

INTRODUCTION

"I should've done..." "I shouldn't have said..." Have you ever experienced the gnawing remorse that comes from a breached relationship? You long to live in unbroken harmony once again, but you don't know where to start? We have all been born into a broken relationship with our Creator God. And the story of the Bible is all about God's plan to rebuild the relationship between humankind and himself so that we can one day live eternally in His presence – reconciled to a holy God.

One day soon, Jesus is coming back. The final chapters of the book of Revelation give a tiny glimpse of what is to come when this world ends and Jesus our Savior ushers in our new and perfect forever home where we will finally be reconciled to God, seeing Him face to face, finally resurrected into the perfect image of Christ. Come Lord Jesus! Will you be ready to meet Him?

Even as we visit Proverbs, we are reminded that God's design all along has been for us to truly know Him. God has given us His wisdom so that we may follow in our Father's footsteps; He has given us Jesus, the God-man, so that we can access heavenly wisdom and know and be known by our Creator.

As we see in the book of Luke, this Jesus came once before, not as the conquering King that He will return as, but as a human, facing the same hurts and pains and struggles that we live each day. Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, became man, teaching us how to live, how to follow the Father. He lived, sweated, cried, bled and died for all, so that we could be reconciled to God.

In his teachings, Jesus shared the Father's heart of longing desire that all should come to repentance and be reconciled to Himself. He showed and shared what the Kingdom of God is all about and how to get there by laying down our desires to serve the King. Jesus showed his great love for us by serving the lowest of the low each day and by ultimately laying down His life for each of us. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus would conquer death once and for all and open the way for us to be made right with God.

We see in the journey to Emmaus the thread of God's plan all along to bring mankind back to Him—to weave our hearts inextricably with His until we are one with Him forever.

Our journey continues with a heart-wringing cry for God's people to return to Him in the books of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. The prophets urge us to remember God's goodness, turn away from our own ways and be made new by the Spirit of God. You are never too far – He has chosen you as His child and the desire of His heart is to be in unbroken fellowship with you. Will you come with all your heart?

In this Christmas season, even as Matthew tells of the Magi bearing gifts and bowing in worship, let us come before the throne of God and bow our hearts. Allow the Lord to cleanse and renew you to prepare you for that glorious Day of the Lord when He will return again. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20).

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.

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 BC to AD 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 AD 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."

HOW TO LEAD A GOD LIFE

We have to contend with a mixed bag of people in this world! There are wise children; foolish children; uncaring rich; undeserving poor; those unwilling to work; the industrious; scheming officials; concerned fathers; joyful mothers; noisy neighbors; the promiscuous; the tight-fisted; the unhappily married; honest friends; greedy materialists; lying flatterers; others without self-control and those who cynically mock all of the above! These sound like character types in a gripping contemporary Netflix drama but they populate the ancient pages of Proverbs, not as entertainment but for warning and instruction.

Since these moral poems and punchy sayings were compiled to educate young Hebrews, people have become no less concerned with what it means to live a good life. Today, many see it as an individualistic project, but how can goodness be good if it goes selfishly unshared? Ultimately, Proverbs isn't interested in promoting *goodness* as distinct from *godliness*. Wisdom is the evidence of godliness here. It isn't an exercise in developing critical powers to become an independent authority; it's so we know who to depend on and how (3:5, 6). To be wise is to know God and his ways.

Our Creator is Father of all; sinner and righteous alike are made in his image and receive common grace to enjoy his world. He made it with wisdom at its foundation (3:19). Will we look into his “perfect law that gives freedom,” choose to work it out in real-life situations and receive the promised blessing (James 1:25)? Our answer has consequences for ourselves and our world.

THERE COULD BE TROUBLE AHEAD

Like a closed door opening, these chapters mark a change of direction for Jesus. We will encounter Him in a variety of settings, engaged with all kinds of people and yet these readings also show a man focused on His destiny. He turns His face towards Jerusalem (9:51) knowing all that is in store for Him and he refers explicitly to His death and resurrection on two occasions (9:21, 22, 44, 45). And dividing these statements is an event so profound and dramatic that Peter is reduced to babbling (9:28–36). But it's also Peter who introduces this sequence of readings by announcing Jesus' identity while all His colleagues are still scratching their collective heads.

Jesus is not, though, obsessed with the future. Some of His most famous words and parables crop up in these passages – all flavored by Jesus' self-understanding of His work in Jerusalem. He's also living in the moment. His sustained plea to avoid the twin pitfalls of anxiety and fear (12:22–34) have a contemporary feel. Trusting God mindfully in every situation is as fresh today as it was then. He applies this perspective in all kinds of ways. He sends out His followers to announce the arrival of a new kingdom, telling them not to take anything for the journey but to travel light. As we read these passages, we are left with the sense of a man living authentically and urging His followers to do the same. He has no stomach for pretense or fake spirituality, urging us to trust God and share our lives fully with others. So sit tight; there could be trouble ahead.

UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM

Over the next three weeks, Penelope Swithinbank and David Lawrence help us to think about God's kingdom through chapters 13-18 of the Gospel of Luke.

First, Penelope Swithinbank opens this series on Luke's writings (chs 13-17) bringing into focus the nature of this upside-down kingdom of God. It is a kingdom where the broken-hearted and lost are welcomed and restored; it is a kingdom where humility and generosity are 'prodigal' (extravagant). It is a kingdom where God is sovereign, and obedient choice is the response which enables us, by God's grace, to enter through the 'narrow door' (Luke 13:24).

