

INTRODUCTION

“God is jealous for you.” The words the evangelist spoke directly to me sunk deep into my spirit. That was the beginning of my return to God after months of trying my own way. We serve a God who passionately pursues us because of His deep love for us. What does He ask in return? Your life—heart, soul, mind, and strength.

What does it mean to live for Christ? What must we do to truly be His followers? Through the Scriptures, we will discover in history, life examples, and prophecy what it looks like to give our all to God. Then, we can walk in the life and power of Christ Jesus in anticipation of our blessed hope—Christ’s return.

In Ezekiel we see God’s passionate call for His people to return to Him from their sin to experience His blessing and covenant once more. The people who were once dead to sin would be made alive by the wind of God’s Spirit. We must allow God to exchange our hearts of stone for hearts of flesh.

In the final chapters of Acts, we see an example of someone who turned wholeheartedly to the Lord and gave the rest of his life in a passionate display of devoted commitment to God. The Apostle Paul dedicated all he had to following Christ and pressing on toward his heavenly goal.

And yet, Paul’s life is not the only shining example of complete commitment to God. Daniel too risked his life and livelihood to worship the Lord his God only. Because of Daniel’s commitment to God’s commands, the Lord shared His words of prophecy with Daniel to pass on to the Lord’s people as a forewarning of the future—both the coming judgment and the coming hope of Christ’s eternal, powerful reign.

Daniel’s messages and John’s revelation of Jesus both share similarities of what is coming for our world. John’s words are sent to encourage the church to stand strong and are meant to serve as a reminder to love Christ more than anything in this world of trouble. The believers are challenged to press on unreservedly in their pursuit of Christ as they look forward to Christ’s ultimate victory and return.

We find another example of one who left his life behind to walk in the power of the Spirit in Elisha, the apprentice of Elijah the Prophet. Because Elisha chose to leave his life behind to follow God’s call, he received the power to walk faithfully in obedience to the Lord, performing mighty acts, all for God’s glory.

We too are encouraged to walk in the power of God’s Spirit in the book of Galatians as Paul shares with believers to put off the flesh and put on Christ as His life shines through us. It is then that we will see the hand of God at work in our lives as we live in eager anticipation of the glories that are to come.

Are you willing to turn to the Lord and give Christ your all as you eagerly look forward to His coming return? Let’s take the next steps together each day as we study the examples, warnings, and calls from God’s heart to walk with Him on this journey, keeping our eyes fixed on the One who is faithful.

SCRIPTURE UNION'S BIBLE READING METHOD

- PRAY** that God would speak to you from the Bible passage.
- READ** the Bible passage slowly and thoughtfully, perhaps more than once.
- REFLECT** on what you’ve read.
- APPLY** what you learn from the Bible to the situations in your life.
- PRAY** again, using your discoveries from the Bible to guide your prayers.

HOLY, SOVEREIGN, FAITHFUL

Ezekiel was once described to me as ‘bonkers but brilliant!’ Amen! The language we will encounter is often symbolic. Some of the visions couldn't possibly be drawn. Time frames, particularly in the second week of our readings, move from near to distant futures. Ezekiel's behavior, as he acts out some of the messages, is bizarre.

Ezekiel's audience, exiles in Babylon, will hate what he delivers over much of his 22 years of prophesying. The 52 oracles, recorded in chronological order, have three phases: God is holy – chapters 1–24; God is sovereign – chapters 25–32; God is faithful – chapters 33–48.

The first phase occupies this first week of notes. Ezekiel exposes the appalling sinfulness of God's people, particularly their idolatry within the Temple, that has led to the Exile which began when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in 587 B.C.

In the second phase, which these notes don't cover, God's victory over nations that have oppressed His people is pictured as terrible judgement. These victories and judgements are the hinges on which the door opens onto the new landscape of...

The third phase – oracles about God's restoration of the remnant of his people into the land, under his loving kingship in the days of a new covenant. They culminate in God dwelling with his people in a temple, from which a river of life reverses the cosmic impact of the Fall. They connect Ezekiel to the beginning and very end of the Bible.

Ezekiel's God is very much our God, revealed supremely in Jesus and still to be worshipped, obeyed and trusted. Enjoy!

THE LONG WAIT

The book of Acts is a fascinating picture of the earliest days of the church. Luke, the Greek doctor who wrote both this book and Luke's Gospel, was a good historian. In Luke 1:1-4 he explained his method. He used eyewitnesses, investigated the events personally and then put it all into a logical order. He wanted readers to be able to trust what he wrote.

These five chapters cover a period of about five years and focus on Paul. For four of those years he was in prison. We pick up the story in Caesarea where he had been taken for safety. He'd been arrested in Jerusalem and tried by the Jewish leaders, the Sanhedrin. Some of the other Jews (Paul was also a Jew of course!) were plotting to kill him (Acts 23:12-15), so for his own safety the Romans took him to Caesarea to be tried by the Roman governor Felix. After another inconclusive trial by Felix's successor Festus and King Agrippa, Paul asked to be tried by Caesar in Rome. The rest of Acts tells the exciting story of the journey to Rome.

One element is missing, however, and it's a spoiler alert! Through two visions (23:11; 27:24), God told Paul that he would get to Rome safely and stand trial before Caesar. So Paul's story brings hope to anyone who is frustrated by waiting - God's purposes will be worked out in the end. But it's also a challenge to single-minded discipleship, wherever it might take us.

FAITHFUL IN EXILE

Daniel's situation was shocking – how could God allow his land to be conquered, his people exiled, his Temple defiled?

But what is more shocking than the defeat of God's people is the way God called Daniel to live in Babylon, and gave him gifts far beyond his training, so he could work to the benefit of God's enemies.

Let that sink in for a minute. We tend to look down on collaborators, and praise resistance fighters – and yet Daniel was a collaborator par excellence; he even ended up as one of their chief officials!

So the question for Daniel and his fellow exiles was this: 'How can we live in an alien and hostile culture, without selling out?'

Daniel did that by constantly acknowledging God and giving him the glory, not allowing himself to be assimilated, refusing to engage in idolatry, and by praying every day, never forgetting his home, or his God.

The dreams – disturbing as they are – reveal and lift the veil on normally hidden spiritual realities. They both warn and encourage God's people, that worldly kingdoms 'are God's will for now, but not forever' (Dale Ralph Davis, *The Message of Daniel*, p48). The Ancient of Days is sovereign (even though it might feel as if he isn't), and one day the Son of Man will usher in God's perfect and everlasting rule.

Until then, with Daniel, we are called to serve God faithfully and patiently in exile. Can we do that without selling out?

ALL WILL BE REVEALED

Whether or not you enjoy the world of fantasy – *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*, *Narnia* – the book of Revelation can seem surreal, with ethereal creatures, vast numbers, strange signs and symbols. Yet Revelation is exciting because it's all about Jesus! It is a powerful, supernatural revelation (singular, not plural) or unveiling of Jesus (1:1), giving a glimpse of heaven to thrill and excite us, in anticipation. And it invites us to respond in worship and praise.

Probably written by the elderly apostle John whilst banished to the island of Patmos (think harsh gulags and hard labor), during a time of intense persecution, it has much in common with the Old Testament apocalyptic writings (e.g. Daniel) and was intended to encourage and build up faith during difficult times. Commentators differ on their interpretations, and it would take more than the space available here to delve into the details and depths of those debates; we will instead look at a theme from each day's reading.

The word 'Apocalypse' means a revealing of things known only to God, rather than 'cataclysmic disaster'. It says God has a plan – Jesus is coming back, and we win and Satan loses! Every part of the book has that in mind. Yes, there are rough times ahead, but Jesus said: 'Take heart! I have overcome the world' (John 16:33). That's essentially what Revelation is saying to every church, in every age, in every nation.

