

Ezekiel was a young priest who also happened to be a young prophet when he was dragged off to Babylon in 597 B.C. during the second of four deportations. Like Jeremiah, he had an unenviable task: preaching about an angry God to a bunch of unwilling listeners. His visions are among the most spectacular in all the Old Testament, and his message, like that of many other prophets, was one of present judgment and future restoration. His prophecy contains the most comprehensive delineation of the end time restoration of Israel in all the Old Testament.

The Book of Acts is the transitional link between the Messiah and the church that he founded. As the second of a two-part literary work by Luke to Theophilus, it showcases the exploits of the men commissioned by Jesus to evangelize the world. Miracles and mass salvations punctuate its contents. The tipping point sits in chapter 9 with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, who figures prominently from that point on. Another high point is chapter 15, which features the first council of the Christian Church. The book ends with Jewish uncertainty over this new movement and a bright future for all interested Gentiles.

Few, if any, Old Testament books are more hotly disputed than Daniel, due mainly to the alleged inability of a 6th-century Hebrew slave to predict forthcoming world events with such startling accuracy. Indeed, the teenage slave from Jerusalem who lived to be an old man in faraway Persia was privileged to receive some of the most sensational revelations about the future ever given by God. His faithfulness to his God all his days stands as a shining example to all generations of believers. Even an angel from heaven called him “a man greatly beloved.” Truly, Daniel was one in a million.

Revelation is unlike any other book in the Bible. As Genesis opens God’s Bible, this book closes it. It includes a blessing to those who study it and a curse to those who add to it. Written by John probably during the mid-90s, it purports to unveil God’s end time plan. Much of it is difficult to understand, and it presents a challenge to anyone undertaking a serious attempt to put it all together. But it is a profitable book which discloses what God has planned for both the righteous and the wicked as He winds down His involvement with planet earth.

The melancholy monarchy saga continues in 2 Kings, which opens with the ignominious death of Ahaziah, son of Ahab. The book chronicles the slow and steady descent of the northern kingdom into captivity at the hands of the Assyrians. Wicked king follows wicked king, many of them assassinated. The coroner’s report is found in chapter 17—cause of death: idolatry. Judah’s demise at the hands of the Babylonians also receives treatment. One bright spot in the book is Elisha, and practically everything we know of him is confined to 2 Kings.

Oh, foolish Galatians! It seems that many of the Christians in the churches of Galatia were falling victim to well-meaning but misguided teachers who were leading these believers away from Paul’s Gospel of faith and into the Old Testament law. Paul was none-too-happy about it. The Gospel, says Paul, provides what the law cannot: justification before God. This epistle, though heavy on doctrine, also contains practical advice on how to live the Christian life. Gentiles saved by faith find this epistle especially encouraging.

## EZEKIEL

### GLORY AND JUDGMENT

The only information about Ezekiel we have is in this book. He probably came from a priestly family, making him eligible for the priesthood (1:3). His name means 'may God strengthen' – very apt, given the demanding nature of the prophetic ministry to which he was called. He shared his fellow prophets' concerns about Israel's idolatry and failure to rely on God, but uniquely focused on Israel as the holy people of the holy temple, the holy city and holy land. More than any other prophet, he used prophetic symbolism to communicate his message to a demoralized people.

This book contains more dates than the other prophetic books, from which we learn that Ezekiel exercised his ministry over 22 years against a backdrop of exile with his fellow Jews to Babylon, by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C. Jerusalem subsequently fell, and another wave of exiles joined them. If we think about current situations in which people are fleeing their own countries, we can get an idea of the setting in which he spoke, the trauma further exacerbated for the Jews by the growing belief that God had forsaken them. By using more prose than poetry (unusual for prophetic books), Ezekiel enacts and shares a series of overwhelming visions. Their messages powerfully depict the grandeur and glory of God's sovereign rule but are heartbreaking in their promise of judgment, the fall of Jerusalem, and the removal of God's glory (chs 1–24). Yet despite this, woven into the later chapters are wonderful promises of restoration.

Daily scenes on our TV screens make real the brutality of war and its impact, giving us tough things to grapple with when reading Ezekiel's words concerning God's love and judgment. Lastly, note the description of the strengthening and equipping role of the Spirit of God in Ezekiel's life. That same Holy Spirit now lives in each Christian today to empower, equip, and encourage us.

*Fran Beckett*

### FOR FURTHER READING

Christopher Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel*, IVP, 2001; an informative and readable commentary

## ACTS 24–28

### PAUL THE MISSIONARY-PRISONER

The book of Acts is an inspiring story about the growth and expansion of the nascent Christian church, along with the exploits and trials of some of its main leaders. Its readers get caught up in the drama and excitement of the stories, including miracles, dramatic encounters, imprisonment, and even shipwreck. We are challenged to think about our own lives and spiritual communities – there is much to emulate here and much that should leave us hungry for change and growth. Acts is a provocative, encouraging, and motivating narrative.

