

The Book of Revelation is a roadmap for all interested parties about how life on this planet will change at the climax of history, and change radically. Its star attraction is the Lamb, a word found a whopping 30 times, more than any other book outside of Numbers. In Revelation, the Lamb vanquishes all enemies and emerges as King of kings, the absolute Ruler of the new world. And the devil finally gets his due at the end. Although much of its language is difficult to understand, it remains the gold standard of apocalyptic literature.

Proverbs is God's prescription for how to live life skillfully, maximizing one's benefit during this life. It is a member of the wisdom literature, along with Job and Ecclesiastes. As such, it does not deal with Israel's heritage as much as the features of everyday life: sound speech, hard work, listening to good advice, remaining honest in our dealings, etc. This book contains more occurrences of the word "fool" than any two books in the Bible combined. A roadmap for sensible living during any point in human history, it remains one of the most popular books in the Bible.

The Gospel of Luke is the longest of the four at about 1,147 verses. With the possible exception of the author of Job, Luke is the only non-Hebrew writer of any book in the Bible. A true scholar, his Greek is the most polished of all the NT books, and he presents an astounding 266 Greek words found nowhere else in the NT. Most conservative scholars feel that the author of this third gospel and the beloved physician of Colossians 4:14 are the same person. As such, he was a companion of Paul on certain missionary enterprises. The Jesus he portrays for us is the friend of the outcast, the downtrodden, and the socially undesirable. Finally, Luke gives women more face time than any of the other three.

Haggai, a companion of Zechariah, wrote in the year 520 B.C. Having returned from the Babylonian exile, the rebuilding of the temple has begun, but remains interrupted. Interest has waned. Everybody is now watching HGTV, and God's people have become fixated upon remodeling their own homes and forgetting about God's. Haggai rebukes them, pulling no punches: forget your kingdom and get on with God's. The prophecy ends on a note of general blessing if they heed the call of the prophet.

Zechariah begins his ministry two months later than Haggai. Reminding them of what happened to former generations, he sternly advises them to get in line and tow the line. Some of Zechariah was fulfilled during the 20th century, but much of it remains to be fulfilled. This is Israel's Book of Revelation. In rebuilding the temple, Israel is building its future. One day Messiah will arrive and deal with not only Israel, but the entire world.

Malachi in Hebrew means "my messenger." A contemporary of Nehemiah, Malachi is a messenger with a tart message: correct some of your ways, or else. The years have taken their toll on commitment. Divorce, playing church, withholding the tithe, and even a touch of arrogance have infected the community. The book ends with mention of the great and dreadful of the Lord. It's final word in both Hebrew and English is "curse."

Matthew wrote the second longest gospel at 1,071 verses. This gospel is a gift to all Jews seeking more information about the Messiah. It is a thoroughly Jewish gospel. Here, Jesus is the Son of David and the fulfillment of OT prophecy. "Have you not so much as read..." is a favorite question of Matthew's Jesus. And Matthew mentions the Sadducees more times than the other three times two. This gospel may be summarized by the question posed in 12:23.

REVELATION

THE TRIUMPH OF GOD

“The book of Revelation is not written to satisfy our curiosity but to stimulate our holiness. It was written when the church was under attack, both by persecution from the Romans and through sin and error from within. Conscious of their weakness, the author of this book wrote it to put heart into God’s people of every age. The underlying message, told in a variety of colorful ways, is that, despite appearances, God remains on the throne and in the end wins! This is a revelation by God of Jesus Christ to the church. It purports to enable us to know Jesus better and in a fuller way, not to give us a coded timetable of the end of the age. It contains a picture gallery of Jesus, sometimes depicted in ways we have never seen Him before.”

“Although I have taken one way (among several) of interpreting this book, I hope that most of what I write is applicable to all, whichever approach you favor. I believe this book speaks both to the time in which it was written and also to all ages of the church. The writer covers the whole of the last days – i.e., the time between Christ’s first and second comings – in a variety of cycles (chapters 1–3; 4–7; 8–11; 12–14; 15–19; 20–22), each one coming to a climax with the victory of God and the defeat of evil (eg., Michael Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened*, third edition, IVP, 1991; John Stott, *Basic Introduction to the New Testament*, Eerdmans, 2017). In earlier notes on this book we have seen Christ supervising His churches on earth and sharing God’s throne in heaven. We take up the story where He is controlling the course of history. We see Him calling a world to repentance, riding on a white horse to judgment, sitting on a great white throne, and promising to come back soon to claim His bride. Never forget that the ‘friend of sinners’ is also the Lord Christ and that our Savior is also the Judge. We need a Savior because without Him, we would not escape judgment. The good news of the gospel shines all the brighter against the darkness of evil.”

PROVERBS 19–27

WISDOM IN OUR DAILY LIVES

The purpose of the book of Proverbs is to instruct the youth of Israel in wisdom and the fear of the Lord (1:2–7). The book is divided into five sections – chapters 1–9; 10:1 – 22:16; 22:17 – 24:34; chapters 25–29; and chapters 30 and 31. It contains two major genres: instruction and sayings. Being explicitly didactic, the “instructions” are longer poems in the form of instructions delivered by a parent or teacher to a child or student. They are characterized by frequent imperatives, motivations (“for” or “because”), conditionality (“if”) and consequences. Instructions can be found in chapters 1–9, 22:17 – 24:22 and chapters 30 and 31. The “sayings” are short wisdom sentences in the form of two contrasting half-verses, usually addressed to an audience in the third person. Shorter sayings can be found in 10:1 – 22:16; 24:23–34 and chapters 28 and 29. Alert readers can spot a mixture of instructions and sayings in chapters 25–27.

The readings for this week are taken from chapters 19–27, in which both instructions and sayings will be studied. Readers often find the sayings a bit challenging, because the connection between individual sayings is not obvious. Catchwords, repetition, comparison, contrast, metaphors, and imageries can give us clues as to the clustering. Chapters 1–9 lay the foundation for the discussions in chapters 10–31. In the first nine chapters, the two women (Wisdom and Folly: 1:20–33; 8:1–36; 9:1–6, 13–18) and two paths (right and wrong: eg., 1:10–15; 2:6–8, 12–15; 4:10–19) are set forth for the young to choose. For the practical issues in chapters 10–31, the young are still challenged to acquire wisdom and stay on the right path.

LUKE 12-13:9

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

The title for the following studies is borrowed from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classic work *The Cost of Discipleship*, first published in Germany in 1937. Intended as an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, this writing was penned at a time when the need to resist the pressure to conform and to remain focused on Christ could not have been greater. It is well known that Bonhoeffer's own determination to follow Christ would eventually lead to his martyrdom in Flossenburg concentration camp in April 1945. The opening words of the book are 'Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace'. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Reprint, SCM Press, 1959, p. 35) Bonhoeffer embodied what he proclaimed, as did the Lord who was his inspiration.

Although these notes on Luke do not contain the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5–7 and Luke 6 for this), we are confronted with the fact that following Christ is the greatest challenge we will ever face. As He makes His way towards death and martyrdom (and much more) in Jerusalem ("for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!" – 13:33), Jesus calls His followers to tread in His steps, to give up everything for the sake of identification with Him. This challenge confronts all of us and is quite clear. Yet, how it gets worked out may be different for each one of us.

By following the Gospels closely, we can discern two circles of disciples, one inside the other. The inner circle consists of men and women (8:1–3) who quite literally follow Jesus on His preaching journeys. They include the twelve (9:1–6) and maybe the seventy-two (10:1). Their lifestyle was challenging. Beyond these were those who stay in their towns and villages, acting as the ones who "promote peace" (see 10:6) and as the multitudinous family of disciples who give needed support. Both circles are important. Whatever our calling, the challenge is the same: to offer up everything for Christ (Matthew 19:29).