Take a peek into the throne room of heaven – a taste of the coming glory of Jesus. Persevere. Worship.

FACING UP

After major national or international disasters, inquiries are set up and we hear politicians and journalists talking about ‘learning the lessons’ of whatever catastrophe has taken place. Think 9/11 or the financial crisis of 2008 or London’s Grenfell Tower tragedy. After any catastrophic event, we want to get to the bottom of why and how the tragedy happened so that, wherever possible, we can prevent a reoccurrence.

The kingdoms of Israel and Judah also faced national catastrophes. The first was the brutal defeat and exile of Israel at the hand of the Assyrians. The second occurred when the Babylonian army invaded Judah, carried God’s people into exile in Babylon and destroyed both Jerusalem and the Temple. Surely, the defeated exiles in Babylon must have asked, ‘How did this happen?’

In order to help the people understand why God allowed such national catastrophes, the writer of 2 Kings scrutinises both Israel’s kings and the pivotal events of their reigns. Although the writer of 2 Kings chronicles the key political and military events of the time, he is more interested in the spiritual history and spiritual health of God’s people.

2 Kings is a rollercoaster read. Despite the catalogue of failures and deep slides into apostasy, there are chapters that take us higher. They point us to the God who welcomes outsiders, who calls his people to stand firm when spiritual liberalism is rife, who offers mercy to the oppressed and forgiveness to any who repent, no matter how far they have drifted.

JESUS PLUS...

Secretly, we all fear God's love is conditional.

The Father looks at you today with something of a plastic smile. You prayed 'the sinner's prayer'. You trusted in Jesus' death on the cross for you. So the Father had to accept you. He even adopted you into his family... although you suspect there are others he'd rather have, and some Christians he loves more.

So what does life look like now? Mostly, how can you be worthy of the cross? It's about doing the right stuff so that the Father still loves you and Jesus isn't too disappointed. So you watch your temper and give more to charity and serve on just one more ministry team at church. You read *Daily Bread* and feel guilty if you miss a day.

That's how the Galatians felt too. Of course their issues were different from ours: they worried about circumcision (2:3), kosher food (2:12) and observing Sabbaths (4:10). Yes, they and we started with the cross, with the blank slate Jesus gives us. But isn't the Bible full of stuff to do? And secretly, you feel your Christian life is an impossible burden. And you go to bed, unsure if you've done enough.

And Paul agrees! Any 'Jesus plus...' gospel like that is a bitter prison. But the gospel is freedom! Freedom from guilt. Freedom from a guilty conscience. Freedom from fear. God did everything for you. So now you're free! Free to enjoy his love, to love him joyfully, and to serve others.

LIVING FOR A LOVING GOD

After all the legal material in Exodus and Leviticus, you would be forgiven for being disappointed if you turn from Numbers and discover another book of laws. Even though the name means 'second law', Deuteronomy is not dull repetition, it is a real treat!

The nation of Israel was on the doorstep of the Promised Land. The generation that had failed to trust God and take the land had died off (with a couple of exceptions), and the new generation had grown into adulthood. This book is like a team talk before the action begins!

The shape of Deuteronomy is simple. It begins by looking back to what God had done in the past (chs 1-4). Then the second sermon clarifies what God wanted Israel to know as they entered the Promised Land (chs 5-26). The third and final sermon looks forward to what God would do for this nation with which he had established this covenant (chs 27-34).

Please don't miss how much material is aimed at the hearts of the people. God had loved them and Moses urged them to love him in response. Moses was the greatest prophet in the Old Testament, and the most quoted in the New Testament. But remember that Moses is not the high point of the Bible, for God told the people to anticipate a greater prophet than Moses who would one day come and speak the words of God! Let Deuteronomy stir your love for God, and build anticipation for Christ himself!