The final chapters of Acts are the least known and most often ignored sections of this great narrative. There is much less of the great apostolic preaching here and noticeably fewer of the powerful miracles that are so common in earlier sections. Instead of churches being triumphantly planted, we see Paul in prison, on trial, and transferred to stand before various authorities. The contrast between these final sections and the earlier narrative is somewhat jarring at first glance. Even the ending doesn't really end – after moving toward a cosmic confrontation between Paul and Caesar, the narrative simply stops. What are we to make of this strange conclusion? What does the author purport to teach through these extended trial narratives?

Over the next two weeks we shall see that these episodes are rich in theology and contemporary relevance. Even the ending is a literary device, designed with a purpose in mind. The author of Acts is extremely careful in the way he crafts this masterpiece of missionary adventure, particularly in how he intentionally displays Paul as not just a missionary but a missionary-prisoner. The author is insistent that our theology include not simply triumph in mission and expansion, but also suffering and seeming defeat. It is precisely Paul's imprisonments and trials that afford him the greatest platform for proclamation and the advancement of the gospel.

*Daniel McGinnis*

### FOR FURTHER READING

My favorite Acts commentary is that of Ben Witherington, an excellent and accessible resource. Craig S Keener's *Exegetical Commentary* is indispensable for any serious student of Acts.

## DANIEL 1–9

### QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

Apart from the vivid stories of ‘The Fiery Furnace’ and ‘The Lions’ Den’, Daniel is something of a closed book for many Christians. This may be because there are so many questions about the meaning of the book’s dreams and visions: for example, ‘Which empires are represented by the statue in chapter 2? Are they the same as the beasts in chapter 7?’ Unfortunately, these questions may keep us from engaging with the more important question and theme of the book: ‘How do I live as a faithful follower of God in a society which is fundamentally opposed to such belief and lifestyle?’ I know of no other book in the Bible which provides such insight into this question and such inspiration for us to live out the answer.

Scholars engage in questions of authorship and dating of Daniel, which may also distract us from the main thrust of the book. The traditional view is that the book was written in the period in which the stories are set, the sixth century BC, the time of Israel’s exile in Babylon and its aftermath. In contrast, the revisionist view is that the book was compiled in the second century BC to encourage Jews to stand against the oppression they were facing under the invading king, Antiochus Epiphanes. These debates make very little difference to how we interpret the book and to how God may speak to us through it.

Christians in today’s world face two kinds of pressure from living in societies that reject our faith. In some countries, there is obvious and severe persecution, as under Antiochus; this is illustrated by some events in Daniel. In other countries, the pressure is the subtle temptation to conform to the prevailing culture, losing what is distinctive about our discipleship; this scenario is also addressed in the book, as Daniel and his friends try to be faithful to God and influentially involved in a pagan society. Let’s learn from them as we and they grapple with these vital questions!

*Paul Oakley*

## REVELATION 1–9

### I AM COMING SOON

The letter of Revelation is unique and has so much to say, yet many feel an aversion to it. We should understand that it is not John's revelation but that of Jesus Christ to his servants (1:1). We will encounter seven churches, seals, and trumpets, seven being a repeated number representing perfection and completeness: Jesus' aim for his church.

The churches in the late first century were being persecuted to varying extents. Some believers paid with their lives, others were expected to worship Jesus and Caesar or have their businesses destroyed. Then, as now, standing for Christ was costly and we find hope and challenge in these chapters. The church faced internal issues too, not unlike today, and her challenges and victories may inspire us. The church remains in the world and must deal with the enemy's attacks upon her, while in the heavens there is an ongoing spiritual battle.

I have approached Revelation from an eclectic angle, combining elements of different interpretations and finding merits and limitations in each: 'idealist', about general principles; 'futurist', about the end times; 'preterist', about interpreting it in light of first-century events. The letter is written to seven specific churches who are to receive a blessing for their obedience. The literal stands out, but so does the symbolic: in some places it is even explained. 'The visions are to confront us with God's demands and promises – not to satisfy our curiosity about minute end-time details.' Revelation offers hope, as we glimpse heaven's glories. Jesus said, 'I will build my church, and the gates of death will not overcome it'. These passages challenge complacency. We see how powerful prayer is. Finally, we are left with the humbling thought that, after all we have done, he washes away our sin, gives us undeserved white robes, and incorporates us into his plan of redemption.

*Andy Robinson*

### FOR FURTHER READING

Eugene Boring, *Interpretation – Revelation*, John Knox Press, 1989

Robert Wall, *New International Biblical Commentary – Revelation*, Paternoster Press, 1991

Craig Keener, *The NIV Application Commentary – Revelation*, Zondervan Press, 2000

## 2 KINGS

### LEARNING FROM THE PAST

For the next three weeks we shall be reading about the divided monarchy (Israel and Judah) from about 850 to 587 BC, covering almost 300 years. Israel and Judah were on the main trade routes between north (Assyria, later Babylon) and south (Egypt) and thus often a battleground for control. Moreover, their lands depended heavily on rain (rather than irrigation through the flooding of rivers, like in Egypt) and were more susceptible to droughts and famine. Both politically and agriculturally they were vulnerable and faced two choices. Either they trusted God for protection and provision, or they looked for political alliances and worshipped the gods who might better ensure rain (the storm god, Baal) and fertility (Asherah).

As we begin, we encounter a series of incidents clustered around Elisha the prophet (chs 2–5), highlighting the importance of trust in God and his provision for the faithful. Our focus then shifts to the kings of Israel and Judah, mainly following the storyline of Judah. Israel's Assyrian captivity (722 BC) is recounted in chapter 17, which reflects on the nation's lack of trust in God as a kind of warning for Judah that unless it repents, the same fate awaits. The need for trust and faithfulness continues as king replaces king and Judah is increasingly threatened from the north. The reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah stand out as positive examples of prosperity when the king trusts and obeys his divine boss. Hezekiah trusts God, so Jerusalem escapes an Assyrian attack in 701 BC (chs 18,19). In the course of Josiah's temple renovation, 'the Book of the Law' is discovered (22:8), leading to the wholesale cleansing of the land from other gods and a great renewal (622 BC).

In the end, however, the worship of other gods is too ingrained, and Judah ends up in Babylonian exile (587 BC). While this is a tragedy beyond belief, the book ends with the release of the last Davidic king from prison, giving hope. If the people submit to God's discipline and learn from the past, there is still a future for them.

*Csilla Saysell*

## GALATIANS

### THE MAGNA CARTA OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

Paul was an urban church planter and pastoral theologian who wrote to the churches for which he felt responsible – some of which had actually been founded by him. Christianity, as it grew in the first century, faced various challenges and conflicts. Paul's aim was to resolve disputes and promote Christ-like thinking and living in these churches. Galatians is a magnificent, passionate letter that goes to the heart of Christianity. Paul founded the churches in south Galatia during his first missionary journey, and probably wrote this circular letter around AD 48–49, just before the crucial Jerusalem council.

This letter is prompted by reports that the Galatians are in danger of turning away from the true gospel that Paul has preached to them. What is at issue in Galatians is not Paul's apostolic status but the gospel itself! The crisis in Galatia was caused by the arrival of a group of Judaizers – Jewish Christians who tried to establish the Jewish way of life as the norm. These new arrivals tried to impose on the Galatian believers some requirements of the Mosaic Law – especially circumcision (5:2–6; 6:12,13) but perhaps also other requirements such as observance of the Jewish calendar (4:10) and food restrictions (2:11–14).

While Paul's opponents in Galatia probably acknowledged that faith in Christ is the way to be saved, they propagated adherence to the Mosaic Law in order to remain saved. Paul, however, argues that obligatory law-keeping is no longer required of a Christian, since it would involve losing the freedom and salvation that Christ has won. Instead, Paul asserts that one should continue in salvation through the same faith with which one started and by keeping in step with the Spirit. For Paul, living by the Law and following Christ are incompatible. A new community of Jews and Gentiles has appeared, united in Christ and not under the Mosaic Law. As we go through Galatians, we will consider the nature of our freedom and how we can enjoy it properly.

*Cornelis Bennema*

## DEUTERONOMY

### REMEMBER THE COVENANT

Deuteronomy begins where Numbers ends, on the plains of Moab. It stays there until the very end. The picture remains frozen, while Moses speaks on... and on... and on...

God's people are assembled on the threshold of the Promised Land. Their sin has lengthened a straightforward 11-day journey into 40 years of meandering in the wilderness. The older generation has passed away; only Moses, Joshua, and Caleb remain. After the fall of communism, playwright Vaclav Havel undertook the task of leading Czechoslovakia in finding its feet as an independent nation. He said it felt like 'a parent trying to teach an unruly bunch of children how to behave as adults'. Moses probably felt the same!

Having lost their heart's desire through disobedience, the Israelites now stand poised to gain it – that land flowing with milk and honey – but they stand on dangerous ground. Their gravest danger would be forgetfulness of God's faithfulness, leading to unfaithfulness to the covenant. The overarching theme of Deuteronomy, therefore, is covenant renewal. Moses repeatedly (at least a dozen times) exhorts the people to 'Remember!' They are to remember, both to avoid past mistakes and as an encouragement to trust God for their future. But 'the simple act of remembering would require daily acts of concentration', so remembrance is woven into the fabric of everyday life: the Shema (6:4–9, 20–25); the feasts (16:16); the ritual of the first-fruits offering (26:5–10); writing the laws (27:1–8); even a song (32:1–43)! The psalmist declared, 'Your decrees are the theme of my song wherever I lodge'. If covenant renewal is Moses' theme song, wholehearted obedience is its refrain. Both then and now, it is through obedience that God's people must give expression to their love and loyalty.

*Tanya Ferdinandusz*

### FOR FURTHER READING

JA Thompson, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Deuteronomy*, IVP, 1974

Gordon McConville, *New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition*, OM Books, 2001

Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*, OM Books, 2000, p75–105