became desperate, and he sent Uriah back to the battle front, sending a letter to his commander to put Uriah right at the front and to withdraw from him when he was attacked! Uriah died, and then David took Bathsheba as his wife. But God was watching all this.

Even after a son was born to them, there was no sign of David admitting his sins of adultery and murder. Now God sent the prophet Nathan with a story. A rich man had a visitor, and he took the only lamb of his poor neighbour to prepare food for the visitor, even though he had plenty of sheep of his own. David was infuriated with the rich man and said he should be killed! Then Nathan reminded David that he was really the man in the story who had taken someone else's wife and even had the husband killed. David was an honest and sincere man at heart, and when he was confronted with the facts he owned up. He acknowledged that he had sinned against God. Later he even wrote a song of repentance referring to this great failure on his part. This is why David is still referred to as a man after God's own heart.

God forgave David these terrible sins. But because David had given everyone a terrible example by this behaviour and brought public dishonour to God's name, God said He would cause certain consequences that would warn everyone who heard about this. David and Bathsheba's son would die, and David would suffer much evil and confusion from his own family.

Even though God forgives our sins and blots them out from our record, He would also sometimes discipline us so that we can learn some lessons from it. There would also be natural consequences of our sin which would remind us and others who know us not to take sin lightly.

The Great Bible Story #61

Trouble in David's family

King David had several wives, following the custom of the heathen kings around him. His son Amnon raped his stepsister Tamar. Her brother Absalom was very angry at this, but kept quiet for two years. Then one day he invited all the king's sons for a feast, and got Amnon killed when he was merry with wine. Afterwards Absalom fled from the place and kept away from the king for three years. But finally Joab, the commander of David's army, convinced David to receive Absalom back. Though David allowed Absalom to come back, he would not meet him because of what he had done.

After some time, Absalom made a plan to take the kingdom from David. He got himself horses and a chariot and men to run before him. Every day he would stand where people gathered and enticed them by telling them how he would help them and sort out their problems if he was in charge. After he had won their hearts like this, he went to Hebron and made people announce him as king!

Fearing that Absalom would now put him to death, David fled from the place along with many of his faithful friends. Then Absalom came to Jerusalem, the capital, and took over as king. David gathered all the people who were with him and put three commanders over them and sent them to fight with Absalom's army. He still loved his son Absalom and so he told his army to be gentle with him.

The people following Absalom were defeated by those of David and about 20000 men died that day. As Absalom was riding a mule his long hair got caught in the branches of an oak tree. He was left hanging from the tree as the mule moved off from under him. Somebody who saw it reported to Joab that the king's son was hanging from a tree. Joab went there, took three darts and thrust them through Absalom's heart. Then he blew the trumpet to announce that the battle was over.

When David heard about Absalom's death, he was inconsolable, and his followers did not feel like celebrating the victory. The Joab came and impressed upon him that if he cared more for Absalom than for the people who had followed him, none of them would be with him anymore. So David put aside his personal grief and went and greeted his people.

When David was on his sick bed in his old age, another of his sons Adonijah declared himself as king in his place. Bathsheba and Nathan went to remind him that he had committed for Solomon, Bathsheba's son, to be king. So Solomon was anointed as king before David died.

The Great Bible Story #62

Solomon begins his reign

Solomon loved God and followed Him as David his father did, except that he also worshipped in 'high places'. High places were usually places where heathen nations worshipped their idols, but some of them were also places where Israel worshipped God by building altars. Solomon went to worship God at Gideon where the tabernacle of Moses was, even though David had set up the ark of the covenant in Jerusalem. There God appeared to him in a dream and asked him what he wanted. Solomon's reply was that since he was young and inexperienced he would like to receive wisdom from God to rule over the people well. This was so pleasing to God that He showed Solomon His appreciation for choosing wisdom above wealth and fame. God said that He would give him wisdom above everyone else and also that He would make him rich and famous as additional blessings.

Solomon's test of wisdom came almost immediately. Two prostitutes came to him with a case. They both had babies in the same day, and in the night one of them accidentally slept over her baby and the baby died. But in the morning she claimed that the dead baby belonged to the other woman and the living baby was hers! Solomon asked someone standing by to take a sword, divide the living baby into two and give to them. At this point the woman whose baby it really was cried out and pleaded with him not to kill the baby but to give him to the other woman. Now everyone was clear whose baby it really was! Solomon's reputation for wisdom shot up immediately.

Solomon became so wealthy that he could accumulate much gold, silver and precious stone, build huge buildings, have a large stable of horses, keep a huge array of soldiers, etc. Neighbouring nations began to pay tribute to him and send in valuable things as a token of respect. The queen of Sheba came all the way from her country to see him and his wealth and to observe his wisdom. When she was going back her comment was that what she saw was far greater than what she had imagined.

Solomon also married many foreign princesses, including the daughter of Pharaoh of Egypt. He did not pay any attention to God's commandment for Israel to be separate from the nations around them and not to intermarry with them. These women began to slowly turn his mind from God to their gods.

After completing a grand palace for himself, Solomon made a magnificent temple for God in Jerusalem. He also set up the ark in the temple.

The Great Bible Story #63

The dedication of the temple

When the temple was complete and the priests had installed the ark inside, the glory of God filled the place as a cloud. Solomon knelt in front of the altar and dedicated the temple to God in prayer. He said he was awed by the privilege he was given to build the temple for God even though it was his father's desire to build it. He requested God to listen with favour to the prayers made from the temple, and to show mercy even if Israel backslid from Him at any time and then returned to Him. When he got up, he blessed the people, and they had great feasts in celebration for several days.

God appeared to Solomon and answered him, saying that if he and the people followed in His ways, His blessings would continually be with them and his descendants would always have a place on the throne. But if they or their descendants went away from Him or did not keep His commandments He would chastise them in different ways.

As a man who had a high intelligence and who had practically no limitations in respect of money or power, Solomon tried to explore different ways he could get pleasure and find meaning in life. He tried constructing great buildings, planting trees of different sorts, trying different cuisines, gaining knowledge from as many sources as he could get, getting 700 wives and 300 other women, etc. He wrote the Song of Songs describing the love of a young man and woman, the Book of Proverbs compiling many snippets of wisdom that he had acquired, and finally the Book of Ecclesiastes where he described the folly of going after the things of this world to find the meaning of life which could only be found with God.

As Solomon became older, he went away from God as he came more and more under the influence of his many wives. He began to build shrines for their heathen gods and carry out sacrifices to them. Just as God had warned him, He began to raise up trouble for him. Jeroboam who was the son of one of Solomon's servants rebelled against him. The prophet Ahijah came to him, cut his cloak into twelve parts and told Jeroboam that he would be given ten parts of the kingdom while Solomon's son would only have two. God told Solomon that after his death the kingdom would be divided into two. Because He remembered the dedication of his father David, He said this would happen only after he died, and also that the lineage of David would continue through one kingdom.

Solomon died after forty years of rule over Israel.

The Great Bible Story #64

Rehoboam acts foolishly

After Solomon's death his son Rehoboam took over as king over all Israel. When Jeroboam heard this he came to talk to Rehoboam along with all the people. He said that Solomon had been very hard with the people and so he suggested that Rehoboam should make things easier for them. Rehoboam said he would think about it and asked them to come after three days.

When he consulted with the older leaders of Israel they suggested the strategy that Rehoboam should show some lenience towards the people after which they would fall in line with whatever he said. He went on to consult young men of his age to see what they would suggest. These friends were of the opinion that he should act tough with them and get them under control, saying that if they thought Solomon was tough he would be tougher still! Sadly, Rehoboam liked the opinion of the youngsters than the wisdom and experience of the older men.

When Jeroboam and the people came to meet him after three days Rehoboam just mouthed what the young people had told him. He told them they would find him tougher than his father Solomon!

This was enough to trigger the people in the wrong way. They formed groups along tribal lines, and ten tribes in the north of the land separated from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. These two separate kingdoms came to be known as Israel and Judah or the northern and southern kingdoms. Israel made Jeroboam their king with Samaria as their capital, and Rehoboam ruled over Judah in Jerusalem. Some people of Benjamin were with Israel and the others with Judah. The people of Levi came over to Jerusalem and supported Judah.

Now Jeroboam wondered if people would go back to Jerusalem because the temple was there. So he made two golden calves, put one in Bethel and one in Dan along with altars so that the people could go there instead to worship! He also made priests from those from tribes other than Levi.

One day Jeroboam was offering something on the altar in Bethel when a prophet came from God and told him that one day a king called Josiah would be born as a descendant of David who would desecrate this altar by burning human bones on it. He also said the altar would be split in two. The altar immediately split into two. Jeroboam was angry and asked somebody to catch the prophet, pointing him out with his hand. His hand became stiff and he could not draw it back! He had to beg the prophet to pray to God to heal his hand.

The Great Bible Story #65

Asa rules in Judah

Asa was one of the good kings in Judah. When he became king, he removed all the foreign high places from the kingdom and encouraged the people to follow the Lord God. He even removed his mother from being queen because she had made a heathen image of worship.

One day Zerah the Cushite came to attack Judah with an innumerably huge army. Asa cried out to God for help, declaring his faith in God being able to deliver them. Then God defeated the Cushites till they fled. God sent Azariah to prophesy to Asa and tell him that as long as Judah stayed with Him and sought for Him He would be with them, but if they forsook Him He would also forsake them. Asa was very much encouraged when he heard this, and he went on to remove all the idols from the land of Judah and Benjamin. When the people from the other tribes in Israel saw that God was with Asa many of them came over to his side. Asa gathered all of them together at Jerusalem, made sacrifices to God and made a covenant with Him to follow Him.

In the thirty sixth year of the reign of Asa, Basha the king of Israel came up against him. Instead of seeking God as he had done earlier, he resorted to taking out gold and silver from the temple of God and giving it to Ben-Hadad the king of Aram to break his covenant with Israel. Ben-Hadad therefore went with Asa to attack certain parts of Israel. When Basha heard about this he returned to his place.

But what Asa did was displeasing to God. God sent Hanani the prophet to Asa to remind him about how He had delivered Judah from the mighty army of Zerah when he depended on Him. He asked him why he chose to rely on Aram instead of Him. Asa could have also defeated the army of Aram if he had depended on Him. He was disappointed with Asa because He was always on the lookout for those whose hearts were wholly devoted to Him in order to strengthen them.

Somehow the earlier humility and the reverence for God which Asa had shown earlier seemed to be missing. Perhaps his success and many years as king made him feel strong in himself. Anyway Asa was angry with Hanani for speaking to him like this and put him in prison! Following this Asa also started oppressing some of the people. One day he became very ill, but even then he did not return to seeking God.

This is an example of a man who began well with God but who let his resulting success, power and position go to his head. It also teaches us to be open to listen to correction always.

The Great Bible Story #66

Elijah the prophet

Ahab was the worst of the kings of Israel so far and he did much evil. He married Jezebel, a princess of Sidon, and started worshipping Baal their god. He made a house and an altar for Baal. It was during this time that Hiel from Bethel tried to rebuild Jericho and then his first son died when the foundations were built and another son died when he set up its gates, just as Joshua had prophesied.

God sent Elijah the prophet to tell Ahab that it would not rain or dew in Israel till he said so. A famine developed in the whole land due to the lack of rain. God told Elijah to go and hide near a brook called Cherith. Every day some ravens would bring him food and he would drink water from the brook. Then the brook dried up. Then God told him to go to Zarephath in Sidon where He would instruct a widow to take care of him. When Elijah went there he saw a widow collecting dry sticks as firewood. He asked her for a drink of water, and as she was going to get it he said he would like to have some bread too. At this the woman turned around and said she had only a bit of flour and oil with which she was going to make the last dinner for her and her son after which they would die. Elijah told her not to worry because God was going to keep the flour and the oil coming miraculously till it started raining again.

One day this widow's son became so sick that there was no breath in him. She took him to Elijah and asked him if this was God's way of reminding her of her old sin. He took the boy to his room and prayed, asking God to give the boy his life back. When Elijah gave the boy back to his mother alive, she said she was convinced he was indeed a man of God.

Now God told Elijah to go and tell Ahab that it would rain again. Ahab was actually looking for Elijah to hold him responsible for the famine. He told Obadiah who was in charge over his house to search for Elijah in one part of the kingdom while he himself searched in the other. Obadiah was a man who had reverence for God and had saved many prophets of God when Jezebel had tried to kill them. As he went searching he met Elijah who told him to tell Ahab he was there. Obadiah was at first scared that by the time he told Ahab God would take Elijah somewhere else! But after Elijah convinced him not to worry he went and told Ahab.

Elijah told Ahab that God had stopped the rain because of Ahab worshipping Baal. Now he wanted Ahab to bring all the prophets of Baal to Mount Carmel.

The Great Bible Story #67

Showdown at Carmel

Just as Elijah said, King Ahab collected together 450 prophets of Baal on the top of Mount Carmel, while Elijah was alone there as a prophet of God. Elijah challenged the people who had come to watch, asking them how long they would hesitate to choose between Baal and God. He asked them to follow Baal or God, whichever was the true God.

At the top of the mountain Elijah got two oxen, and asked the prophets of Baal to cut one into pieces, make an altar and put the pieces on the altar without putting any fire under it. He would do a similar thing with the other ox. Then both sides were to pray for fire to come down from the sky and burn their offering. Elijah told the people that the God who answered with fire could be seen to be truly God. The people were excited with the idea.

Baal's prophets finished their preparation and started prayer. Since there was no answer they started jumping wildly, cutting themselves, etc., in their fervour. But nothing happened. Elijah began to mock them saying perhaps their god was sleeping or otherwise occupied! They went on from morning to almost evening, but there was no answer from Baal.

Now Elijah built an altar for God, cut the ox into pieces and put them on top of some wood on the altar. Then he made a trench around the altar and asked the people to pour water on the sacrifice till it flowed down and filled the trench! Now he prayed to God and asked Him to send fire to show the people who He was. Fire came from the sky and burnt up the sacrifice and the wood on the altar, and even licked up the water in the trench! Seeing this, all the people cried out that the Lord (Jehovah) was God.

Elijah now asked the people to quickly catch the prophets of Baal and kill them without letting them escape. He told Ahab that rain would come now. Very soon dark clouds developed and rain came pouring down.

When Ahab told Jezebel what Elijah had done to the prophets of Baal, she was furious. She said that she would make sure that Elijah would be dead within a day's time. Probably exhausted after the day's events, this prophet who had stood against the king and all the prophets now ran for his life, went into the desert, sat under a tree and wished he was dead. But God sent an angel to give him food after he had slept, and told him he had a long journey to take.

Then Elijah got up, travelled for forty days and came to the mountain called Horeb where he stayed in a cave.

The Great Bible Story #68

Misadventures of Ahab

God asked Elijah what he was doing in a cave, and he replied that he was there because people were trying to kill him even though he had been faithful to Him while everyone else had gone after Baal. God asked him to go up the mountain because He was going to pass by. Elijah went up Mount Horeb to meet with the Lord. First there was a strong wind that shattered the rocks, then an earthquake, and then fire, but God was not in any of them. Then a soft, small voice asked Elijah what he was doing there. Elijah replied that he had been very zealous for God, everyone else had gone after Baal and they were now pursuing him to kill him. God told him that He still had 7000 others in Israel who had not bowed down to Baal. He also told Elijah that it was time to anoint Elisha who was to take over from him.

In the meantime, Ben-hadad, king of Aram came against Israel along with 32 other kings and told them to surrender. Now a prophet of God came and told Ahab that He would deliver that huge army to him that day. Following instructions from God, Ahab picked up 232 young leaders of provinces and 7000 people of Israel and went to fight, and they defeated the Arameans! Then the Arameans said that they were defeated because Israel's God was a God of the mountains and they thought that if they fought in the plains they would win. So they came to fight again with a large army. This time God said He would show He was really the Lord. Israel killed 100000 men and when they fled God sent a city wall crashing down on them killing another 27000. Ben-hadad came to Ahab humbly and promised to give back some cities which his father had taken from Israel. Ahab let him go on that condition. But God was angry with Ahab for letting him escape.