In his reflections on chapters 17 and 18 of Luke, David Lawrence draws out what it means to follow Jesus faithfully in God's kingdom. Here there is challenge that requires honesty and openness with God. How much are we willing to spend time listening to God? How far are we willing to go in truly giving up all for Jesus? David draws out the paradoxes of God's kingdom: it's about humility not status; poverty is wealth; blindness leads to sight.

And in it all is Jesus our King, who only asks us to follow where he has gone before. In laying down our lives for him, we discover the love of God for ourselves – and for others. How can we live today so that this upside-down kingdom of God is seen in our own lives and more widely in our troubled world?

THE KING IS COMING!

As we look towards the incarnate King of Christmas, our readings over the next two weeks give us other glimpses of the coming King.

We see Jesus shortly before His death on the cross, arriving in Jerusalem, hailed as a king by the ordinary people... but challenged over His authority and with some unexpected ideas about His kingship.

The Jerusalem we enter with Jesus has all the color, vibrancy, intrigue, and seething volatility of a center of political and social unrest. Thousands are making the pilgrimage to the holy city for the Passover festival. The sense of excitement and anticipation is tangible. Will this be the year the longed-for Messiah returns to rescue them? That hope is soured by strong undercurrents of disillusionment. They feel keenly the oppressive Roman rule, with crippling taxes keeping them in poverty.

The religious leaders are feeling threatened by this itinerant miracle-working teacher who has the crowds eating out of His hands. And the Roman overlords have responded with extra troops on the streets, watchful for signs of rebellion, ready to act.

What will the King want to communicate in His last few precious and turbulent days on earth?

We'll find words of warning and cutting censure for the religious leaders; but also words of challenge and encouragement to the twelve and to the people gathered to listen in the Temple precincts.

May His words speak to us afresh as we prepare to celebrate Christmas and the baby born to be King!

THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD

Before us lie three chapters that trace the most momentous events in human history, pulsating with life, crowded with characters – the good, the bad, and the very ugly. Can I suggest that you begin by reading the whole narrative in one go? Twenty minutes should do it. Then over the next nine days we will come “up close and personal” to pull the meaning out of these chapters. For me, it is a great privilege to be walking with you through Holy Week and Easter. Please don’t linger on my notes, but let them be a window leading you more deeply into the text, into the mind of Luke, and into the heart of the mystery of the cross and resurrection.

So what about Doctor Luke? As well as being a medical man he was a careful historian (Luke 1:1-4). He was no dry academic, but a committed disciple with a passion to proclaim the truth of Jesus, and with a big vision of Jesus, the Savior of the world (19:10). In reading Luke, your mind will be informed and your heart warmed.

One other thing. At the center of the narrative stands Jesus our Lord. In the first two chapters it seems that He is at the mercy of events and people, pushed this way and that. It is not so. Always He is the one in control, resolutely bringing redemption to a lost and broken world – and offering that redemption once more to you and me.

A GOD WHO WON'T LET GO

A friend often asks me to envisage the future: “How would you like things to look in three or twelve months’ time?” His questions provoke the imagination and provide motivation.

The books of Haggai and Zechariah are full of God’s future intentions. We’re asked to imagine a world where God reigns, to set our hearts on it, and to bring our present lifestyle into line with it. We imagine a New Jerusalem, a renewed Israel and a rebuilt Temple (destroyed in 587 BC). Nations are shaken, enemies are crushed or, miraculously, they come to worship in God’s city. Peace is established, and God is present, protecting His precious people (Haggai 2:6–9; Zechariah 8).

The background to these books is the return of the people from exile in Babylon (538 BC). Haggai begins his prophecies in 520 BC with a challenge to complete the postponed building of the Temple. Zechariah is Haggai’s contemporary but serves longer. He presents eight visions (Zechariah 1–6) and two “sermons” in his first eight chapters, all probably prior to the completion of the Temple (518 BC).

Chapters 9–14 have no clear dating and follow no obvious pattern as they reflect on spiritual leadership, the sinfulness of the nation, and God’s determined, loving commitment to His people. There are external enemies of God (Zechariah 9:1–8), but the grievous thing is internal opposition (Zechariah 7) – people who should have been chastened by the Exile remain deaf to God.

Here, there are warnings aplenty for us, but also the promise of restoration, glory and peace.

JESUS IS COMING ...

We end the year reading the last chapters of the Old Testament and the first ones of the New Testament – but not in that order, because Christmas interrupts! Between Malachi and Matthew there are 400 years when it seems that God is silent. And then... Matthew introduces Jesus the Messiah by way of His genealogy.

Emlyn Williams leads us through Matthew's account of the nativity. He brings new insights, and challenges us once again to reflect on God's gift of Jesus, and what we can offer Him. The familiar Christmas narrative repeatedly echoes the big story of God and His people. Careful reading prompts fresh perspectives – yes, God has a plan, which is good news for all people.

John Grayston helps us look back at Malachi's part in this story. This prophet was operating around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah – centuries before the coming of Jesus. Despite the return from exile, hopes had not been realized and the people of Israel were cynical and disillusioned. Yet, in spite of the bleakness of some of Malachi's words, there are glorious glimpses of hope and healing in God's promise that the Messiah would come.

As we celebrate the first coming of Jesus this Christmas season, like God's people of the past, we also live in troubled times. As a new year begins, we look forward with hope to our coming King. Let's pray with our brothers and sisters around the world, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."