LUKE 13:10-18:42

ON THE ROAD TO JERUSALEM

Most people today are focused on the destination – we don't know much about enjoying the journey. If we're honest, we may simply wish we could be wherever we're going already! Yet it's remarkable how much time Luke devotes to a journey – the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem (eg., Luke 9:51; 13:22; 17:11; 19:28,41). While Jesus is on the road, we see much of great significance about His life and teaching. Of course the destination, Jerusalem, is important – but so is the trip. It's often in the journey that we learn most about ourselves and about the God who leads us. One of the most exciting things about Luke's Gospel is the amount of material devoted to Jesus' ministry in Judea and Perea (Luke 9:51 – 19:27), consisting of His sayings and doings on the way to Jerusalem. Many of these passages have no parallel in any other Gospel. According to Luke's prologue (Luke 1:1–4), his content is based on his own careful investigations, drawn from the “eye witnesses and servants of the word” as his sources. These passages contain many rich stories which fill gaps in the Gospel narrative and serve to fill out our understanding of Jesus' life and ministry.

This particular material is predominantly made up of accounts of Jesus' teaching and discourses. Most of the parables found in Luke are found in this section, while it contains fewer of Luke's miracle stories. The focus is on the words of Jesus as He makes His way towards Jerusalem and the suffering and glory awaiting Him there. Luke's distinctive themes are prominent here, including a focus on the role of women and an interest in the poor.

Jesus loved to teach through parables, and these pages are replete with these symbolic stories which memorably illustrate truth. Yet only “those with ears to hear” (see 14:35) will understand their meaning. As we make our way through these stories, let us pray that God's Spirit will help us to interpret them wisely and to understand their implications for our lives today.

LUKE 19–21

JESUS, JERICO AND JERUSALEM

In Luke 19, Jesus (in Hebrew, Joshua) reaches the end of His long journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (See Luke 9:51). Before Jerusalem, He visits Jericho, not to destroy it as did God through the first Joshua (Joshua 6), but to seek and save its lost. Luke neatly uses His encounter with Zacchaeus, a rich chief tax-collector, to counterbalance the story of the rich ruler in Luke 18. Whereas the ruler becomes “very sad” at Jesus’ invitation (Luke 18:23), Zacchaeus willingly divests himself of his wealth and offers to pay generous reparations to his victims. Readers are challenged to identify with Zacchaeus. Juxtaposing this with the story of the beggar (Luke 18:35–43), Luke shows what salvation looks like for rich and poor alike. The ten-minas parable reinforces the challenge – kingdom people are to use whatever God has given them for His kingdom.

Much to the chagrin of some Pharisees, Jesus enters Jerusalem as King, heralded as such by followers. Showing His extraordinary compassion, He weeps over the city’s imminent destruction. Instead of summoning Israel’s leaders to His cause and launching a blitzkrieg on the Romans – as would be expected of the Messiah – Jesus drives sellers from the temple and debates with Israel’s elite. The dialogue is engaging as they antagonistically question His authority, Roman taxation, and resurrection. Jesus brilliantly evades their snares, counterpunching with His own questions, along with the parable of the tenants, Old Testament citations confirming resurrection, teaching about His messiahship, and warnings against the scribes.

After yet another lesson concerning wealth (21:1–4), Jesus foretells the temple’s destruction and how events climax upon His return (cf., Mark 13; Matt 24). Unlike Matthew, who adds a string of parables, Luke’s Jesus asserts that readers should expect a world full of woe as they await His return. Yet, as with the fall of Jerusalem soon to be fulfilled, His promise is sure, even if the date of His return is not. Meanwhile, we are to keep careful watch that we do not fall prey to temptation, but instead remain prayerful, strengthening ourselves for the day we meet Jesus and His Father.

LUKE 22–24

LUKE'S WINDOWS ON THE CROSS

Luke's passion narrative follows the same broad outline as the other gospels, but includes events that only he recounts – the interrogation of Jesus by Herod, the dying thief, the road to Emmaus, etc. There are many details which cannot be covered in short notes, so I recommend slowly reading the whole account before engaging it section by section.

A central theme is Jesus' innocent and righteous suffering and His ultimate vindication: "Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter His glory?" (24:26). The primary antagonists are the chief priests putting pressure on Pilate and also Herod playing a minor role. There is a strong undercurrent of irony here. Jesus is accused and condemned to death for claiming to be who He is: the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of the Jews – but it is precisely because of these roles that His path leads to the cross. He understands this in terms of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. He is a suffering Messiah whose victory is won on the cross. He is the Son who reveals the character of God through self-sacrifice.

The Passover is the key to the Master's personal understanding of His self-offering. The cross is the great liberation, freeing people for God. Jesus' death is an exodus event (Luke 9:31) but on a far greater scale. His victory on the cross is a defeat of the forces of evil – a larger battle rages. Satan, who tempted Jesus at the beginning, enters Judas and wants to sift the disciples like wheat. His original "if you are the Son of God" temptations are echoed in the chief priests' interrogation. The resurrection is the predicted but unexpected event which turns apparent tragedy into total triumph.

FOR FURTHER READING

RT France, Luke ("Teach the Text" series), Baker Books, 2013; for preachers and Bible study leaders

Tom Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, SPCK, 2016; for a full development of the Passover theme

HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH

ENCOURAGEMENT IN TOUGH TIMES

The detailed dates in Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 tell us that Haggai was active from 29 August to 18 December 520 BC. Zechariah began his ministry about two months after Haggai and his last dated oracle was delivered on 7 December 518. Some background to their ministry is given in Ezra 5 and 6. In 538, soon after defeating Babylon, Cyrus the Great of Persia allowed people who had been deported to Mesopotamia by the Babylonians to return to their homelands. A large group of Judean exiles returned to Jerusalem, intending to rebuild the temple. They laid the foundations, but the work stopped because of local opposition. Years passed. Nothing more was done until these two prophets began to challenge and encourage the returned exiles to complete the work. The new temple was thus completed in 515 under Zerubbabel, the civil leader, and the high priest Joshua. The background of the two oracles in Zechariah 9–11 and 12–14 is unclear. They are not attributed directly to Zechariah. A change in style, especially from prophecy to the use of apocalyptic imagery in 12–14, and the mention of Greece as an enemy (9:13) suggest that they may come from a later period.

Haggai and Zechariah addressed people facing tough times. There were crop failures, food shortages, economic hardship, and hostile neighbors. The hopes of re-establishing temple worship have been dashed. Rebellions in the Persian Empire in 522 probably inspired dreams of independence and messianic expectations, but these too were dashed when Darius I defeated the rebels. The prophets encourage the people not to be defeatist in what seems to be “the day of small things” (Zechariah 4:10), to quash their excuses, and to return to the task God gave them 18 years earlier. The prophets challenge the people to trust God, promising them God’s blessing if they cooperate. There is much here to encourage us as we seek to serve God.

FOR FURTHER READING

J. Goldingay and P. Scalise, *Minor Prophets II*, NIBC 18, Paternoster, 2009
Andrew E. Hill, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, TOTC 28, IVP, 2012

MATTHEW 1 AND 2; MALACHI

UNIVERSAL DELIVERER

I once visited a remarkable mission in North India which had recruited 1,000 church planters. Each month they gathered for a full week to study a Bible book. The reason? Most of the church planters had been converted from a Hindu background; to teach others they needed to understand the Bible's story line – its big themes, its trajectory, and its purpose.

The readings which follow come from the last book in the Old Testament and the first in the New. Written 400 years apart, they are part of the same big story. We will see in Malachi's uncompromising message that God's people were in danger of drifting spiritually; Malachi looks forward to a day of both judgment and blessing. Matthew tells us that the Savior has come and that all the promises regarding the Messiah find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Matthew frequently records this in words like "All this took place to fulfill what was said through the prophet" (See Matthew 1:22; 2:5,15,17,23; 3:3; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:56; 27:9).

This is the central message of the scriptures. Martin Luther suggested that the Bible is the cradle in which we find the baby. Imagine a young mother bringing her newborn son to your church on Sunday. It would be very odd if you simply admired the stroller which held the child – "lovely upholstery, great color, frictionless wheels!" No, everyone's attention would be on the baby – we would want to see him. Luther's point is simple, but profound: the Scriptures are the place to encounter the Lord Jesus. No matter where you step into the Biblical story, the focus is always the same. The Old Testament is the story leading to the Messiah, so Matthew starts his Gospel with a list of Old Testament characters who point towards the one destination: Jesus Himself. He is the one whom the prophets predicted, whom Matthew announces and whom we now worship. As we turn the page from Malachi to Matthew, we discover that everything God promised is coming true! Let's rejoice in this one story and worship this one universal Deliverer!