King Ahab saw and coveted a vineyard belonging to a man called Naboth, and he asked Naboth to sell it to him. But he refused saying it was an inheritance from his ancestors. Ahab became very sullen because of this and lay down in bed. When Jezebel heard from Ahab what had happened she chided him for forgetting that he was king! She made a scheme to call Naboth for a fast, have someone accuse him of blasphemy and then to stone him to death. After this happened Ahab went and took over the vineyard. But God sent Elijah to tell Ahab that judgment would come upon his family, Jezebel would be eaten by dogs in the street, and every male in the family would get killed.

The Great Bible Story #69

Jehoshaphat of Judah

Jehoshaphat, son of Asa, was one of the good kings who came up in the southern kingdom, Judah. God was pleased with his ways and gave him great riches and honour. Jehoshaphat took great pride in the ways of God and he removed all the idols and high places from the land. He appointed men in different places to teach the people from God's book of the laws. But he made a mistake in making an alliance with Ahab, the wicked king of Israel, by getting his son married to Ahab's daughter. This led him into compromising situations.

One day when Jehoshaphat was visiting Ahab in Samaria, Ahab invited him to join in attacking Ramoth-Gilead. Jehoshaphat obliged him by promising him full support. Ahab gathered some prophets and asked them if he should go for this battle. They were all unanimous in promising him victory. But Jehoshaphat asked them if they could consult some genuine prophet of God. Ahab knew one, but he was afraid that this prophet Micaiah would only tell him evil things! Micaiah acted at first as if he was also saying what the prophets said, but when Ahab asked him to tell the truth he said that an evil spirit had lied to the other 'prophets' and that Ahab was going to die in the battle.

Ahab decided to disguise himself and go to battle. During the fight, some people were going to attack Jehoshaphat seeing his royal clothes, but he cried out to God and He diverted them from him. But some archer hit Ahab without knowing who he was, and by evening he bled to death. Later dogs licked up his blood from the chariot. Jehoshaphat returned safely to Jerusalem.

One day the people of Moab and Ammon came to attack Judah. Jehoshaphat proclaimed a fast throughout Judah and prayed to God. He acknowledged his powerlessness against the enemy and not knowing how to deal with the situation, but he said that he was looking to God to take action. Then Jahaziel, a prophet of God, came and told him that God had heard the prayer and He would give a mighty deliverance. God wanted Judah not to fear the enemy but to watch and see what God would do for them. Jehoshaphat believed this and set up people to sing songs of praise and thanksgiving to God.

As the people of Judah did this, the Lord fought against the enemy. First they went and killed the people of Mount Seir and then they fought among themselves. When Jehoshaphat went, he could see only corpses all around! The people also got much loot from the enemy camp.

The Great Bible Story #70

Elijah is taken up

Ahaziah became king after Ahab. One day he fell down from an upper floor and was ill. He sent someone to find out from Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, if he would recover. God saw this, and He sent an angel to tell Elijah to go and meet the men Ahaziah had sent. Elijah met them on the way and told them to ask the king why he was going to Baal-zebub as if there was no God in Israel. Elijah also said that because Ahaziah had done this he would not recover but die.

When Ahaziah heard this, he asked his people who had said this, and then he knew it was Elijah. In his anger he sent fifty soldiers to go and bring Elijah to him. The captain went to Elijah and told him, "O man of God, come with me because the king wants to see you." Elijah said that if he was a man of God the fire of God would come down and consume them. So the captain and his soldiers were burnt to death with fire from the sky. When Ahaziah came to know this, he sent another fifty soldiers. This captain also said the same thing to Elijah and the same thing happened to them too. Now the king sent another fifty! This captain was begged Elijah to spare his life. This time God told Elijah to go with the soldiers and talk to the king. So Elijah went and told the king that he was going to die because he had sought for help from Baal-zebub. King Ahaziah died just as God said.

When the time came for Elijah to leave the earth, Elisha kept following him around. Every now and then Elijah would ask him to stay so that he could go on. But Elisha would not leave him. When they came to the Jordan, Elijah took his mantle and struck the water with it. The river parted, and the two of them walked through it to the other side. Then Elijah asked Elisha what he wanted before the Lord took him away. Elisha wanted double the anointing that Elijah had. Elijah said that it was a difficult, but he could receive it if he saw Elijah being taken away.

As they were walking along, suddenly they saw a chariot and horses made of fire come between them. This chariot took Elijah up into the sky. Elijah's mantle fell down from him and Elisha picked it up. He went to the Jordan and struck the water with the mantle saying, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" The water parted and he crossed over to the other side.

There were some prophets there who saw Elisha coming back from the Jordan and said to themselves that the anointing of Elijah was now with Elisha. Elisha did many miracles to help them.

The Great Bible Story #71

Elisha raises the dead

One day the widow of a prophet came and told Elisha that the creditors were coming to take away her two children because of her late husband's debts. He asked her what she had in her house. She said that she had only a jar of oil left. So he asked her to take this jar and to keep pouring the oil into as many vessels as she could find in the house because the oil would not finish till all the vessels were full. She could also borrow vessels from her neighbours and fill them too with the oil! After that she could sell all the oil, and repay her creditors with that money.

Another day when Elisha the prophet passed by a place called Shunem, a prominent woman there invited him for a meal. After that every time he passed that way he used to stop there to eat. As time went on she suggested to her husband that they should make a room for him upstairs so that he could rest there whenever he wanted. After this was done Elisha asked his servant Gehazi what he could do for her in return for all this hospitality. He found out that this woman had no son. Elisha called her and told her that by the time the next year came around she would have a son. It happened just as Elisha said.

As this son was growing up one day he went to his father's field. There he started complaining about a pain in his head, and so he was taken back home to his mother. He sat on her lap for some time and then died! She quickly got up, laid her son on Elisha's bed, got on to a donkey and rode to meet Elisha. When he saw her coming from a distance he sent Gehazi to find out if everything was well. She replied it was, but she came and clung to Elisha's feet. Gehazi tried to push her away, but Elisha said there might be something that was causing her this distress which the Lord had not yet told him about.

She cried out to him reminding him that she had not asked him for a son! Elisha quickly asked Gehazi to take his staff and to go and lay it on this son. Gehazi returned saying that the son was still the same. Then Elisha went to his room, saw the dead body and started praying. He walked up and down, and lay on top of the body trying to make it warm. Soon the boy came alive. Elisha asked Gehazi to call the mother, and then he handed the boy over to his mother!

The Great Bible Story #72

A leper is healed

Naaman, the captain of the army of Aram, was suffering from a severe sickness called leprosy. He had a slave girl from Israel in his house who told her mistress that the master could get healed if he went to the prophet of God in Samaria. Naaman shared this with the king. This king immediately sent him to Israel with a letter to the king of Israel asking him to get Naaman cured of his leprosy! Naaman went there with lots of silver, gold and clothes to give as reward.

When the king of Israel read the letter he was distressed because he thought that the king of Aram was trying to find an occasion to fight with him! He exclaimed he was no God to be able to cure leprosy!

When Elisha heard that the king was upset he told the king not to worry but to send the man to him. He would show him that there was a true and living God in Israel.

Naaman came with all his soldiers and animals and stood outside Elisha's house, expecting him to come out and do some magic that would take away his sickness. But instead, Elisha just sent word to him asking him to go to the River Jordan and dip himself seven times in it. But Naaman was furious because he did not get the dignified response that he expected. He started going away saying there were better rivers in Aram!

But his servants convinced him to try what the prophet had said, saying that this was a simple thing that the prophet asked him to do. So Naaman went to Jordan, and after he came out from the seventh dip he found that his skin was as good as new!

He came back happily, acknowledging that there was no God in all the earth except in Israel. He tried to give all the gifts he had brought to Elisha, but Elisha was not willing to take anything. But as Naaman was going away, Gehazi thought that Elisha had made a mistake in letting Naaman go free. So he ran after Naaman and said that Elisha had sent him to collect some silver and clothes for some visitors who had just turned up. Naaman was happy to give, and Gehazi went sneaking into the house and hid the gifts. But Elisha knew what Gehazi had done. He scolded him for going after wealth instead of serving God and said that the leprosy of Naaman would now cling to Gehazi and his family forever. So Gehazi left in disgrace from that house as a leper.

The Great Bible Story #73

Joash the boy king

Elisha sent one of the prophets to anoint Jehu as king of Israel. Jehu was also given the task of destroying the family of Ahab the wicked king. So Jehu went and killed King Joram of Israel, the son of Ahab. He also killed King Ahaziah of Judah who was visiting with Joram at that time. When he went to Jezreel, Queen Jezebel was there, mocking him from the top of the wall. He asked people to throw her down from the wall. When she died, her blood was splattered everywhere and the dogs licked it up just as the prophecy said. Later they could only find her skull and palms. Jehu also killed all the other sons of Ahab.

When Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah saw that he was dead, she declared herself queen of Judah, killed all the other heirs, and began to reign. But the sister of Ahaziah took Joash his son and hid him away from Athaliah.

When Joash was seven years old, Jehoiada the priest called the military guards and priests and told them about Joash. On a certain day they declared that Joash was king! When Athaliah heard it, she was furious, but Jehoiada asked the soldiers to put her to death.

King Joash (Jehoash) did well in God's sight as he was instructed by Jehoiada the priest. Along with Jehoiada he made arrangements for people to offer money for the repair of the Temple, and he organised the collection of the money and the payment to the workers. However, when Jehoiada died in his old age, the people began to go back to the idols around them. God sent prophets to warn them, but they did not listen to them.

Then the Spirit of God came upon Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest, and he told them that because they had forsaken God, God had forsaken them too. They got angry with Zechariah for this, and at the word of the king they stoned him to death inside the court of the Temple. Joash forgot the goodness that Jehoiada the father of Zechariah had done to him.

Then the Arameans came against Judah with a small army, but God delivered Judah into their hands even though Judah had a stronger army. The Arameans killed all the officials of Judah and took away the spoil. They left King Joash sick. At this time his own servants conspired against him because of what he had done to Jehoiada, and killed him in his bed.

We wonder how much King Joash knew God personally, because as soon as Jehoiada left, he started backsliding, even though it looked earlier that he had a great future as a king.

The Great Bible Story #74

Jonah the reluctant prophet

One day God called Jonah the prophet and told him to go to a city called Nineveh and warn them about impending judgment from God because of their wickedness. But Jonah didn't like this, and he thought he would get away from God by going in the opposite direction! He found a ship going to Tarshish, paid his fare, went down into the hold and went to sleep. But as the ship went into the middle of the sea God sent a great storm there, and even the toughest sailors on the ship thought they would surely perish. Everyone started praying to their gods, and the captain woke up Jonah and asked him why he was not praying. Some people felt that this was an unusual storm and thought that this might be due to the anger of the gods against someone on board. They began to cast lots to find out who it might be, and it fell on Jonah. They pounced upon him and asked him what his crime was.

Jonah guiltily admitted that he was a Hebrew who was running away from the God who had created the earth and the sea. The people got scared and asked him what they could do to ease the storm. He asked them to throw him into the sea, after which the storm would cease. They didn't want to do this, and so tried their best to get the ship back to land. But the storm was becoming nastier, and finally they felt they had no option but to throw him into the sea. As soon as they did that the storm disappeared! They were struck with fear, and they offered sacrifices to God.

God arranged for a huge fish to swallow Jonah alive, and he was in that fish's stomach for three days. (We are not given any details about the fish or how Jonah survived, but we have no problem with that once we realise that it was the Creator God who was handling the situation supernaturally.) When Jonah finally realised his folly at the end of the three days, he began to repent before God and cry out for mercy, acknowledging that God was right. Then God made the fish to go and vomit him on to the shore.

Now Jonah walked to Nineveh, went through its length and breadth, and began to proclaim that God was going to destroy the city in forty days. This made all the people of Nineveh to repent, including the king. This was what God really wanted, and He turned his judgment away.

This was what Jonah had been thinking would happen, and how he would look foolish for proclaiming judgment. But God taught him to understand His concern and heart for even wicked people to turn to Him.

The Great Bible Story #75

Years of captivity

Even though there were a few kings in the kingdom of Judah who followed the Lord and tried to bring reforms among the people, most of the kings of Israel were wicked people given over to idol worship and following the practices of the nations around them. God would allow some other kings to oppress these two nations as a warning when they began to go astray, and He would send prophets one after the other to correct them. When calamity struck them, they would occasionally turn back to God, but they would soon go back to their old ways when there was peace. This seems to be a universal principle for all people.

The prophet Isaiah spoke about the coming of the Messiah, His birth in Bethlehem, His betrayal and His death for the sins of all people. He also prophesied about what would happen to the different nations that fought against Israel.

God began to warn the two kingdoms that unless they repented they would be taken into captivity by enemy nations. But false prophets began to proclaim 'peace' and convince them that the true prophets of God were taking the side of the enemies! The people did not pay any heed nor try to repent. Several prophets of God were imprisoned and even put to death in cruel ways. Finally the army of Assyria came and carried off the people of the kingdom of Israel to their country. Hoshea was the last king of Israel.

The focus now turned to the kingdom of Judah. God was hoping that the people of Judah who heard about what happened to the sister kingdom of Israel would at least repent now. But they continued their backsliding. God warned them through prophets that they would be taken into captivity, but they did not repent. God felt that they were becoming more wanton than Israel. Finally the Babylonian army came and carried off most of the people in Judah to Babylon. However they left a few back in Jerusalem and appointed someone to rule them on behalf of Babylon. The last king of Judah, Zedekiah, was taken to Babylon, his sons killed before him, and had his eyes gouged out.

The Babylonians destroyed the temple of God in Jerusalem and took away all the precious things of gold and silver to Babylon. The ark of the covenant has not been seen since, and all the glory of the people in their magnificent temple came down. As the Babylonian empire expanded, it conquered Assyria too. After God took the children of Israel from captivity in Egypt, they were all back in captivity now.

The Great Bible Story #76

Daniel keeps himself pure for God

When King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered the southern kingdom of Judah as a part of God's judgment against Judah, he asked Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to select a few young men from Judah who were without defect, good looking, intelligent and able to study. These young men were to be given special training in all the literature and wisdom of the Babylonians so that after the training they could become his personal staff. Among them were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Ashpenaz gave them new Babylonian names as Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego.

As special trainees these boys were given special food and wine every day from the king's table. But in order to remain faithful to his God, Daniel decided not to have them. When Ashpenaz heard about this, he was worried that the boys would suffer in their health and when the king came to know about it his own life would be in danger. But Daniel suggested that he could try it out by giving the four of them only vegetables and water for ten days. If he found them becoming unhealthy he could then change their diet. God was watching Daniel's intention to be faithful to Him, and so He gave him favour with Ashpenaz. Ashpenaz agreed to try this for ten days.

At the end of ten days, these boys who were having only vegetables and water turned out to be healthier than the others who were enjoying the food and wine from the king's table! So Ashpenaz continued to give them what they wanted.

At the end of their training programme, these four boys, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, were seen to have more wisdom and understanding in all things compared to the others. This was because God had given them special grace and endowed them with knowledge and intelligence in everything they had to learn. He also gave Daniel special abilities to understand and interpret visions and dreams. King Nebuchadnezzar was so impressed by these four young men that he gave them special responsibilities as his personal staff. He thought that these men had greater knowledge and abilities than even the renowned magicians he had employed till then.

God watches every decision that we make, and when He finds us choosing to honour Him even at the risk of losing out because of it in front of people, He honours us by giving us special favour beyond our natural abilities and skills. Ultimately people also come to recognise what God has done in our lives.

The Great Bible Story #77

Daniel and the king's dream

King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that took away his sleep. In the morning he called for the wise men and asked them to tell him the dream he had seen and its interpretation. They said that if he told them his dream they would give the meaning. But the king wanted to see if they could tell the dream itself so that he could also believe their interpretation! But they admitted that no one could do what the king wanted! The king felt very angry and threatened them that unless they did what he had said, he would have all of them torn to pieces and their houses destroyed!

Arioch, the captain of the king's bodyguard, was given the task of killing all the wise men in Babylon. When Daniel heard about the order, he asked Arioch discretely why the king was so angry, and then Arioch told him what had happened. Daniel went and requested the king to give him a day to get the answer, and then he asked his three friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah to pray to God along with him to reveal the answer to him.

God heard their prayer, and He revealed the mystery through a vision to Daniel in the night. Then Daniel praised God and acknowledged how it was He who was in control of kings and all events. He gave thanks to God for revealing the secret to him. Then he informed Arioch that he was ready to reveal the mystery of the dream to the king.

When Daniel went before the king, he made it clear that it was not any special cleverness on his part that had helped him to understand the mystery but that God who made heaven and earth had chosen to reveal a part of the future to Nebuchadnezzar through his dream.

Daniel described how the king had seen a tall statue in his dream, whose head was made of gold, chest and the arms of silver, stomach and thighs of bronze, legs of iron and feet partly of iron and clay. The king saw a stone that was uncut by hand come rolling, striking the feet and the whole statue tumbling down and becoming powder! But the stone became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth. He said that the head represented Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom, after which two comparatively inferior kingdoms would come, followed by one kingdom that would rule with a hand of iron. After that God would set up His kingdom that would never end.

Nebuchadnezzar was so impressed that he threw himself down before Daniel. He made Daniel the ruler of Babylon and the chief of the wise men. At Daniel's request, his friends were also promoted.

The Great Bible Story #78

Trial by fire

After Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream his empire represented by a head of gold, he made for himself an entire statue of gold, about 90 feet tall. This was possibly an expression of his desire for his empire to last forever. Then he made a royal decree that when the band played everyone must bow down before the statue in worship. Everyone did that, except Daniel's three friends. We don't know where Daniel was at that time, but from what we know about him we can be sure he also would not have bowed down to this statue. Some people who saw this went quickly and reported to the king that Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego were refusing to bow down.

Naturally the king became very angry to see that someone dared to disobey him, and asked for them to be brought before him immediately. Since they were part of his personal staff he was willing to give them one more chance to save themselves. He told them that the band would play again, and they had to bow down this time. He also warned them that if they still disobeyed him he would have them thrown alive into a fiery furnace.

Their reply showed their allegiance to God above all, and their trust and confidence in Him whatever happened. They replied to the king that they believed that their God was quite able to deliver them from the fire. But since they didn't know what exactly God would do, they also said that even if they were to die in the fire, they would still not bow down to this image. As Hebrew young men they knew that it would be totally against God to bow down to anyone or anything else.

As may be expected, this made the king more furious than ever. He ordered the soldiers to catch these three men and throw them into the fiery furnace, after making sure that the furnace was made seven times hotter. As these soldiers carried them to the furnace the fire was so hot that these soldiers were burnt to death. But as the three men fell into the fire, the ropes that tied them became loose and fell away, and they stood up in the fire unscathed by the fire. Not even one of their hairs was burnt! But, wonder of all, King Nebuchadnezzar looked at the furnace and he saw one more person inside the fire who looked like a god!

The king was both amazed and in fear. He called for the men to come out of the fire, and then there was not even a smell of fire on them. The king made a declaration that the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego was the true God.

The Great Bible Story #79

The king has another dream

King Nebuchadnezzar saw another dream which made him fearful. He called all the diviners and the wise men of Babylon to interpret that dream, but none of them had any clue. Finally he remembered Daniel who had interpreted the earlier dream and called him, thinking that Daniel had some spiritual ability to interpret dreams which was given to him by the gods.

This was the dream he saw. He saw a great tree which grew up from the earth to reach the height of the sky. Its leaves spread all around and were seen by the whole earth. Birds made homes in its branches, and animals and people found shade under it. Then an angel came down from heaven and made a declaration, "Cut down the tree, cut off the branches, strip off the leaves, and let the birds and the animals flee from it. Leave only a stump with the roots, and bind a band of bronze and iron around the stump. Let his mind become that of an animal and let him live on the grass for seven years till everyone realises that the Most High God is the one who raises and brings down people!"

When Daniel heard this, he was very hesitant to give the interpretation. He told the king he wished this would happen to some enemy of the king. But it was a message to the king from God. It meant that when Nebuchadnezzar became rich and famous, he would become haughty and arrogant, and then God would bring him down. The king would become like an animal living on the ground for seven years. So Daniel pleaded with the king that he would give up his sinful ways and choose to live righteously before God. But Nebuchadnezzar didn't think it would happen to him.

A year later the king was walking on his terrace and looked around at the grandeur of the city of Babylon. He gloried in himself saying that he was the one who had built the great empire of Babylon. The moment these words came out of his mouth, the judgment of God came on him. He lost his senses and started moving on his fours like an animal, eating grass, with his hair and nails growing long.

But at the end of seven years he became sane again, and took back charge of his empire. Now he realised that God was almighty and sovereign, and that He was able to humble those who exalted themselves and raise up those who humbled themselves. This is a warning for all of us to recognise and submit to God in our lives and not to take pride in ourselves.

The Great Bible Story #80

Daniel with the lions

The Babylonian empire was finally taken over by the Medo-Persians. Darius the Mede became the king and he appointed Daniel as one of the three commissioners in charge of the whole kingdom. But when the king was impressed with the 'extraordinary spirit' that he saw in Daniel he planned to appoint him over the whole kingdom. Obviously the other commissioners and leaders were not happy with this, and they planned to bring some charge against Daniel to the king. But search as they might, they could not find anything to charge Daniel with as far as the government was concerned. Then it occurred to them that Daniel worshipped a different God and that they could use that to pin him down.

These people went to the king suggesting that the king should pass a decree that for the next thirty days no one in the kingdom should pray to anyone other than the king! If anyone disobeyed this, he should be thrown into the lions' den. The king agreed. Even after Daniel heard about it, he did not stop praying as usual to God three times a day, kneeling on the floor with windows open towards Jerusalem. The other commissioners were quick to note this, and ran to the king saying that Daniel had not bothered to obey the decree of the king. When the king heard this about Daniel he was sad, but he had to follow the law which he himself had made. Reluctantly he told them that they should throw Daniel to the lions.

After this the king spent a sleepless night worrying about Daniel, and early in the morning he rushed to the lions' den. He shouted loudly asking if Daniel's God had somehow saved him from death. He was relieved to hear Daniel reply that his God had kept the mouths of the lions closed all night and that he was all right!

Now the king was angry with the commissioners for plotting this against Daniel and commanded the soldiers to catch them and throw them into the lions' den. As soon as they reached the bottom of the den, the lions pounced upon them and tore them to pieces.

Then King Darius made a proclamation all through the empire that the God of Daniel who saved him even from the lions was the real God and that everyone should honour and fear that God. He also said that it was His kingdom that was to last forever.

Daniel continued to enjoy great success even during the reign of the next king, Cyrus. During his life God showed him many visions concerning the future. He also prayed for the return of Judah to their own land.

The Great Bible Story #81

Announcing the new covenant

The prophet Isaiah talked much about the coming Messiah, of how He would suffer for the sins of men and become their Saviour. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel made announcements about the new covenant that the Messiah would bring.

The old covenant which God made with Israel through Moses was contingent on the people obeying the commandments of God. If they obeyed they would receive blessings from God and if they disobeyed, curses. It became apparent that Israel, or for that matter anyone else, was unable to keep all the commandments of God. So now God began to announce through His prophets what He was ultimately planning to do for His people through a new covenant. In other words, the old covenant also served the purpose of convincing people that no one could find acceptance with God on the basis of keeping the commandments because no one could fully keep them.

Under this new covenant, God would do things which the people could not do by themselves, and He would enable the people to do what He wanted them to do. He would take away their stony hearts and give them fleshy hearts, put His Spirit in them, 'write' His laws upon their hearts and minds and cause them to walk in His ways. From the least to the greatest of people, all would be able to know Him personally. God would be compassionate and merciful to their sins, and He would not remember them (bring to remembrance) any more. In other words, it would not be dependent on the people to learn and obey the commandments, but God would do a work inside them so that they will want to obey and they will also receive the power to obey.

It was through the blood of Jesus the Messiah ('the anointed one' in Hebrew, Christ in Greek) that the new covenant was ratified. Now under the new covenant, salvation comes through grace from God, or the undeserved favour He shows upon us. We can receive this salvation freely, as a gift, when we go to God repenting from our past sins, and accepting the death of Jesus as our Substitute dying in our place for our sins. The Jews in the days of the prophets could not understand exactly what the prophets were saying about the Messiah. In the days of Jesus on earth, the Jews thought that the Messiah's work would be to free their nation from the Romans who ruled them. But it is when we know the truth about Jesus and then look back at the preparatory work that God did centuries earlier, that we can begin to get the whole picture.

The Great Bible Story #82

Rebuilding the temple

Fulfilling the word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet, after seventy years of exile for Judah in Babylon, God stirred up the spirit of Cyrus the king of Persia during his first year of reign. This was the same Cyrus who was named in the prophecy of Isaiah as a servant whom God would raise up to fulfil His purposes. Cyrus declared that God had given him the task of rebuilding His temple in Jerusalem. So he asked every one of the people of God to leave for Jerusalem to carry out this task, taking gold, silver, cattle and other valuable things, along with the freewill offerings given by the people for this. He gave them the articles of the temple which Nebuchadnezzar had brought away to Babylon. This started the return of the people of Judah from their exile to Jerusalem.

Jeshua and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel and his brothers got together and built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it. They began to offer burnt offerings on it twice a day. They also celebrated the feast of booths. After this they gave money to masons and carpenters for laying the foundations of the temple, getting cedar wood from Lebanon through the sea, with the support of King Cyrus. After the foundation was ready, Jeshua, Zerubbabel and others offered prayers of thanksgiving to God for the restoration. Some of the older people there who had seen the earlier temple wept loudly seeing this new foundation, mixing their sound with others who were shouting for joy.

When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the Jews were rebuilding their temple, they tried their best to obstruct and discourage them. This went on during the reign of Cyrus and Darius. At last they wrote a letter of complaint to the king saying that the Jews were building the temple in order to rebel against him. When the king read this, he sent an order stopping the work immediately. But the prophets of God encouraged the people to build again. When Tattenai the governor asked them how they could do it in spite of the order from the king, they replied that they had permission from King Cyrus. King Darius made a search in the archives and found the order there. So he instructed Tattenai to give full support for the building of the temple.

When the temple was finally ready, the Jews offered many sacrifices of thanksgiving, and they also celebrated the Passover after many years.

The Great Bible Story #83

Esther is made queen

When Ahasuares was the king of Persia and Media, he gave a banquet to his officials that lasted for 180 days. Then he gave a feast lasting seven days for all who were in the capital Susa. Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for all the women in the palace. When the king's heart was merry with wine, he asked for Vashti to come with her royal crown to show off her beauty. But Vashti was unwilling to do this. This made the king very angry, and he asked the wise men what he should do with her. They said that she should be removed from being queen in order to set an example for all wives, and he should choose a young, beautiful woman as his queen.

So an announcement was made in the empire that every young and beautiful virgin should be brought into the king's harem, and whoever he was pleased with would be made queen. So the process began for choosing the queen. There was a young Jewish woman named Esther among the captives, who had no parents, and she was being taken care of by Mordecai, her cousin, as if she was his daughter. Along with all the other women, Esther was also taken into the harem, waiting for her turn to meet the king. Every day Mordecai used to walk in front of the harem to know how she was doing. He had told her not to reveal her nationality to anyone.

When Esther's turn came, the king was very happy with her, and he set the royal crown on her head as the next queen in the place of Vashti.

One day when Mordecai was sitting at the gate of the city he became aware of a plot being made by two officials against the king. He informed Esther to tell the king. This was investigated and found it to be true, and the two culprits were hanged on the gallows. This matter was noted in the king's records, but soon everyone forgot about it.

After this, the king appointed a man called Haman above everybody in the land. Haman was very conscious of his position and expected everyone to bow before him in respect. Everyone did so, except Mordecai, because as a Jew he would not bow down before anyone but God. Haman noted this and started thinking about how he might teach Mordecai a lesson. When he discovered that Mordecai was a Jew, Haman thought that this would be an opportunity to annihilate all the Jews at once. He met the king and told him how the Jews were a troublesome lot and got his permission to kill all the Jews on a special day. He also made a tall gallows on which he would hang Mordecai.

The Great Bible Story #84

God is sovereign

When Mordecai heard about the king's order he told Esther about it, and asked her to speak to the king. The rule of the court was that anyone who went in front of the king without permission would be killed unless the king extended his sceptre towards him. Even as queen, Esther also faced the same risk. But Mordecai told her that perhaps it was from God that she was in the palace at this time and also that God could raise someone else in her place if she was unwilling. So Esther said that for three days Jews should fast and pray for her.

When Esther walked into the court, the king extended his sceptre towards her and asked her what she wanted. She said that she would like him and Haman to go for a dinner she would host. Haman was greatly thrilled that the queen had singled him out for this honour. At the dinner, Esther asked both of them to come again the next day for dinner when she would tell the king what was on her mind.

That night the king was tossing and turning on his bed because he could not get sleep. He asked someone to read something to him, and what he heard was the record about how Mordecai had saved him from the plot. He decided immediately that Mordecai should be honoured for this. Just then Haman came there to request permission to hang Mordecai! The king asked him how he should honour a man he liked. Haman thought the king was referring to him, and suggested that such a man should be given the royal robe and taken on a procession on the royal horse. Immediately the king asked Haman to do so to Mordecai. Poor Haman was forced to do this!

The next night when the king and Haman went to Esther's dinner, she revealed that Haman had plotted to kill all her countrymen including her. The king was upset and went thoughtfully to the balcony. When he returned he saw Haman pleading with Esther on her bed, and he thought Haman was going to molest Esther in front of him! As soon as he expressed his thoughts, the court officials came and took away Haman. It turned out that Haman was hanged on the same gallows he had made for Mordecai!

Queen Esther pleaded with the king to reverse the order to kill all the Jews and to give them permission to kill their enemies on two particular days. The king also promoted Mordecai to take over Haman's position. These two days called Purim are celebrated every year by the Jews in gratitude for God saving their lives from Haman.

The Great Bible Story #85

Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem

While Ezra the scribe was teaching the scriptures to the people at Jerusalem, Nehemiah was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes at Susa the capital of Persia. His brother came from Judah and told him that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down. This became a burden for Nehemiah, and he wept before God, asking Him for help. The king noticed his sad face and asked him what was wrong. Nehemiah shot a quick prayer to God and asked for favour from the king to travel to Jerusalem to rebuild it. The king agreed, and also gave permission to cut timber for the work. Many times this is how God works: giving a burden to someone who carries it in his heart praying for help and guidance from God, and then accomplishing a great work through that person.

When Nehemiah reached Jerusalem he didn't tell anyone his mission, but went at night and surveyed the condition of the walls. Finally when he shared his burden with the officials and the priests they all agreed to share the work of rebuilding the walls. When foreigners Sanballat and Tobiah heard about the plans they accused them of wanting to rebel against the king. Nehemiah replied that God would help them to build His city.

Groups of Jews started working on different parts of the wall. Sanballat and Tobiah kept trying to discourage and threaten them in many ways. So the people became vigilant, looking out for enemies. They also began to carry weapons to defend themselves if necessary. Some of them worked with a weapon in one hand while they used the other hand for the construction work. Nehemiah kept praying for God's help. Finally the work was complete, and the people dedicated themselves to the Lord. Nehemiah tried to bring about many reforms and bring them in their heart back to where God wanted them. Ezra kept exhorting them from the scriptures.

One of the things the people of Israel and Judah who came back to their land finally learned through the bitter experience of the exile was not to go back to idol worship. But their heart was still not entirely right with God. Different prophets spoke about the destruction of the nations that had attacked Israel, and many about the coming Messiah and the new covenant. The last prophet to speak to the people of Israel and Judah was Malachi who told them about returning to God with all their heart. After him there was a gap of almost four hundred years during which there was no word from the Lord. And then the Messiah came.

The Great Bible Story #86

The miracle that was Jesus

When the Son of God, the second Person in the trinity of God, was to be born into this world, many different conditions had to be met. He had to remain as God while at the same time become Man. He had to fulfil many prophecies about Him as the Messiah for the Jews as well as the Saviour of the whole world. He had to be born in the family of David in the royal line even though there was no king in Israel at this time. He had to be born of a virgin in Bethlehem which was the birthplace of David. He had to come with the good news of salvation but He had to be rejected by the Jews and put to death. The prophecies about Him described how He would be prophet like Moses, a High Priest like Melchizedek, betrayed for thirty pieces of silver, lifted up on the cross like the bronze serpent in the desert, how people would cast lots for His clothes, how land would be bought with the money He was betrayed for, and finally how He would be raised from the dead after three days.

It was important that Jesus had to be born of a virgin, so that He would get His humanity from His mother, but He would remain as God because His Father was God who miraculously caused Mary to conceive. He would know what it was to be a man while He lived on this earth, tempted in every way as we are tempted but without yielding to sin. Yet He had the authority as God to receive worship from people and to forgive sins. Even the most perfect man would have been too small to take the punishment for the sins of the whole world, and so it was necessary that the Son of God was there to take our place on the cross. We may not be able to understand all the implications of how Jesus was God and Man at the same time, but we can see that it could not have been any other way.

Jesus the Son of God came to earth taking the form of the Son of Man subjecting Himself to the Father at all times, not doing anything of His own initiative but doing all that the Father asked Him to do. He humbled Himself to such an extent that He came alongside the human beings He had created, allowed them to misunderstand Him, abuse Him and finally kill Him, so that ultimately He could save them. Now the Father has exalted Him above every name on earth and in heaven, that Jesus reigns as the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Soon He will come again to reign on this earth for a thousand years, and then to judge the world. Jesus is a miracle in Himself. There is no one else like Him.

The Great Bible Story #87

A forerunner for Jesus

When Herod the Great was ruling Judea as a king appointed by the Roman government, there was an elderly couple, Zacharias and Elizabeth, from Aaron's priestly family, who were known for their reverence for God and right living. One of their problems was that they didn't have any children. One day he was chosen by lot to burn incense and offer prayers in the temple. When he was doing that inside the temple, suddenly an angel called Gabriel appeared in front of him. Gabriel told him that he and his wife were going to have a son called John who would be filled with the Holy Spirit right from the womb. This John would become the forerunner for the Messiah in the spirit of Elijah and would turn many people back to the Lord.

Even though Zacharias was an elderly priest who knew the things of God, he was looking more at his age and how it was difficult for him and his wife to have children. So he was sceptic before Gabriel asking him how this could happen since he was already old! Gabriel identified himself as one who stood in the presence of God and rebuked Zacharias for his unbelief. He said that Zacharias would be dumb till the baby was born. The people were waiting outside for Zacharias to come out after offering the incense, but when he finally came out he could not speak. They tried to ask him what had happened, but he could not say anything.

When Elizabeth became pregnant, she was so embarrassed that she tried to hide herself in the early months. When Elizabeth finally delivered the baby boy their relatives assumed that they would name him after his father. But Elizabeth said that the baby's name would be John. They could not understand why she would do that, and so they asked Zacharias. He asked for a slate on which to write, and he wrote that the baby's name would be John. Immediately he regained his speech, and he described what had happened to him. All those who heard this began to suspect that this child was going to be someone special, and they glorified God.

Then Zacharias himself began to praise God and proclaim how God had finally visited His people and how John was going to be the forerunner for the Messiah in the spirit of Elijah the prophet. He said John would prepare the way for the Messiah and tell people about the salvation of God and the forgiveness of sins.

As John grew up, he began to spend a lot of his time in the desert places till it became time for him to start his public ministry.

The Great Bible Story #88

Announcing Jesus

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, the angel Gabriel appeared to her relative Mary who was in Nazareth in the region of Galilee. Mary was a virgin, engaged to be married to Joseph, a carpenter. Both of them were from the family of David. Gabriel told her that God was going to do a miracle and she was going to give birth to a baby boy. She was to name Him Jesus (meaning God saves) because He was going to save His people from their sins. He would also be a King forever. Mary's immediate question was how this could happen because she was a virgin. Gabriel did not rebuke her as he did to Zacharias because she was only an inexperienced young girl while he was a knowledgeable priest. The angel explained that this conception was going to be supernatural, a work of the Holy Spirit. He told her everything was possible with God, and asked her to think about what God had done for her relative Elizabeth in her old age. Mary humbled herself before God and said she was willing to let Him have all His way with her.

Mary immediately rushed to Elizabeth with the news, and when Elizabeth heard Mary's voice, the baby in her womb leaped, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. Mary described her great joy in being given this unusual privilege by God and praised God.

When Mary went and shared this news with Joseph, he was a bit sceptical. But he was a good man and he thought he would slowly separate from Mary without too much noise. As he was thinking about it, an angel appeared in his dream and told him not to be afraid, but that the Child who was conceived in her was from God. Joseph accepted this, and postponed their wedding till the Child was born.

At this time Caesar Augustus, the emperor of Rome, made a decree that all people should go back to their ancestral town for a census to be taken by tribe. Joseph took Mary to Bethlehem the birthplace of David. This fulfilled the prophecy about Jesus being born in Bethlehem. When they reached there it became time for Mary to deliver, but they could find no place for them to stay because of the rush. Finally an innkeeper allowed them to stay with the animals. When the baby Jesus was born, Mary covered Him with warm cloth and placed Him in a manger!

The manner of His birth was in line with the way He had humbled Himself, coming down from heaven to take His place as a man, a servant of all, from where He finally took the deepest place of taking our sins on Him.

The Great Bible Story #89

Responses to Jesus' birth

When Jesus was born, there were some shepherds in the field with their sheep. Suddenly an angel appeared to them and announced that the Messiah had been born in Bethlehem and they could identify Him sleeping in a manger wrapped up in cloth. Immediately the sky was filled with angels singing praises to God. The shepherds got up, went to Bethlehem and saw the baby Jesus just as they had been told.

On the eighth day after birth Jesus was circumcised, and after the days of purification for Mary were over according to the Jewish laws, His parents took Him to the temple in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices and to dedicate the first born. There they met an old and godly man called Simeon to whom God had promised that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. When he saw Jesus he gave thanks to God for fulfilling His promise. He told Mary that Jesus would lead to the rise and fall of many and prophesied that she would one day feel pain because of Him as if a sword was piercing her. An elderly widow called Anna saw Jesus and told everyone that this was the promised One from God.

Some wise men in the east saw a special star in the sky when Jesus was born, and following the direction of the star they came to Jerusalem, looking for the One who was born to be the King of the Jews. When Herod heard this He was disturbed, and told them to report to him after they located this baby. So they followed the star and reached the place where Jesus was. When they saw Him they bowed down, worshipped Him and gave gifts to Him. When they were planning to go back to Herod, they were warned by God in a dream not to do that. So they returned to their place another way. At this time God also warned Joseph in a dream to leave that place, flee to Egypt and stay there till it was safe to return, because Herod was going to seek to destroy Him.

When Herod realised that the wise men had tricked him, he was furious. He calculated the time which he had heard from the wise men about the birth of Jesus, and made an order that all boys under the age of two who were in and around Bethlehem should be killed. A great cry rose up when this took place. But Jesus was secure in Egypt.

When Herod finally died, an angel told Joseph in a dream that now it was safe to return. So Joseph, Mary and Jesus returned to Nazareth where Joseph and Mary had been in the first place. Jesus grew up there, increasing in wisdom and the grace of God.

The Great Bible Story #90

The growing years of Jesus

As was expected of all Jews, Joseph and Mary used to go to the temple in Jerusalem every year during the Feast of the Passover. When Jesus was twelve years old, after they had spent the time of the Passover in Jerusalem, Joseph and Mary started back to Nazareth, assuming that Jesus was also in the caravan going back. After they had travelled for about a day, they started looking for Him and could not find Him! So they panicked and returned to Jerusalem, looking all around for Him. They found Him after three days sitting in the temple, and having a discussion with the Jewish teachers about different things. It was apparent that these teachers and others who were listening to them were very impressed by the way He asked questions and sought out the answers. But when Joseph and Mary found Him, they showed Him their frustration, asking Him why He had left them like this and telling Him how they had been worried about Him.

For Jesus it was not as if He had done anything wrong. He said that He had been involving Himself with His Father's work and told them that they should have known! We do not know how much they understood Him at this point. But anyway, Jesus left the temple along with them, reached home in Nazareth and continued in submission to them. Later some people referred to Him as a Nazarene, or a native of Nazareth (which is different from a Nazirite who is someone who has made a vow to God, not drinking wine, not cutting the hair, etc.).

We have no further record of anything about Jesus between this time and the time when He came out into the public at the age of thirty. It is believed that He helped Joseph in the carpentry work, and later took over the work when Joseph passed away. We can believe that He was faithful in attending the synagogue where the scriptures were taught regularly because He was very familiar with the word of God when He started His public ministry. God laid a great foundational work in His life in those years before it became the time for Him to start proclaiming the good news to people. We also know from the certificate that the Father gave Him later that He was faithful and true to the Father in every way, not giving in to any sin even though He was tempted in all ways just as we are tempted now. It was this knowledge of the word of God and His faithfulness to it that prepared Him to minister to other people with the proclamation of the kingdom of God.

The Great Bible Story #91

Jesus gets baptised

John the son of Zacharias came out of the desert where he had been for some time, proclaiming that people everywhere should repent from their sins because the kingdom of God was near. All types of people began to come to him, and he baptised them in the River Jordan as a sign of their repentance. John announced that he was only baptising them with water, but Someone was coming who would baptise them in the Holy Spirit and fire. That would be the Messiah, the Son of God. John said that he did not consider himself to be worthy even to untie the sandals from His feet. When he saw some Pharisees coming for baptism, who were a group of religious people who took pride in defining the tiny details of the Law, he told them they should repent first and show some proof of their repentance before he would baptise them.

Then Jesus came and asked John to baptise Him in water. When John saw Him he declared that this was the Lamb of God who was going to take away the sins of the world. John was unwilling at first to baptise Jesus because he did not see any need for Jesus to take this baptism of repentance, and also he felt that it should be Jesus who baptised him! But Jesus replied that it was necessary for Him to do everything right. Since He had come to identify with man and to be a Forerunner for man, He wanted to submit Himself to baptism too.

So John agreed, and baptised Jesus in the water. As He was immersed into the water and brought out afterwards, everyone heard the voice of God the Father declaring from heaven that this was His beloved Son with whom He was thoroughly pleased. People watching Him saw the Holy Spirit coming down from the sky in the form of a dove and resting on Jesus' head. All the three Persons of the Trinity were obvious at this time.

The word baptism is taken from the Greek word 'baptisma' which means immersion. The way it was done was to fully immerse a person under water and then to bring him out. The fact that Jesus Himself went through it for us and instructed His disciples to baptise people who believed in Him later makes it important for us to follow. The baptism of repentance which was started with John the baptiser was later replaced with the baptism of Christ which represents for those who have been born again a burial of the old life and a coming up into a resurrected life. This is meaningful only for those who have repented consciously from their sin and placed their trust in Jesus for salvation, and who want to testify to this openly.

The Great Bible Story #92

Jesus faces strong temptations

After Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit at Jordan, He was led by the Spirit into the desert areas to spend time alone with the Father. He was there for forty days, without eating anything, and at the end He was very hungry. Satan spotted this as an opportunity and suggested to Him in His mind that as the Son of God He could easily turn one of the stones into bread and satisfy His hunger. But Jesus countered it by deciding that there was more to life than eating. He was determined to do everything according to the directions which the Father gave Him. Another idea Satan suggested to Him was that if He would go to the top of the temple and jump down, the angels would carry Him down safely and then He could show everybody who He was. But Jesus knew that jumping like that would be to put God to a test, instead of doing what God wanted Him to do. Satan made another attempt to pull Jesus down. He knew that Jesus had come to save the world, and so he offered to give all the kingdoms of the world to Him without Jesus having to make any effort if He would just bow down to him. When Adam and Eve sinned, they had handed over the dominion of the world to Satan. In that sense he felt he had the right to offer the world to Jesus. But the way God was planning to redeem the people of the world was through the sacrifice of His Son. So Jesus was not willing to take 'the easy path'. At this point Satan left Him for a while, and some angels came to minister to Him.

These were not the only temptations Jesus faced in His life, because He was tempted in all points as we are, yet without sinning. But these were some strong temptations He had to face just before He could start on His public ministry. The way Jesus dealt with these temptations demonstrated the knowledge of God's word and the insight He had to use the appropriate word in every situation. Knowledge of God's word and the leading of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us are the means we need to have to face our own temptations. We read how Jesus also spent much time alone with God, praying for help and wisdom so that He could triumph in all situations and do the Father's will.

We can be sure that the Devil would have attacked Jesus with his strongest tricks, knowing that this was the Son of God, and that if he could make Him trip up even once he would win. God watches the measure of our own temptations and He will not allow us to face anything that might be too much for us.

The Great Bible Story #93

Jesus starts His ministry

One day John the baptiser spoke up against King Herod who had taken his brother Philip's wife Herodias as his wife. Herod caught John and put him in jail. After this, Herod was having a feast with many guests and he asked Salome, Herodias' daughter, to come and dance. She did so well that he declared she could ask from him whatever she wanted. Salome consulted with her mother, and Herodias told her to ask for John's head on a platter! Herod agreed because he didn't want to look silly in front of the guests, even though he had respect for John as a godly man and used to listen to him.

When Jesus heard that John was in jail, He started going around, preaching the message of repentance from sin and turning to God, saying that the kingdom of God was near. He also moved to Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. Two of John's disciples came to see Jesus. One of them was Andrew, and he went and told his brother Simon that he had discovered the Messiah. When Simon came to see Jesus, He looked at him and told him his name would be Peter. One day as Jesus walked along the beach He saw the brothers Andrew and Simon casting a net into the sea. He told them that if they followed Him He would make them fishers of men. They immediately left their boats and followed Him. Further ahead, He saw two other fishermen brothers James and John who were repairing their nets. When He called, they also followed Him. Another man He called was Philip. Philip told his brother Nathaniel that perhaps Jesus was the Messiah. Nathaniel could not believe that anything good could come out of Nazareth (they all didn't know at that time that Jesus was really from Bethlehem). But when Jesus saw Nathaniel He told him how He had seen him even when he was sitting under a fig tree before Philip called him. Nathaniel was so astonished that he immediately believed. Another time Jesus met Matthew who was a tax collector and told him to follow Him. He too left his place immediately and followed Him.

In this way Jesus collected twelve men to be with Him, to learn from Him and to work with Him in His work. They came to be known as the twelve apostles (ones who are 'sent') who were later entrusted with taking the gospel throughout the world. They were also 'disciples' or 'learners' as those who follow their Master in order to become like Him. They travelled around Galilee and He preached everywhere about the kingdom of God. His name began to become very popular.

The Great Bible Story #94

Confrontation and miracles

One day Jesus and His disciples were invited to a wedding of a relative of Mary in Cana. While they were there, Mary came and informed Jesus that the wine had run out, hoping He would be able to handle the crisis. But Jesus told her it did not have anything to do with Him because His time was not yet ready, meaning His Father had not told Him about it. But afterwards He must have heard from the Father because He went to the servants there, asked them to fill with water six large jars they had there, and to take out some to the head waiter. The head waiter tasted the wine (because the water had turned into wine) and said that it was even finer than the one they had served earlier! This was the first miracle which Jesus did, and it was a sign for the people to recognise who He was. This helped His disciples to get confirmed in their faith in Him.

One day Jesus went as usual to the synagogue where He was given the Book of Isaiah to read. He turned to the place where the prophecy about the Spirit of God coming upon God's Servant was mentioned, how He would proclaim good news to the poor about the favourable year of the Lord, release of the captives and recovery of sight of the blind, and how He would set free those who were oppressed. Then He declared to them that the prophecy was being fulfilled before their eyes! All who heard this were happy, and began declaring how well He spoke and what a good Man He was. But then He said that no prophet was welcome in his hometown, and that a time would come when they would reject Him. They got so upset with this that they rose up, took Him out of the city and wanted to throw Him over the cliff. But He quietly walked away from them.

Joseph and Mary had had a few 'normal' children after Jesus was born. These siblings of Jesus had seen nothing supernatural with Jesus all the years they had grown up together. For them He was just like them, except in terms of His character, and they had no idea they were living with the Son of God. Now suddenly He was becoming famous. They could not understand this, even when they saw the miracles, and they thought He was trying to make Himself a great leader. Sometimes when He was so taken up with His ministry among people that He didn't get time to eat, they even accused Him of losing His head! It was only much later that they understood who He really was. James and Jude who wrote two books in the Bible were two of His brothers!

The Great Bible Story #95

A Pharisee seeks out Jesus

The Pharisees who were a group of Hebrew religious scholars who focussed on the external observation of the Law and considered themselves to be holier than everyone else were greatly upset with Jesus who looked at the core of spiritual issues and thereby exposed their hypocrisy. One of them called Nicodemus could recognise that there was something special about Jesus. But he could not risk letting his friends know that he was interested in Jesus. So he came once in the darkness of the night to meet Jesus. Jesus sensed that this was a genuine enquirer and agreed to spend time with him. Nicodemus admitted to Jesus that he thought He was a teacher from God because no one else could do such miracles. Knowing how much the Pharisees were knowledgeable in theology, without beating around the bush Jesus came straight to the point. He told Nicodemus that there was no way anyone could enter the kingdom of God except through being born again. He made the statement even stronger by saying that people could not even understand what the kingdom of God was except after being born again.

Nicodemus was shocked because he was thinking of how impossible it was to be physically born a second time! But Jesus explained that what He meant was a spiritual birth. It would be the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of a man who had heard the word of God and responded to it.

What Nicodemus found difficult to understand at that time, we can understand now because we have the advantage of all the scriptures that have been written after that. It is because all people are born into this world as children of Adam with a sinful nature, that we need to be born again. When we hear the word of God proclaiming the salvation of God, we recognise ourselves as sinners in His sight and gladly receive the free offer of forgiveness from God. It is then that the Holy Spirit does a supernatural of regeneration of our spirit and we are born again. We who were dead in sin and disconnected from God are now adopted as His children through the undeserved mercy (grace) which He shows upon us. This is what it means to be 'born again'. Now it is clear that without being born again no one can qualify for heaven, however good they think they are, or how many good things they have done in their lives. The fact of the matter is that their sinful nature has to be replaced with a new life from God.

The Great Bible Story #96

A Samaritan woman comes to faith

One day Jesus came to Sychar, a city in Samaria, and sat near 'Jacob's well'. The Samaritans were usually looked down upon by the Jews because of their mixed ancestry. His disciples went forward to buy some food. At this time a woman came to collect water and Jesus asked her for some water to drink. She expressed her surprise that a Jew was talking to her. Jesus' reply was that if she knew who He was she would ask Him for living water. She ridiculed Him by saying He didn't even have a bucket to collect water and He was offering her living water! Jesus replied that anyone who drank the water He had to give would have living water springing up inside to eternal life. She continued her mockery by asking Him for that water!

At this point Jesus asked her to go and bring her husband along. She said she didn't have any. Then Jesus told her that she had had five husbands in the past and now she was now living with a man without marriage. When she realised she was dealing with an extraordinary person she tried to change the subject to religious matters. She asked Him whether God should be worshipped only in Jerusalem as the Jews said or whether it was all right to worship on the mountains in Samaria. But Jesus would not be side-tracked. He said it was not about the place, but the point was to worship God in truth and in spirit. God was looking for that kind of worshippers. The woman replied that when the Messiah came He would clarify all such matters. Jesus told her plainly that He who was talking to her was the Messiah.

The disciples came back at this time with food. They were a bit shocked to see Jesus talking alone with a woman. But they didn't say anything about it. But when they asked Him to eat food, He said that He had some food they didn't know about! He explained that the best kind of food that could satisfy us was doing the will of the Father.

Meanwhile, the woman was so excited with the knowledge of the Messiah that she left her pots behind and ran back to the village with the news. She told the people there that there was a man who knew everything about her, and asked them to find out if He was really the Messiah. So many of them came rushing to Him and listened to Him. At the end they exclaimed that now they believed Him because they had seen Him themselves and not merely because of what the woman had told them.

Many were saved because of her testimony. Jesus had not come to judge her, but to save her.

The Great Bible Story #97

The authority Jesus had

One day when Jesus was in the synagogue in Capernaum, the people wondered at the authoritative way in which He spoke. There was a demon possessed man there who saw Jesus and cried out, acknowledging Him as the Holy One of God and pleading with Him not to trouble him. Jesus asked the evil spirit to come out of the man, and when it did, the man became normal. The people who saw this were amazed at the authority Jesus had even over demons.

A leper who was an outcast from society came to Jesus and said that if He was willing, He could heal him. Jesus said He was willing, and healed the man's leprosy.

Jesus was sitting inside a house, teaching the people who had gathered there. Some people came carrying a paralytic on a bed hoping Jesus would heal him. But there was no way they could get to Jesus because of the crowd. So they carried the bed to the roof, made an opening in the roof, and lowered the bed with ropes to the place Jesus was! When Jesus saw their faith in action, He told the paralytic that his sins were forgiven. The Pharisees and other leaders were aghast, saying only God could forgive sins. Jesus asked them whether it was easier to say his sins were forgiven or to heal him. To prove that He had the authority to forgive sins, He asked the man to get up, carry his own bed and walk out! The crowd was astonished beyond measure!

A centurion of the Roman army whose servant was sick came to Jesus and requested Jesus to heal him. Jesus started walking towards his home. But the man said it was not necessary for Jesus to go to his home, but it would be sufficient just to command it through words. Jesus was impressed with this man's faith and said it was difficult to find such faith even among the Jews. Jesus sent the centurion home, and when he reached there he found out that his servant had been healed at the time when Jesus had commanded it.

Jesus was crossing the Sea of Galilee in a boat along with His disciples. He was sleeping when a storm broke out and even though many of the disciples were experienced sailors they began to fear it was the end. They woke Jesus up and told Him they were all about to die. Jesus saw the storm and rebuked it (possibly because this was an attempt from Satan to kill Him). Immediately the sea became calm! The disciples were awe-struck by the event wondering how Jesus could command even the wind and the sea and how they obeyed Him. They didn't realise He was the Creator!

The Great Bible Story #98

Signs and wonders

Jesus came to a place called Gerasenes when a man ran towards Him. This man was demon possessed, lived among the tombs and was so strong that even chains could not hold him. He used to scream and cut himself, but when he came to Jesus he bowed down and asked why the Son of God was there. Jesus asked him his name, and he said it was Legion because there were many demons. When the demons knew Jesus was going to cast them out, they begged for permission to enter some pigs nearby. (Demons need permission even to enter pigs! We don't need to fear them.) Jesus agreed. But then the pigs became so wild that they ran over the cliff into the sea! But the man himself became normal. The owners of the pigs were upset with Jesus and requested Him to go away!

One day when Jesus was teaching the people, Jairus, an official of the synagogue, came and requested Him to go with him and heal his daughter. As they were walking, a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years came in the crowd secretly, too embarrassed to address Him openly. She thought that she could get healed if she could just touch Jesus' clothes. When she touched she was instantly healed! Jesus asked aloud who had touched Him! She came trembling, fell down before Him and said what had happened. He acknowledged that it was due to her faith that she had been healed.

In the meantime, people came from Jairus' house and told him his daughter was already dead. Jesus said not to worry, and continued towards the house. When they reached home there was a lot of crying. But Jesus told them not to cry because the girl was only 'sleeping'. Some of them laughed at Him for this. But Jesus went to the girl and commanded her to get up. The girl became alive and got up!

As Jesus kept moving from place to place, two blind men followed Him and asked Him loudly to heal their eyes. Jesus asked them if they thought He was able to do this. They confirmed their faith in Him, and then He touched their eyes and suddenly they could see!

Once when Jesus had been speaking to the people for a long time, they became hungry. He asked the disciples to give them food to eat. They didn't have enough food or money to buy! One boy had five loaves of bread and two fish which the disciples showed Jesus. He made the crowd to sit around in groups, took the food, blessed it, broke it into pieces and asked the disciples to distribute. After everyone ate, they collected twelve baskets of leftovers.

The Great Bible Story #99

Signs and wonders

After a long talk with people one evening, Jesus sent off His disciples in a boat to the other side of the lake and He went up on a mountain to spend time alone in prayer. As the night went on, a strong wind began to blow and the disciples began to struggle with the boat. Jesus got down from the mountain and walked on the water towards the boat. When they saw Him coming they got frightened thinking it was a ghost! But Jesus shouted out at them that it was He. Peter suddenly thought that if Jesus was walking on the water perhaps He would make him also to walk. At his request, Jesus asked him to come towards Him. Peter started walking, but then he looked around and saw all the waves. When he lost his courage he began to sink. But Jesus caught him and took him into the boat!

One day the Spirit prompted Jesus to go to Tyre which was quite a distance from Galilee. When He reached there, a woman of Canaan met Him and pleaded with Him to heal her daughter who was possessed by a demon. Jesus began to test her by saying such mercies were only for God's people, and that children's food should not be thrown away to dogs. But she would not give up and said that dogs could at least get the crumbs that fall down from the table. Jesus marvelled at her faith and said that her daughter would be healed. It happened at the same instant.

When Jesus was on the top of a mountain with His disciples Peter, James and John, His face began to shine brightly like the sun, and His clothes became dazzling white. Then Moses and Elijah appeared and started talking to Him. When Peter saw this he blurted out that they should build three tents, one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. But suddenly a cloud came and covered them, and they heard the Father's voice saying this was His beloved Son and asking them to listen to Him! The mistake Peter made was to equate Jesus with Moses and Elijah.

When they came down from the mountain they found a crowd around a young man who was being thrown around by a demon. His father told Jesus that His disciples could not cast out this demon. Perhaps they had become scared by seeing the powerful manifestations, even though they had themselves cast out demons in the past with the authority of Jesus. Jesus scolded them for not trusting Him enough, and then cast out that demon.

Jesus went around healing everyone who came to Him. At the same time He could not do any miracle in places where people would not believe in Him.

The Great Bible Story #100

Jesus, Lord over sickness and death

As Jesus came to a city called Nain, He saw a funeral procession of a young man, the only son of his mother, a widow. He felt sad, stopped the procession, and brought the man to life!

Jesus was friends with a family of two sisters, Martha and Mary, and their brother, Lazarus. One day Lazarus was sick, but Jesus was away travelling in His ministry. The sisters sent an urgent word to Him, asking Him to come and heal Lazarus. But Jesus decided to stay a couple of more days in the same place and continue with His work. This must have looked strange in the eyes of many people. But finally the news came that Lazarus had died, and then Jesus started towards their home! When He reached there, the body was in the tomb. Martha and Mary were naturally upset that Jesus who could have healed their brother didn't come when they needed Him the most! Jesus went to the tomb and asked people to move the stone that blocked the entrance of the cave. The sisters warned Him that there would be a stink by then! But Jesus told them He Himself was the resurrection and the life, and that if they believed in Him they would see the glory of God. He prayed to the Father and then He asked Lazarus to come out. Lazarus came out, bound in his grave clothes. People couldn't be amazed more. But the Pharisees and the rulers wanted to kill Jesus because He was becoming too popular for them and exposing their hollowness.

One day Jesus healed a man who had been born blind. When the Jewish leaders asked him how it had happened, he said that a Man called Jesus had healed him. They verified with his parents whether he had really been born blind. Then they told the man Jesus couldn't be from God because He had healed on a sabbath day. But when the man insisted that no one could have healed him unless he was from God, they cast him out of the synagogue.

There was a pool called Bethesda around which sick people used to lie, expecting for, according to tradition, an angel to come and stir the water. They believed that the first one who got into the water after that would get healed. Jesus saw there a man who had been sick for thirty eight years. When Jesus asked him why he wasn't healed after all that time, he said that by the time he got going someone else would beat him to the water. At this point Jesus asked him if he really wanted to be healed. When the man said yes, Jesus asked him to get up, take his bed and walk. That's what he did!

The Great Bible Story #101

Jesus with different people

One day a lawyer asked Jesus which was the most important among all the commandments of God. Jesus said that the most important one was to love God with all one's heart and mind. He added that the second one was to love others as being as important as oneself. He explained that these two commandments actually covered every commandment and instruction.

A rich young leader came to Him and asked Him what he should do to get eternal life. Since he was a Jew, Jesus said what he should do was to keep all of God's commandments, mentioning a few. This man asserted that he had been keeping all of them. Jesus, knowing his love of money, then told him that if he really wanted to go deeper, he should sell all that he had, give the money to the poor and then follow Him. The man was very upset with this because he wasn't willing to part with his riches, and he went away. Jesus mentioned to His disciples how difficult it was for rich people to enter into the kingdom of God (because those who felt strong in themselves wouldn't be able to see their need for God).

Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on a sabbath day, and He saw a woman who had been bent double for eighteen years because of a demon. Jesus cast out that demon and she straightened up. But the synagogue official was upset because Jesus had done on a sabbath what he considered was a 'work', and he began to question why it couldn't have been done during the other six days! Jesus answered by asking him if he wouldn't take his oxen or sheep to give water on a sabbath day, and why he was upset with delivering a woman who had been bound for many years!

Another sabbath day, Jesus saw in the synagogue a man with a withered hand. He looked around and asked if it was right to do good on the sabbath day. There was no answer. Jesus continued by asking them if there was even one man there who wouldn't take out his cattle that had fallen into a pit on the sabbath day. Asking that man to come forward, He told him to stretch his hand forward. Immediately his hand was healed, and the people who opposed Him felt ashamed of themselves.

Some Pharisees wanted to trap Jesus, and so they brought to Him a woman who had been caught in adultery suggesting that she should be stoned according to the Law. Jesus said that anyone who hadn't done any sin could throw the first stone. They all left! Finally He told her she could go, only taking care not to sin anymore.

The Great Bible Story #102

The sermon on the mount

This is a set of teachings Jesus gave to His disciples sitting on a mountain after drawing them away from the crowds. These make a great contrast with the religious approach taught by the Pharisees of those days. The Pharisees and other religious leaders of those days knew only the covenant God had made with Israel through Moses, where blessings and curses from God depended on how the people obeyed or disobeyed His commandments. What Jesus was teaching now had to do with one's inner life more than the external behaviour and practices. So these teachings are key to the understanding of the new covenant which Jesus brought.

Jesus said it was those who recognised how spiritually poor they were in relation to God who would finally be in the kingdom of God. Such people's cries for more of God would get answered. Such people might also not become big, recognised and admired in this world, and they might even get persecuted. But they would have their rewards in heaven.

Most people were worried about their life on this earth, what they would eat, dress with, etc. But the people of God would want the Father to be honoured and glorified as the highest thing they desire. They prayed for their earthly needs, but far more important to them was that God's will must get done on earth. Jesus made a promise that He would take care of everyone in their earthly life who gave top priority to the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

People in the old covenant thought that as long as they didn't commit adultery or murder they were fine. But Jesus pointed out that God wanted these laws to be fulfilled to the highest level in people's hearts where there wouldn't even be lustful looks towards women or hatred towards other people.

We were to live before God's eyes, honest, humble and upright, and not to be concerned about impressing people.

Jesus said that people who lived for God would be forced to put up with injustice many times in this world. They should not react violently if they got slapped or bullied into unfair treatment. Bearing with such things and going the extra mile for the sake of their relationship with God was more important. We were to shine in this dark world as lights that witness for Him and be like salt that gave taste.

It was not enough, Jesus said, to merely hear the words of God or to 'worship' God with passion saying, "Lord, Lord," but the important thing was to actually do what we heard from God.

The Great Bible Story #103

The parables of Jesus

Jesus used many stories to illustrate His points, sometimes introducing a bit of mystery into them so that only those who were 'born again' and had their 'eyes opened' could understand them.

Once when people who were commonly labelled as sinners came to listen to Jesus the Pharisees commented that Jesus was mixing with sinners! Jesus told them that His mission was to save those who were 'lost'. He asked them to think of a farmer who had 100 sheep one of which had strayed away. He pointed to Himself as a good shepherd who would go in search of that one sheep leaving the other 99 behind.

He described the heart of God the Father towards lost sinners with a story. A man had two sons, and the younger son wanted to get his share of the property and enjoy himself. When the father reluctantly agreed, he went off and spent the money on his pleasures with his friends. When it was all gone, even his friends left him. He found himself looking after pigs for the sake of survival, which was as low as a Jew could get to. Then he realised that in his father's house even the servants were better off. He started back towards home thinking that since he didn't deserve to be a son, he would request his father to treat him at least as a servant. But his father was waiting, and ran to welcome him. He called for a feast to celebrate the return. This is the kind of welcome a repentant sinner would receive in heaven. The older brother wasn't happy. He thought his brother who had wasted everything with sinful living didn't deserve this while he himself had carefully avoided all excesses. But the father explained that everything in the house had been all along his to enjoy and nobody had prevented him. This feast was specially to rejoice over the son who was 'dead' who had come back. Both sons have something for us to learn from.

Jesus told the people about a rich farmer who once had a bumper harvest. This man thought he would build bigger barns, become richer and enjoy himself. What he didn't know was that he was going to die that night and all his labour was going to be wasted. This is what would happen to everyone who aims only at earthly gains and isn't making himself rich towards God. Another story was about a merchant of pearls who discovered a pearl more precious than everything he had seen, and so he sold off everything else to buy that one. Jesus meant that this was how we should value the kingdom of God in relation to everything else.

The Great Bible Story #104

More parables

Jesus taught people about the immeasurable value of the kingdom of God by comparing it to a pearl of greatest value which a pearl merchant found. He realised how valuable it was, and so he went and sold off all his other pearls and bought it.

One story which brought out the meaning of grace, unmerited favour, was that of a vineyard owner. He wanted some workers and he went to the market in the morning and hired some people, promising to give them the standard charge for a day's work. Later he hired some more people at different times of the day, promising to give them whatever was right. He went again just an hour before closing time and saw some people who had not found work till then. He hired them too. At the end of the day when he started paying them he gave this last group a full day's wages. Seeing this, those who had come earlier thought they would get more. But he gave all of them the same one day's wages. The first group began to grumble saying that they had worked the whole day and it wasn't fair to equate them with those who had worked for just one hour. The owner's reply was that he had given them what he had agreed with them, and they had no reason to complain if he was going to be gracious towards others! If we can't be gracious towards others, it would show that we don't appreciate the grace we ourselves have been shown.

Another story was about ten bridesmaids who were waiting for the bridegroom to come, each with an oil lamp to use at night. Five of them had oil and the other five did not. When the bridegroom came suddenly, the foolish ones requested the others to share their oil, but they replied that it wouldn't be enough for all. What Jesus taught was that since we don't know the time of His second coming, it would be wise to be ready at all times.

There was a king who sent out invitations for his son's wedding feast, but those who were invited didn't show any interest. When the time came nearer he sent his servants to remind them that the feast was ready, but they gave various excuses to say they were busy. Some of them even mistreated the servants. The king was angry with them and destroyed all of them. Finally he invited anyone they could find on the roads, and gave them wedding robes. When the king looked around he saw one man without the wedding robe and he had him thrown out. What Israel rejected, the Gentiles got. It also shows us that those who enter the kingdom of God do so only through grace.

The Great Bible Story #105

Some more parables

One day a lawyer tried to trip Jesus by asking Him how he could get eternal life. Jesus turned it around and asked him what the Law said. The man said what the Law required from people was to love God with all their heart and also to love their neighbour as themselves. Jesus told him if he did that he would live! This man wanted to save his face and he asked who his neighbour was. In reply Jesus told him a story of a Jew who was going from Jerusalem to Jericho. He was beaten up and robbed by dacoits on the way and left bleeding. A priest came that way and also a Levite. Both of them saw him but hurried away because they had their religious duties to carry out! Afterwards a Samaritan came, whom the Jews despised, took pity on the man, gave him some first aid, put him on a donkey and took him to an inn. Since he had to go on his work, he gave some money to the innkeeper asking him to take care of the man, promising him to pay more if required. Now Jesus asked the lawyer who turned out to be a 'neighbour' to the victim, and the answer was the one who showed him mercy. Jesus said this was how we could be neighbours to those around us whom we met.

Peter asked Jesus one day how many times it was required to forgive someone. Peter thought he was being very generous when he suggested seven. Jesus suggested that it should be seventy times seven, trying to indicate it wasn't necessary to put any limit. To illustrate the concept of forgiveness, He told them the story of a king one of whose servants owed him a huge sum of money. Since he couldn't repay the amount, the king ruled that he and his family should be sold as slaves in order to collect the money. At this point the servant fell at the king's feet, and begged for time to repay. Knowing that the servant couldn't really do it, and having pity on him, the king let him go off free! As this man was going, he met another servant who owed him a paltry sum of money. The first servant caught him by his neck and threatened him. When that man asked for mercy, the first servant wouldn't show him any, and put him in jail till he could pay back the full amount! Someone told the king about this, and the king was very angry when he heard it. He called the servant back, took back his mercy and sentenced him to jail and torture, because he had not shown another man mercy when he himself had received undeserved mercy. Jesus said God would do the same thing to those who would not forgive others.

The Great Bible Story #106

Continuing with parables

Jesus talked about seeds sown on the ground to illustrate how different people responded to truths. Truth doesn't even enter into some hearts just like seed that fall on hard ground. Some accept the truth with enthusiasm but only superficially without understanding the implications. Even though the plant sprouts up it doesn't last because there is no depth as in the case of seed that falls into rocky soil. Some respond like seed among thorns, where as thorns choke the growth of the plant, they give up when pressures come up. But there are also people who hear the truth, understand it, work with it and produce much fruit in their lives.

In one story a wealthy man was going on a journey. He called his servants, gave one man five portions of money, a second man two and a third man one. When he returned he found that the first and the second men had traded with the money and doubled it. The owner was delighted with this and congratulated them both equally. But the third man told him that he had just kept the money safely because he thought the owner was going to be unreasonable in his expectations. The owner was angry and took his money and gave it to the one who now had ten portions. Jesus wanted to teach that everyone would be rewarded based on what he had done with whatever he had been given. God also takes it seriously if we don't use what we have been entrusted with.

In another story, a wealthy man gave ten servants one portion of money each. Later he found one servant had made ten more portions and another had made five more. Each one was rewarded according to his output. But when one servant just returned the money without any profit because he thought the master was anyway going to find fault, the master condemned him for his wrong attitude and unfaithfulness. This story teaches us that our reward would also be proportional to how faithful we are.

In one story a rich man was living in luxury while a beggar called Lazarus was lying outside his house, surviving on the scraps thrown from the house. After both died, the rich man found himself in torment while he could see at a distance Lazarus enjoying himself with Abraham. He requested Abraham to send Lazarus with some water for him. But there was a gulf between them nobody could cross. Then he wanted Lazarus to warn his brothers on earth. But he learned there was a finality about death, and that the choices people made when living on earth determined their eternity.

The Great Bible Story #107

Pharisees, Sadducees

In the days of Jesus, the Pharisees were a group of Jewish religious people who were fanatic about the Law. They studied it and formulated applications of the Law for different situations. But where they went wrong was that they kept to the external form of the Law, missing its spirit. They became upset with Jesus who followed the spirit of the Law and in the process exposed their hollowness. Because the Pharisees were leaders the people looked up to, Jesus used many opportunities to show where they were wrong.

Jesus warned the people that the Pharisees paid more attention to defining the Law than in obeying it. They would wear special attachments to their dress to indicate their piety. They wanted to impress the people with their knowledge and craved for their respect, even though there were self-indulgent in the secret of their inner lives, just like polished tombstones with rotting flesh inside. Jesus told them to clean the inside of the cup first without being occupied with the outside. Hypocrisy was one thing Jesus would not tolerate.

The Pharisees would be strict about giving to God one-tenth of even the kitchen herbs they grew. But Jesus pointed out that by focussing on such things they missed out on more important values such as mercy and compassion on others. They travelled around trying to get many followers, but since they themselves were only religious and not spiritual, they ended up making their followers doubly dead-- they were already dead and now they believed they were alive! On the other hand they opposed genuine seekers after God who did not join them in their religious rituals.

One thing that irritated the Pharisees most about Jesus was that He repeatedly healed people on Sabbath days. They believed no work should be done on those days. Jesus had great difficulty explaining to them that doing good to people in need was according to a higher law than the one pertaining to keeping the Sabbath.

There was another group of Jews called the Sadducees who did not believe in anything supernatural such as angels, demons or life after death. Once they tried to fox Jesus by asking what would happen to a woman who had married seven brothers in succession when they died one after another. They asked Jesus whose wife she would be in the resurrected life! Jesus said that people would not have any gender in heaven, just like the angels, and there would not be any marriage relationship there!

The Great Bible Story #108

Jesus speaks about the last days

One day when Jesus and His disciples were in Jerusalem, the disciples pointed out to Him the grand structure of the Temple buildings. But He told them that one day there wouldn't be even one of those stones left on top of another. They wanted to know when it would happen, when He would come and what the signs of the end would be. They were thinking that He would come in triumph, throw off the Roman rule from over them and establish His kingdom.

Jesus replied that as the Son Of Man He didn't know the day when the end would take place, because that was known only to the Father. But He told them many things that would happen in the end days by which they could know that the end was near. (The destruction of the Temple took place during the lifetime of many of the disciples.)

Jesus said that in the end days, the people of the world would turn against His disciples and hate them. Many would be taken to court and put to death, and many would be betrayed by their own family members. There would be many wars and rumours of wars on earth, sicknesses, earthquakes, famines, floods, etc., in an increasing manner. There would arise many false teachers, prophets and miracle workers using the name of Christ but actually turning people away from God, proclaiming false teachings about Christ, some even claiming they were Christ, bringing false anointing and doing false miracles empowered by demons in order to try and deceive even true children of God. Because of the pressure to give in to sin coming upon them, some who stood faithfully till then would give up. Many would get deceived by the miracles that would take place and false teachings based on misplaced quotations from God's word.

Jesus tells us not to allow ourselves to be fooled by all such deceptions but to be alert to identify them and to keep ourselves faithful to Him. We are not to fall a prey to impressive proclamations from people, even if they carry out supernatural works we cannot explain. We are not to be fooled merely because they use God's word or use the name of Jesus as their authority. He tells us to identify false workers by looking at their fruit--whether they show the fruit of the Holy Spirit in their personal lives and also in the lives of those who follow them.

In the end, suddenly Jesus would appear in the sky announced by the trumpets of angels, and all His true disciples would be gathered from all over the world to be with Him.

The Great Bible Story #109

Jesus gets betrayed

The chief priests and Jewish rulers were upset with Jesus because His words and life exposed their hollowness and many people were following after Jesus seeing His miracles. They told themselves that if they lost the support of the people the Romans would take over completely. So they decided among themselves that it was better for everyone if Jesus was put to death (not realising that it was exactly what God had in mind). They began to wait for an opportunity to do it without much public uproar.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus was with His disciples in the house of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Mary took some expensive perfume and wiped it on Jesus' feet with her hair. Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples, commented that this was a sheer waste of money and this perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. (It was not that he cared for the poor. Judas was in charge of the money bag for Jesus' team and he used to help himself to it now and then.) When Jesus heard this He said that what Mary had done was to anoint Him for burial. He said that the poor would always be there, but they would not have Him with them for long. Judas was probably offended by this correction. Anyway he left immediately from there to the chief priests and agreed to identify Jesus for them for a price of thirty pieces of silver. They did not know that by this they were fulfilling another prophecy about Jesus.

After this, Jesus began to tell the disciples plainly that the chief priests and the rulers would hand Him over to the Romans who would put Him to death. But He would rise from the dead after three days just as Jonah the prophet came out of the belly of the fish after three days.

Jesus promised that after He went back to the Father He would send down the Holy Spirit to be with them as their Teacher, Comforter and Helper. He tried to explain to them that it would be more advantageous for them to have the Holy Spirit with them than to have Him (Jesus) in bodily form. The Holy Spirit would be always with them, leading them into all the truth, reminding them about the things Jesus had taught them and exalting Jesus in everything.

Jesus warned the disciples that very few were going to be saved, while the majority would be on the way to destruction. As long as they were in the world they were going to have trouble, but He who had conquered the world would be with them. He would prepare a place for them and take them there finally.

The Great Bible Story #110

The last supper

While He was in Bethany Jesus arranged with someone to lend Him a colt of a donkey. The disciples put their coats on the donkey and Jesus rode on it, headed for Jerusalem. This was another fulfilment of prophecy. As the people saw Him, they thought that this was the Messiah coming to set up His kingdom. So they placed their coats on the ground for Jesus to pass over, and waved palm leaves over Him, shouting, "Hosanna," meaning 'Save, Lord', and "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David." But Jesus only went into the Temple and then returned to Bethany.

The next day He came back to the Temple and drove out the merchants there who were making money with a pretext of serving God. He said the Temple was supposed to be a house of prayer and they had turned it into a den of thieves!

The night before the Passover, Jesus met with His disciples to eat together for the last time. As they were seated together, He took a basin of water and a towel and began to wash their feet. He told them He was doing this to illustrate how they were to serve one another.

As they began to eat, He said that one of them was going to betray Him. When John asked Him who, He indicated it by taking a piece of bread and giving it to Judas. As soon as Judas got it, he got up and went out, since he had already decided to betray Jesus and Satan had entered him.

Jesus led the dinner that night by declaring to them that He was going to establish a new covenant between God and man. He took bread, blessed it, broke it and distributed it to them saying it represented His body which was broken for them. Then He took the wine, declaring it represented His blood which was going to ratify the new covenant. Jesus told them that they were to do this regularly as a memorial of what He had done for them.

After this, Jesus was sad that all of them was going to leave Him. Peter spoke up and said that he wouldn't leave Him even if everyone else did. Jesus told him that he would deny Him thrice before the cock crowed the next morning. But He also told him that even though Satan wanted permission to attack Peter seriously, He had prayed for him, hoping that once Peter returned to Him in repentance, he would be able to build up others in their faith.

After this they sang a song together and moved to the Mount of Olives where there was a garden called Gethsemane.

The Great Bible Story #111

Jesus gets arrested

When Jesus and His disciples came to the garden of Gethsemane, He asked them to sit there while He went a little further to pray. He took Peter, James and John with Him and asked them to support Him with prayer. So much was His agony while He was praying that His sweat drops were like blood, and an angel came to strengthen Him. He knew the Father wanted Him to bear the sins of the whole world and die, and He knew this would also mean being separated from the Father at that time when He took the world's sin on Himself. He tried to plead with the Father three times to see if there was any other way this could be accomplished. When He realised this was the only way to save mankind, His eternal love for mankind helped Him to choose the Father's will rather than His own.

In between His prayers Jesus came to see the three disciples, but they were fast asleep! He woke them up and warned them to watch and pray so that they might not enter into temptation. But when He finished His prayer He told them the time was ready for Him to be arrested.

At this time Judas came leading many soldiers to where Jesus was. Judas kissed Jesus, which was the sign he had given to the soldiers to identify Him. Jesus asked him why he was betraying Him with a kiss, for which Judas had no answer. Jesus told the soldiers to let His disciples go if they wanted only Him. Peter took out a sword and started attacking the soldiers and managed to cut off one man's ear. Jesus just chided him for depending on swords, and touched and healed that man's ear.

