

INTRODUCTION

Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. For those of you who are parents, do you remember holding your child for the first time and the wave of love that swept through you? What we experience as love in our human confines is only a tiny glimpse of the love of God for us and the love that he ultimately plans for us to hold toward each other in eternity. In the next few weeks, we will explore the passages of Scripture that will take us on a journey deeper toward the love of God.

In Deuteronomy, we join the Israelites as they listen to the Law of God that Moses shares before all the people. The book is full of Law, and yet so much of the Word is directed toward the hearts of the people, describing God's love for them and urging their love in return. Can we too allow a deeper love for God to root in our hearts as we learn more about him?

From listening in with the young nation of Israel, we move on to one of Paul's letters to the young church. In this letter, Paul shares some hard truths, yet much of this letter deals with treating difficult relationships with godly love and wisdom. Paul shows both his strength and his deep love for his spiritual children through the words of this letter.

As we dig deeper into the Word, we see more and more of the love of God revealed both through his words and actions and the actions of his people. In the next few readings, we study a segment of the exile and rebuilding of Jerusalem. Even in details of the brick and mortar of Jerusalem's wall or the drama and intrigue of the Persian court, we see that an adoration of God's glory and service born from deep love for God will bring people and nations together and salvation for God's people.

In 2 Peter and Revelation, our focus shifts from Law and history to what is to come. Peter knows that the Day of the Lord could come at any time. It is his life's battle to defend the Gospel because of his great love for his Redeemer. And he wants God's people to be ready to live eternally with that Redeemer.

Through all of the mysterious imagery of Revelation, the main theme that emerges is that Christ, the Lamb, emerges victorious and we, his followers will be victorious too. His love will win out when he gathers his people to himself for all eternity and restores the broken relationship between God and humankind. And, in the words of St. Richard of Chichester, we are charged to remain faithful to him to the end, to know him more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly, till the very end.

Will you allow the Word to deepen your love for your Savior as you discover his deep and great love for you? Let us meet him in his Word together.

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.

LIVING FOR A LOVING GOD

After all of 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 (1–4). Then the second sermon clarifies what God wanted Israel to know as they entered the Promised Land (5–26). The third and final sermon looks forward to what God would do for this nation with which he had established this covenant (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!

CHALLENGING LOVE

Some relationships are downright tricky. Often it's because the people involved are so different from us, or because their expectations of the relationship are at odds with ours. When the relationship is between an individual and a group of people the potential for misunderstandings and complications multiplies. Sometimes a group can find respite from its own underlying divisions and conflicts by uniting against others. Psychologists call this "the perverse triangle."

All these factors are at play in the apostle Paul's relationship with the church in Corinth, his trickiest church relationship. His apostolic authority is under question; other apostolic figures are infiltrating the church; his previous correspondence has been misinterpreted; and on top of all this he is trying to secure their collaboration in a financial gift to the church at Jerusalem. As a leader and as a man Paul is tested to the limit. C. K. Barrett wrote, "Paul never wrote a more personal letter than 2 Corinthians" (*A Commentary on The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, second edition, 32).

In the letter we see Paul wrestling with the urge to assert his rights, defend himself and give his readers a piece of his mind while maintaining the relationship with the church he founded and loved. All this can help us when we face similar situations. We'll be asking, "How can we handle tricky relationships wisely? Where is our identity and security in such challenges? How can we challenge appropriately and lovingly?"

GRAND DESIGNS

The long-running British TV series *Grand Designs* follows bold, audacious and creative home-building projects, and if you've watched more than a couple of episodes you'll notice some predictable themes emerging. There are generally some strong characters instigating the build and they will talk about their "vision" and their "dream." Passion will drive them forward through the inevitable obstacles. The project always takes far more time and money than expected. There is usually conflict between the architect, the client, the builders and/or the local community. And at some point stirring, ominous music will play as Kevin McCloud, the presenter, tells us the whole thing is a disaster and wonders aloud if it will ever be finished.

The rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, 70 years after it was razed by the Babylonians, was an audacious endeavor of a whole other order of magnitude to any *Grand Designs* project. The obstacles were daunting, the cost astronomical and the schedule went out the window once the Israelites got on the wrong side of the locals.

Kevin would have despaired. Yet—spoiler alert—the Temple was eventually finished.

This week as we read the first seven chapters of Ezra, we'll see what can happen when people listen to and obey God's voice, when a community pulls together and works diligently, when worship is the foundation and the glory of God the goal. As we read, our challenge is to consider what grand designs God might be asking us to undertake.