The soldiers first took Jesus to Caiaphas, the high priest. The chief priests and the rulers tried but could not succeed in bringing any accusation against Jesus. Finally the high priest asked Him if He was the Christ, the Son of God. When Jesus acknowledged it, he tore his robe and cried out saying it was blasphemy for which He should be put to death!

Peter had followed Jesus at a distance and was now sitting in the courtyard outside. A servant girl asked him if was one of Jesus' disciples. Peter denied it. Then another servant saw him and told the others that he was with Jesus. Peter said he didn't even know Him. But then some others said he was surely one of the disciples, which they could make out from his accent. Peter began to curse and swear saying he didn't know Him. Immediately a cock crowed. Jesus turned and looked at Peter, and he went out and wept bitterly thinking of what he had done.

The Great Bible Story #112

The trial of Jesus

By morning, the chief priests and rulers decided that Jesus deserved death. Since, under the Roman rule, the Jews didn't have the authority to put anyone to death, they sent Jesus to Pilate, the Roman Governor in Jerusalem. When Judas realised what was happening, he felt remorse and went back to the priests saying he had sinned by betraying innocent blood. When they told him they were not concerned with that, he threw down the silver pieces on the floor in despair and went and hanged himself.

When Pilate examined Jesus he couldn't find anything wrong with Him. When he told the chief priests and the rulers that he didn't find anything in Jesus that deserved death they insisted that He should be crucified. Pilate thought he would have Jesus beaten and let go. In the meantime his wife sent him a message pleading with him not to have anything to do with Jesus because she had been troubled about Him in her dreams. When Pilate asked Jesus if He was a king He replied that His kingdom was not of this world because otherwise His soldiers would be fighting for Him. But He did not utter a word when the chief priests and rulers were accusing Him. Pilate wondered at this and reminded Jesus that he had the power to punish Him or let Him go. Jesus' reply was that he would not be able to do anything to Him unless God permitted it. Pilate was becoming scared, and he wanted to let Jesus go somehow. So he went to the people who had gathered there asking whether they wanted him to release Jesus for them or a criminal called Barabbas. But this crowd had been incited by the chief priests and the rulers to ask for Jesus' death. So they asked Pilate to release Barabbas, and continued to cry out asking for Jesus to be crucified. The Jewish leaders also told Pilate that if he let Jesus go, who had announced Himself as King, he would find himself in trouble with Rome.

Realising that there was too much pressure on him to crucify Jesus, Pilate tried to appease his own conscience by taking some water and washing his hands in front of the people, symbolically washing his hands off the guilt. Then he handed Jesus over to the soldiers to crucify Him.

The soldiers beat Him in such a way that His flesh was getting torn off from His body. Afterwards they took off His clothes, put a purple robe on Him, placed a crown made of thorns pressed down on His head, gave Him a reed to hold in place of a sceptre and mocked Him by pretending to bow before Him.

The Great Bible Story #113

Jesus suffers and dies for us

Jesus was too weak now from His scourging to carry His cross to the place where He was to be crucified, and so the soldiers drafted a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, to carry it for Him. They finally reached the place just outside Jerusalem called Golgotha or Calvary meaning 'the skull'. There they crucified Him and on either side of Him they crucified two criminals. The soldiers divided His clothes among them and cast lots for His tunic which was seamless. Pilate made them write a caption over His head saying, 'Jesus, King of the Jews'.

Someone gave Him some wine mixed with gall to dull His pain but when He tasted it He didn't drink it any more. Some mocked Him saying if He was the Son of God He should come down from the cross, and also how He had saved others but He could not save Himself. Jesus looked at all of them and prayed to the Father for their forgiveness because they didn't really know what they were doing.

One of the criminals was hurling abuse at Him, asking Him to save them and Himself if He was really the Messiah. But the other criminal scolded him saying they were both getting what they really deserved, but Jesus was innocent! Then he turned to Jesus and asked Him to remember him when He came in His kingdom. Seeing this criminal's repentance and faith, Jesus told him that he would be together with Him in paradise that same day.

Jesus saw His mother Mary standing there, and He told His disciple John to take care of her as his own mother.

By twelve noon, the sky became dark, and around three in the afternoon Jesus cried out, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Some people thought He was calling for Elijah because it sounded like that. Then He said He was thirsty. Someone put up a sponge dipped in sour wine on a reed and raised it to Jesus' mouth, and He drank it. After this He realised that everything that the Father wanted had been accomplished, and He said, "It is finished," committed His spirit into the Father's hands and breathed His last.

At this time there were several earthquakes, many rocks got split, and the veil in the Temple separating the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place was torn in the middle, starting from the top, signifying that now the way to God and His presence was open.

The Great Bible Story #114

Jesus gets buried

The Jews didn't want anyone to remain on the cross on the Sabbath day, and so they asked the soldiers to break the bones of the legs so that death would come quickly. When they came to Jesus they saw He was already dead, and to make sure, one soldier pierced His side with the spear, and blood and water came out.

Joseph of Arimathea, a rich member of the Jewish Council who had become a disciple of Jesus and who had not agreed with the Council in their decision to put Jesus to death, went and asked Pilate if he could take the body of Jesus from the cross for burial. Pilate wondered if Jesus could be dead so soon, and so he confirmed it with the centurion before he agreed. Then Nicodemus, another member of the Council who had become Jesus' disciple earlier, brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes for embalming the body of Jesus. Together they took down the body from the cross, wrapped it in new linen cloth and put it inside a new tomb in a nearby garden. The entrance of this cave-like tomb was closed by rolling a huge stone at the entrance. The women who were with Jesus as He died on the cross came and saw the tomb and returned home to prepare perfumes for the body before the Sabbath could start in the evening, so that after the Sabbath they could go and anoint the body.

Then some of the chief priests and the other leaders remembered vaguely that Jesus had said something about rising from the dead after three days. They knew that if this happened they would not be able to stop people from following Jesus. So they went to Pilate and told him what Jesus had said, and requested him to put some soldiers to stand guard over the tomb so that the disciples of Jesus would not be able to steal away the body of Jesus and later claim that Jesus had risen from the dead! Pilate could not be bothered, and he asked them to use their own Temple guards. So they placed some guards outside the tomb to protect it from any vandalism.

What we see is that the disciples were not really expecting Jesus to rise from the dead because they had not really understood what He had told them. They were only planning to embalm the body. They themselves were in hiding from the Jews because of fear that they too might be caught. What the Jewish leaders actually achieved by placing guards before the tomb and ensuring the body could not be taken away was to authenticate the fact of the resurrection of Jesus when it actually took place!

The Great Bible Story #115

The resurrection

Early in the morning on Sunday, Mary Magdalene and a few other women took some spices with them to the tomb. They were wondering who would roll away the heavy stone at the entrance for them. But there had been what appeared to be an earthquake when an angel rolled away the stone. The guards who were there were dazed and shaking with fear. An angel told the women that Jesus was not there but had risen. He reminded them about what Jesus had said earlier how sinful men would put Him to death and how He would come back to life on the third day. He told them to go on to Galilee where Jesus would meet with them. The women were filled with fear and wonder and they ran back to tell the other disciples.

The disciples couldn't believe what the women said. But anyway Peter and John ran to the tomb and looked inside. All they could find was the linen cloths that had wrapped the body of Jesus, and surprisingly, these were lying there, each in its proper place, neatly folded up. The disciples went away confused.

In the meantime, Mary Magdalene came back to the tomb and peeped inside. The body of Jesus wasn't there. An angel asked her why she was looking for the living among the dead.

As she came out of the tomb, Jesus was standing there. But in her confused state of mind she could not recognise Him. She thought He was the gardener. Jesus asked her why she was weeping and who she was looking for. She said she was looking for Jesus, and that someone seemed to have taken away His body. But now He called her, "Mary!" Suddenly she recognised Him and fell down, clinging to His feet and saying, "Teacher!" Jesus told her He wasn't yet ascended to heaven, and He asked her to go and tell the disciples that He was indeed alive!

That afternoon two disciples were walking towards Emmaus when Jesus joined them. They didn't recognise Him. They were perplexed with the news of the resurrection. But Jesus explained to them the prophecies about Him, and finally revealed Himself to them. They went back to Jerusalem with joy and told the other disciples Jesus was alive!

That evening, when the disciples were closed up in a room for fear of the Jews, Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst! They were so happy to see Him! Thomas was not there at this time, and later when they told him about Him, he said he wouldn't believe unless he saw Him personally. Eight days later when Jesus appeared to them again, He showed Thomas the marks of His wounds.

The Great Bible Story #116

Jesus ascends to heaven

After God raised Jesus from the dead, He was on earth for forty days, during which time He taught them many things from the scriptures, especially the things concerning Him and what they should do to be witnesses for Him. On one occasion He appeared to a group of five hundred disciples at one time.

One night Peter felt he should go back to fishing, and some of the other fishermen disciples went along with him. But even though they struggled all night in the Sea of Galilee, they couldn't catch any fish. Early morning Jesus stood on the shore and asked them if they had any fish. They didn't recognise Him and they replied they didn't have any. Then He told them that if they cast their net on the right side they would get a catch. They tried that, and the net caught so much fish they were unable to pull it up! Then someone said it was Jesus! Immediately Peter jumped into the water and swam to the shore to meet Him. The others brought the boat ashore and got down with the fish.

They saw Jesus already had a fire going with some fish on it. He asked them to also bring some fish they had caught, and they had a great breakfast.

After this Jesus took Peter aside and asked him if he really loved Him more than everything and everyone else. Peter said he did, but Jesus repeated the question twice more. Peter was conscious of the fact that he had denied Him, and finally all his bravado was gone. He was now willing to surrender himself to His lordship.

Jesus told Peter that when he became old, someone else would stretch out his hands and take him where he didn't want to go. One implication was about how he would be put to death on the cross for His sake. At this point Peter saw John and asked Jesus what would happen to him. Jesus told him not to worry about that but to leave that to God. Peter's responsibility was only to complete God's task for his own life.

When it was getting near to the time Jesus was going to be taken up to heaven He reminded them about His promise to baptise them in the Holy Spirit. He told them to wait in Jerusalem till it happened, and then to go everywhere and help people to become His disciples. He would give them the power and strength they needed for this, and He would also be with them all the time.

Finally they went up the Mount of Olives, and as they watched, Jesus was taken up from them and disappeared into the sky. An angel told them the one day He would come back to earth in the same way.

The Great Bible Story #117

The Holy Spirit is poured out

Around nine in the morning on the Day of Pentecost, when the Jews celebrated the Feast of Weeks, fifty days after the Passover, the disciples of Jesus were gathered together in one place. Suddenly they heard the sound of a mighty wind coming from above, and they saw what looked like fire in the shape of a tongue coming and resting on each of them. Immediately they were filled with power and they started speaking in languages they didn't know. This was the fulfilment of the promise from Jesus just before He went back to heaven about the Holy Spirit being poured out on them for power to be His witnesses. At this time there were many Jews from all over the world who had gathered in Jerusalem for the feast. It happened that when they listened to the disciples now they could each hear them praising God as if it was in their own languages!

Some people began to mock the disciples saying they were drunk! Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, stood up among them and started speaking aloud. He explained to the people that they were not drunk but this was the result of the Holy Spirit being poured out on people. He said that the prophet Joel had written about it saying that in the last days the Spirit would be poured out on all people, their sons and daughters would prophesy, young men would see visions and old men would see dreams.

When he had caught their attention, Peter started speaking to them about Jesus, how God had attested to Him through miracles and wonders, and how they had delivered Him to death through wicked men. Peter said that they had unknowingly carried out the plan God had made, that Jesus should die for the sins of the people! But God raised Jesus from the dead, whom they had crucified, which was now a fact established by many eye witnesses including the apostles.

When the people heard this, the truth struck home in their hearts, and they were troubled by their guilt. So they asked Peter what they could do. His reply was that each of them should repent from all their sins, and turn to God believing in Jesus. Then God would forgive their sins and fill them also with the Holy Spirit.

About three thousand people responded to this first message of the gospel (good news), and the apostles baptised them in water on the same day. All these people began to gather together regularly to listen to the apostles and to celebrate Jesus through breaking bread together. This was the beginning of the church.

The Great Bible Story #118

A miracle and a sermon

Peter and John were going to the temple in the afternoon at the time of prayer, and they saw a man sitting at the gate who was born lame. Peter looked at him and told him they didn't have any money to give him. What they could give instead was healing! He told the man to get up to his feet, and held him up with his hand. Immediately the man's legs were healed, and he began dancing around with joy!

The people who saw this understood that an extraordinary miracle had just taken place. Soon a crowd gathered around and started looking at Peter with amazement. Peter was shocked that they should think he had done this from himself. He quickly explained to the people that it wasn't anything in him or John that made this happen, but that Jesus had done this when they put their trust in Him.

As the crowd listened intently, Peter told them that Jesus was the Messiah they were looking for. It was the plan of God which was revealed by the prophets that the Messiah should suffer and be killed. When they put Him to death, they were actually fulfilling God's plan even though they did it in ignorance. But God raised Him from the dead and announced Him as Lord. Now Peter asked them to repent from their sins and to turn to God. Many who listened to him, about five thousand people, believed the message.

But some priests and Sadducees came there with the temple guards, arrested Peter and John and put them in jail because it disturbed them that they were preaching about rising from the dead. (The Sadducees were a sect who didn't believe in miracles or life after death.)

The next morning the chief priests and other leaders came together along with the high priest Annas. They asked Peter and John to explain how they had done the miracle.

Peter experienced a mighty filling of the Holy Spirit at this time, and he stood up boldly to speak. He told them that it was by the authority of the name of Jesus, whom they had crucified and whom God had raised up, that the man's legs were fine now. He also said that God had set up Jesus as the only way for salvation for everybody.

The rulers couldn't understand how uneducated men like Peter could talk like this, and they concluded that this was the work of Jesus. Also, they couldn't deny the fact that a miracle had actually happened, because the man was in front of them! So they just threatened Peter not to speak again about Jesus. But he said he would obey God rather than men.

The Great Bible Story #119

God sets the standard for the church

When people began to gather together in the name of Jesus and as they were filled with the Holy Spirit, their love began to flow out to one another as members of one family. Nobody held on to whatever they had for themselves but shared it with the others so that no one was left in need. Some people who owned property even sold it off and brought the money to the apostles to distribute. Joseph who was also called Barnabas (son of encouragement) was one such man.

But right from the start there was also an ugly mixture among the people. A couple by the name of Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property and decided to keep a part of the proceedings for themselves. But what they did was to pretend that they were also giving the sale price to the church just like some of the others. When Peter met Ananias he asked him if this was the full amount and he said it was. But the Holy Spirit revealed the truth to Peter and he rebuked Ananias for this deception. Ananias fell down dead, and people took him and buried him.

Sapphira didn't know this, and she came to Peter with the same story. Peter asked her why she and her husband had conspired to make this pretence, not realising that the Holy Spirit would know the truth. She also fell down dead. The news of this spread quickly, and when people recognised the standard God expected from His people, those who were not prepared to follow it decided not to join the church! But there were many who followed Jesus and were willing to abide by His standards, and the church grew in number and oneness. Many miracles were taking place through the apostles, and people began to lay their sick by the roadside so that they might get healed when Peter's shadow fell on them!

The high priest and the others were filled with jealousy against the disciples, and they caught the apostles and put them in jail. But an angel came in the night, freed the apostles and asked them to continue to bear witness to Jesus.

In the morning when the rulers sent the guards to bring the prisoners, they came back reporting that everything was in order at the jail but the apostles were missing! Then someone said that they were preaching in the temple! Finally they brought the apostles and the rulers told them they were not allowed to preach about Jesus. They replied they had to obey God rather than men.

The rulers were really confused. Finally they decided to just watch how things developed.

The Great Bible Story #120

Ministry and martyrdom

As the church increased in number, some people complained that widows from a Greek-Jewish background were being neglected as food was being distributed. The apostles felt that while this was an important part of the ministry, they could not leave their responsibility for preaching the word and prayer in order to do this. So they suggested that seven men should be selected for this, who had a good reputation, and who were full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Stephen, Philip and five others were selected for this, and then apostles laid their hands on them and blessed them.

Stephen was also used by God in performing many great miracles among the people. Some men from a Jewish group noticed this, and they came to argue with him. But no one was able to stand against the wisdom God gave him. Ultimately they reported him to the Council saying that he was speaking blasphemies against Moses and God. There they asked him to give an explanation about what he was doing and teaching. They saw his face glowing as he spoke.

Stephen started by tracing the history of the Jews from the time God chose Abraham. He told them how the Jews had always resisted the people God chose to lead them, and how they had now become murderers of the Righteous One whom God had sent. He called them a stiff-necked people who kept resisting the work of the Holy Spirit.

The rulers were enraged with Stephen as he spoke these things. But Stephen looked up to heaven and said he could see the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. They thought this was blasphemy and ordered him to be put to death by stoning. They took him outside the city and started stoning him. But Stephen called out loudly to God, asking Him to receive his spirit. With his last breath he also asked God not to lay this sin against this people, following the example of his Lord.

While the people went to stone Stephen they left their robes in the hands of a young man called Saul. He was a Pharisee, and a scholar of the Jewish scriptures under a teacher called Gamaliel. Since Saul himself was opposed to the claims of Jesus to be God Himself, he was in agreement with the decision of the people to put Stephen to death for blasphemy. After the death of Stephen, he started going from place to place, arresting those who followed Jesus and putting them in jail. This became a wave of persecution against the disciples of Jesus.

The Great Bible Story #121

Saul gets converted

Saul went to the high priest and got permission to catch the disciples of Jesus and to put them in jail. With this purpose he was travelling to Damascus on horseback when suddenly there was a bright light that blinded him. He fell down from the horse and heard a voice asking him why he was persecuting Him. Saul didn't know who was talking and asked who it was. The reply was that it was Jesus whom he was persecuting (even though he was persecuting His disciples). Then Jesus told him to proceed to Damascus where he would be told what to do. As Saul got up from the ground he was blind, and some of the others who were with him had to hold him by the hand and lead him to Damascus. After they reached, Saul was without sight for three days, and he was thinking about how mistaken he had been about Jesus earlier and how he had been persecuting the people of God. He didn't eat or drink anything those days.

In Damascus there was a disciple called Ananias, to whom Jesus appeared in a vision and told him about Saul. Jesus wanted him to go to the place where Saul was staying and pray for him. Saul was in prayer, waiting for Ananias to come to him. But Ananias was shocked at this instruction! He exclaimed that this Saul was actually coming to Damascus to catch the disciples of Jesus! Jesus said that He had chosen this Saul to be a witness for Him in many parts of the world. Saul was also going to face many difficulties in this mission.

Ananias went to Saul and told him that the Jesus whom he had met on the way to Damascus had sent him to pray for him that he might get his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. After Ananias prayed and Saul got back his sight, he also baptised Saul in water. Ananias then laid his hands on Saul's head and prayed for him, and he was baptised in the Holy Spirit.

Saul spent several days talking to the disciples at Damascus. After that he started going to the synagogue and declaring that Jesus was the Son of God. He would have used his scholarly knowledge of the prophecies to support this truth to the Jewish listeners. At first there was surprise that the man who had been creating havoc for the disciples of Jesus earlier in Jerusalem was now preaching about Jesus! But soon this turned into anger from the Jews who decided to put him to death. They began to plot plans to catch him. But this became known to the disciples who let him escape from the city by lowering him down the city wall in a basket.

The Great Bible Story #122

The gospel opens to the non Jews

There was a Roman centurion called Cornelius who was a devout man who prayed to God and gave alms to the Jews. One afternoon he saw a vision of an angel saying that God had noted his prayers. The angel told him to send for Peter who was staying at that time at Joppa. Cornelius sent a few of his servants to Joppa to find Peter.

On the next day, Peter was spending some time in prayer when he saw a vision. He saw a sheet being lowered from the sky in which there were all kinds of animals and birds, including those that were forbidden by the Law for the Jews to eat. Peter heard God telling him to kill them and eat. Peter exclaimed in revulsion that he had never eaten any of those unclean things. God told him that what He had declared clean he should not consider as unclean any more. This happened three times, and then the sheet was taken up into the sky.

Peter was perplexed about what this vision could mean, when the people from Cornelius knocked on the door asking for him. The Holy Spirit told him that He had brought the men there and that Peter was to go with them without any doubt.

Peter took with him a couple of other disciples and went to Cornelius. When he reached there Cornelius was waiting to listen to him along with family and friends. Cornelius explained to Peter how an angel had told him to send for Peter, and then Peter told him about the vision and the voice that told him to eat even meat which had been declared unclean earlier. Peter now understood that God really made no difference between the Jews and the others, and that anyone from anywhere who called on Him would be heard.

After this Peter began to declare the gospel of Jesus to the people present there. He told them how God had sent Jesus His Son to Israel and how Jesus had gone around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil. But the rulers put Jesus to death on the cross. After three days God raised Him from the dead and He was seen alive by many people. Peter said that it was by putting their trust in Jesus that people could receive forgiveness for their sins.

As Peter was speaking this, the Holy Spirit came upon the people there and they started speaking in unknown languages just as on the day of Pentecost. The Jews who had come with Peter were surprised that non Jews also could receive the Spirit. Peter said that they could be baptised because it was obvious that God had already accepted them.

The Great Bible Story #123

The confusion about non Jews

When the apostles and others in Jerusalem heard that non Jews had received the gospel, they questioned Peter about it. They asked him how he could have mixed with non Jews and eaten with them, because as Jews who considered themselves as people of God on an exclusive basis they had reservations about everyone else. Then Peter explained the whole story of how he had seen a vision from God where He had asked him to eat even the animals which were considered unclean, saying that what He had declared clean should not be considered unclean any more. He also told them about how, when he was speaking to Cornelius about the gospel, the Holy Spirit fell upon the non Jews just as He had earlier on the Jewish believers. He argued, therefore, that he could not go against what God was obviously doing. Then it dawned on everyone present there that God was widening the scope of salvation beyond the Jews to everyone who believed. They praised God saying that repentance and salvation through grace were now open to everyone.

During the time of the persecution that started at the time of the martyrdom of Stephen, some believers had moved away from Jerusalem to other places. Some of them reached the city of Antioch and shared the gospel of Jesus with the Jews there. But some of them also spoke to the Greeks there about Jesus. Many people responded by putting their trust in Jesus for salvation from sin. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard about it, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to see what was happening. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit, and when he saw what God was doing with the believers in Antioch, he encouraged them to continue to be faithful to the Lord. He went from there to Tarsus looking for Saul. (Barnabas had met Saul just after his conversion, and brought him to the apostles at that time. When there was confusion among many Jews because Saul was proclaiming Jesus, the apostles thought it would be safer for him to be away for some time.) After Barnabas and Saul came to Antioch they stayed there for a year teaching the people about the things of God. It was here that the disciples of Jesus first began to be called Christians.

A prophet called Agabus came to Antioch from Jerusalem and declared that there was going to be a worldwide famine. Then those of the disciples in Antioch who were well off collected some money together for the brothers in Judea and sent it through Barnabas and Saul.

The Great Bible Story #124

Herod tries to shine

Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great who was in power when Jesus was born, was the king in Judea appointed by the Romans at this time, and he tried to exercise his power over Christians. He put James the apostle to death, and when he saw that this was well received by the Jews, he arrested Peter and put him in jail, with a lot of soldiers guarding him, hoping to put him also to death after the Passover. But the church started praying for Peter's release. On the same night when Herod was planning to bring Peter before the people, Peter was sleeping in chains between two soldiers with other soldiers guarding the prison. An angel suddenly appeared there with a bright light, slapped Peter gently on the shoulder and asked him to wake up, take his clothes and follow him out. His chains fell off and doors opened when they were moving, and when they reached the final gate it opened by itself. The angel disappeared. Suddenly Peter realised that he was actually free and outside the prison, and not dreaming as he was thinking till then.

Peter went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many disciples were gathered together and praying for him. When he knocked on the door a servant girl came. But when she heard his voice she ran inside to tell them Peter was there. But the others there wouldn't believe her! But finally when they saw him they were quite amazed. Peter described how the Lord had sent an angel and delivered him from the prison and Herod. He told them to tell the others and went off to another place.

It is one of those inscrutable acts of God that He permitted James to be killed, while saving Peter miraculously. But this is given so that we might learn to trust Him even without all the answers.

When Herod sent for Peter they couldn't find him, even though everything was in place at the prison! He ordered the soldiers to be killed.

Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon. One day they came to meet him, and he gave them an impressive speech. They wanted to appease him, and so they flattered him saying it was as if some god was talking! Herod drank in this flattery without even a thought about giving God the glory. In this case the judgment came quickly, and Herod fell down and died.

After completing their mission of giving the money to the church in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch. But this time they also took John Mark with them.

The Great Bible Story #125

Missionary journeys

When the disciples in the church at Antioch were praying and fasting, the Holy Spirit told them to set Barnabas and Saul apart for the special task He had given them. This was to go to different parts of the world and proclaim salvation through Jesus. Saul changed his name to Paul and they travelled to different places by sea and land. The usual approach they took was to go to the local synagogues and share from the Old Testament scriptures to show that Jesus was the Messiah. It happened many times that some Jews in the synagogues would believe. But then the other Jews would get worked up against them and drive out Paul and Barnabas, sometimes trying to kill them. But then Paul and Barnabas would separate the believers from the synagogues and help them to meet together, usually in homes. After some time they would travel to a new place. In this way churches (assembly of the called out) began to get set up in many places. Non Jews would also join them.

In Lystra, Paul saw a man who was born lame and asked him with a loud voice to stand up on his feet. This man jumped up and started walking! When the crowd saw this, they thought that their gods had come as men, and the priests brought sacrifices to offer to them. But Paul and Barnabas proclaimed loudly that they were ordinary men. But they also explained that they should turn from such gods to the true One who had created everything. Then Jews came after them from some places they had visited earlier, stoned Paul and pulled him outside the city assuming he was dead. But when they left, Paul got up and went away with the disciples.

When Paul and Barnabas came back to Antioch, some Jewish Christians came and began to teach that one couldn't be saved without circumcision. The church felt that Paul and Barnabas should go to Jerusalem to sort out this issue. During the discussion in Jerusalem Peter told them how God had given the Holy Spirit to the non Jews even without circumcision, and said that they should not be imposed with the burden of the Law which nobody had been able to carry. The gathering agreed with this, and adopted the view that non Jewish believers should only abstain from eating things offered to idols, blood and fornication.

When Paul and Barnabas were to start their next journey they had a difference of opinion about whether they should take John Mark with them or not. As a result, they parted ways, Barnabas going with John and Paul taking Silas with him.

The Great Bible Story #126

More missionary work

When Paul and Silas were in Philippi, Paul cast out a demon from a girl whom some were using to make money by fortune telling. When the demon was out, the angry masters put Paul and Silas in jail saying they were teaching people against Roman customs. At night they were praising God while in chains, when an earthquake came and chains broke free. The jailer was about to kill himself thinking the prisoners had escaped, but Paul said they were all there. The jailer had heard their message and asked now what he should do to be saved. Paul told him to put his faith in Jesus. Later the jailer's full family became believers.

When they came to a place called Berea and spoke in the synagogue, the people there received the word with great eagerness. But they would check what Paul said with the scriptures to see if it was correct. This has become an example for everyone.

At one time Paul was left alone in the city of Athens where he saw many idols. He started preaching the word in the synagogue and discussing with whoever was around in the market place about Jesus. Some people there had a habit of talking about new and interesting subjects, and so they invited Paul to give a talk on Jesus whom he was presenting as God. So he spoke in their auditorium saying he had seen their many gods but that he had also seen a monument to an unknown God. He said that this unknown God was the one who had revealed Himself through Jesus. Most people sneered at him, but some became believers.

During his journeys Paul came to Ephesus and found some disciples there. He asked them if they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed. But they had been baptised according to the baptism of repentance which John the baptiser taught, and they had not even heard about the Holy Spirit. So Paul explained the way of salvation more clearly to them, and they were baptised in water believing in Jesus for salvation. Then he laid his hands on them and prayed, and they were baptised with the Holy Spirit, speaking in unknown languages and prophesying.

As Paul stayed there and preached salvation, many who had practised magic earlier repented, and burnt up all their books and paraphernalia. But this hit the business of a silversmith called Demetrius and he created a big furore in the city saying Paul was saying the goddess Diana of Ephesus was no goddess at all! Finally the town clerk said they didn't have to worry about Diana and dismissed the crowd.

The Great Bible Story #127

Paul gets arrested

When Paul returned to Jerusalem after his journeys, the leaders of the church suggested that he should perform a vow in the temple to show the Jews that he was not against them. So he went into the temple to make offerings. But some Jews from Asian countries where Paul had preached found him in the temple they shouted out saying that this Paul had preached against the Jews and the Law and now he had come into the temple and defiled it. This started a big commotion, and people came and dragged Paul out of the temple. Then someone told the commander of the Roman soldiers that Jerusalem was in turmoil. So he took some centurions and soldiers with him and came to Paul. He could not get a proper answer from the crowd about the charges against Paul, and so he took him to the barracks. There Paul told him that he was a Jew from Tarsus and asked for permission to speak to the people.

He spoke to the people in Hebrew and told them how he had followed the Law as a strict Pharisee and got educated under Gamaliel. He told them that when the people were stoning Stephen for his faith in Jesus he was standing there agreeing with them. He was going to Damascus to arrest Christians there with the permission of the high priest. Then he described how he saw a bright light and heard Jesus speaking to him. In Damascus Ananias prayed for him and baptised him. Then God told him that He was going to send him to take the good news of salvation especially to the non Jews. At this point the crowd became violent and said that he should be put to death.

The commander thought that he would scourge Paul and get to know the truth. But then Paul told him he was a Roman citizen by birth who could not be punished without a trial. So the commander decided that he would ask for the chief priests to come and lay their charges against him.

The rulers of the Jews could not prove anything against Paul, and when some Jews made a plan to waylay him and kill him, he was moved to Felix the governor. Since Felix could not see why he should punish Paul, he kept delaying things, and Paul was with him for two years. And then Festus took over as governor. He thought he would send Paul to the Jews for trial, but knowing what would happen, Paul said he would rather be tried by Caesar, the Roman emperor. So Paul was sent to Rome along with soldiers. God kept him and the ship safe through the journey. He lived in Rome and encouraged the believers there until he was killed.

The Great Bible Story #128

The Conclusion

After the setting up of churches in different parts of the world, there were many human problems of adjustments, carnality, ego clashes, influence of heathen culture, etc. Therefore God inspired Paul, Peter, James and Jude to write letters to different churches with teaching, corrections and rebukes which have also served Christians throughout the later centuries. The Book of Revelation contains the direct revelation from Jesus given to the apostle John concerning the end of the days and the future of man.

The Holy Spirit who inspired the scriptures also inspires the present readers to understand the heart of God and also to apply the scriptures to day by day life. That is what makes the Bible living. It teaches us about our personal relationship with God, our attitude and behaviour towards others, and our priorities, values and goals. It also tells us about the function of the church and the individual roles in the church.

The Bible also tells us what will happen as the end of the days comes up, about the rising hatred against Christians, increasing violence and immorality, and the rise of a person known as the Antichrist who will be the anointed of Satan who will try to take over the world. It tells us how this world is going to be judged and destroyed, and how the people who have rejected Christ will face their eternal judgment in hell along with the devil and his demons. It also tells us about the joyous and glorious future awaiting those who chose to believe in Jesus, how they will spend eternity with Jesus without pain, sorrow, sickness, death or any form of evil but with joy and gladness.

I hope this brief introduction to the great story in the Bible has given you a broad understanding of God's dealings with people and has caused you to love Him. My hope is that this will help you to start reading the Bible itself regularly with eagerness.

May God be with you.

Jacob Ninan

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