A CITY FOR LIFE

Servant and leader; prayer-warrior and planner; governor and dispenser of justice: Nehemiah had an amazing range of exceptional gifts. As his story opens we find him serving in the courts of King Artaxerxes, the ruler of Persia, in the years following the Jewish exile. We don't know why Nehemiah remained in the courts of Artaxerxes, when he clearly had a great love for his homeland. His position was a high-ranking one, with the responsibility of making sure no one poisoned the king's wine, but it presumably carried little freedom or autonomy. Yet chapter 2 reveals that he must have done it with a good attitude, and gained the favor, as well as the trust, of this mighty foreign ruler.

Within a few pages Nehemiah was going to gain—and keep—the trust of his people and organize them to complete a task they had long neglected, and then restore the life of the city as well as its walls. How could such a talented man serve in obscurity so cheerfully for so long?

As we read his story we will see his deep, sustaining faith. God was at the very core of his being. Nehemiah knew him intimately, loved him deeply, and trusted him implicitly. When that is true of us we can, like Nehemiah, serve him with joy and confidence, no matter how menial or exalted the task.

COMMUNICATION FOR REAL

Old-fashioned letter writing seems to be a dying art. When did you last put pen to paper, to correspond at length? English teachers like me may grumble about this but, really, there are now so many communication options which are more efficient and, indeed, cheaper!

This change has taken place in a generation. It is difficult, then, for us to appreciate the significance for Peter of producing this letter 2000 years ago. Nevermind email and Skype, stamps and the Post Office: Peter lived in a world where most people were illiterate. He almost certainly didn't write his letters himself; he engaged a professional scribe. Usually they were listened to, because most people couldn't read. That treasured object, a letter received, would have been passed around and read out to groups gathered especially to pay heed.

In the case of this particular letter, the weighty, imperative quality is increased in several respects. First, this is a message from the great apostle, writing now because he expects his life to end soon. Secondly, Peter knows that he will have no other opportunity to convey these vital, urgent words—a follow-up phone call is not an option! Finally, Peter cares passionately about the church. He has heard from afar that Jesus' people are being led astray. It may or may not be The Last Days but Peter, at any rate, is determined to spend his last days fighting the battle which has been his life: to declare and defend the true Gospel.

IF IT PLEASES THE KING...

I have told the story of Esther in school assemblies, dressing up children as the main characters and encouraging audience participation in the form of cheers or booing! It's a lot to get through in a short space of time, but doing so brings out the rollicking nature of the story. There are heroes and villains, red herrings, banquets and bad behavior, dastardly plots and risky doings—but the central dénouement is wonderful. Matters of wealth and power, pride and humiliation, risk and reward are key to the story.

More seriously, Esther is the only book in Scripture which never mentions the name of God. It is set in the opulent surroundings of the Persian court, probably after the main return of the Jews from exile. It is a story of how God's people—the remainers who were settled in their foreign surroundings—were threatened by a plot to annihilate them, and were saved through the actions of two of their number—Esther herself and her cousin Mordecai. God may not be mentioned, but the actions of these two are clearly informed by him. God's hand is on the events that proceed, and his providence for his people hinges on Esther's responsibility and willingness to act because of her position.

The Reflect sections seek to connect with personal experiences, while the Apply sections extend that experience and the passages' narrative into prayer. It is my prayer that whether you know this story well or are less familiar with it, you will meet with God and find his help as we seek to please him, our King.

THE LAMB WINS

To most of us, Revelation does anything but reveal!

It seems to cloud events with imagery and story sequencing that confuse our western preferences for clear, journalistic accounts and neat, straight storylines. So understanding it as its intended readers would have done requires more work from us than some other Bible books might require. It is written in a style called apocalyptic, which was common from roughly 200 B.C. to A.D. 150; we have to translate from Greek to English, from there and then to here and now, and from ancient apocalyptic writing to modern western reading.

The effort is breathtakingly worth it. Revelation radiates with hope, encouragement, and the captivating, awesome glory of God. We'll try to decode the imagery briefly as we go. As far as the historical setting is concerned, John probably saw his visions around A.D. 95, when Rome was the new Babylon, Domitian was emperor and the church was being persecuted.

Despite its complexities, Revelation has a remarkably simple and constantly recurring message: 'The glorious Lamb wins, so all who are in him will win. Don't give up and don't be deceived. Stay faithful to Jesus and keep your eyes on the dazzling destination.' It's a profoundly pastoral message. Everything is written to help you persevere.

So, since we are reading Revelation devotionally, each day make Jesus' seven-fold bidding in chapters 2 and 3 your prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, give me ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches."