

INTRODUCTION

What kinds of things do you find yourself doing for love? When I became a parent, I found myself doing all kinds of crazy things for love – rocking an ill child at all hours of the night; hearing the same songs over and over just because my children liked them; disciplining because I must, even when the sweet blue eyes were full of tears. Just imagine the love that our Father God has for us, a love that would sacrifice all for even those who hate and revile him. This kind of love leaves me speechless.

These upcoming readings are all intertwined with God's love for us and His call for us to love others. In 1 John we hear the Apostle John's injunctions for us to love one another, just as Christ loved us. In 2 John, the believers are encouraged to keep walking in obedience to God, which is our evidence of love to Him. In 3 John, Gaius is commended for his beautiful example of one who is faithful in his love toward God and his fellow believers. These letters to the early churches are all examples of how we as followers of Jesus can continue to walk in love, even as God loves us.

From John's letters, we travel back to the story and prophecies of Jonah. Although what jumps out in his story is the big fish, these four short chapters are all about the love and mercy of God. We see God's mercy extended to a vicious people who are the sworn enemies of God; we see Jonah's lack of love (bitter hatred it seems) for these people and God's loving guidance and discipline for His erring prophet.

From this missive of mercy, we go all the way back to the very beginnings of the world, where the God of the universe begins an epic love story with His creation, mankind, with whom He longs to live in an unbroken relationship. Through the fall of man and the broken relationship with Creator God, we receive God's promise of redemption – His promise that Love will win.

Through the unbelievable sin humankind engages in, the destruction of almost all of creation in the flood, and God's merciful beginning again with Noah and his family, we see the roots of God's redemption plan laid out. Even the scattering of the people at Babel leads us to dream of the day when all peoples will one day be brought together again from every tribe, nation, and tongue to praise the everlasting God.

As we draw closer to the Easter season, our journey of discovery leads us to the Gospel of Mark, to the beginning of Jesus' teachings. Throughout His life on earth, Jesus was the perfect example of God's love in action, teaching and exemplifying love in His every breath and movement, showing us how we must walk in love if we are to follow Him. As we journey on through the book, Mark will lead us to the climax of God's story of love and redemption, with Jesus, the God-man, making the ultimate sacrifice of love when He willingly lays down His life for His friends – and His enemies. Note: we begin with Mark 4 in order to highlight chapters 1-3 during the Advent season.

As we read over the next several weeks, let us reflect on the deep love of God and how we too can follow in His steps and live out our love for Him by sharing His great love with all around us.

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.

LETTERS TO GOD'S CHILDREN

I remember at school, one day a friend of mine, not particularly known for his interest in religion, saying of the chaplain, “Now he’s a real Christian.” Jeremy, the new chaplain, was indeed a delightful and good Christian person. But I was struck that he had somehow impressed my friend.

It raises a question: what should Christian believers be like? This is what these short letters from the end of the New Testament address. 1, 2 and 3 John have traditionally been attributed to the apostle John, the brother of James, the fishermen sons of Zebedee, and two of Jesus’ closest disciples. John, living to a great age, perhaps into his nineties, writes to “my dear children.” It seems he was exercising a sort of “elder statesman” role in and around Ephesus and was held in great esteem and affection.

John wants his readers to have an assured faith in the true Christ: to be resilient and Christ-like in a hostile world. Vital themes – such as loving and knowing, believing and obeying – are intertwined throughout the letters. We may think John is at times repeating himself, but when he returns to a thought previously mentioned, he usually takes it a bit further, bringing a fresh challenge. His writing is attractively simple (often just monosyllables in English!), but profound. He shines a light on what we believe and the life we live. Jude’s brief pastoral letter echoes John’s words, encouraging us to persevere in hostile times.

THE BIGGER HEART OF GOD

Bolting from one side of the known world to the other in a storm-besieged ship, being thrown overboard by desperate crew and held inside the belly of a huge fish... Jonah's fast-paced antics grab our attention.

But there is more to this story than a disobedient man inside a big fish. In Jonah we see God's action on the big stage of nations, whilst He simultaneously works in the heart of one man. It is not so much a story of Jonah, as of God's character and love for all those He created. Studying this book provides a unique window to understanding the desire of God's heart.

As we live in relationship with God, our faith will be reshaped and refined. Often this involves letting go of beliefs and values that hold us in old ways. This small but powerful book challenges both us and Jonah in just this way. We are asked to relinquish our "rules" that limit God and who we are becoming. God is in the process of transforming us into the likeness of Christ. Jonah did not run from God because he didn't believe in God. He fled God because he *did*.

Nineveh was not Jonah's first prophetic gig. God knew Jonah's faithfulness well. Jonah had spent years calling Israel to repent and believe. How God tracks alongside Jonah now suggests God's request was not only about Nineveh. It was also about the maturing transformation of His beloved, if reluctant, prophet. Such care awaits us also.

OPENING THE BOOK

Think of a movie's pre-credits sequence. Think of the prologue to a book or a film – set in a time long ago, in a galaxy far, far away... Think of the opening episode of a TV series. What do you see?

You see something spectacular, something memorable, something a little intriguing inviting you to keep watching or keep reading. Questions are asked whose answers will take time to arrive. Sometimes whole sets of characters come and go before the rest of the series settles down with longer-running more familiar characters.

There is a sense of a story beginning that someone – the author(s) – knows full well is going to develop across complex and multiple levels in pages and scenes and episodes to come. You relax and settle into reading/watching. You trust the storyteller to have reasons why we begin this way, but you know that the journey towards understanding will involve unexpected developments.

Welcome to Genesis 1-11! What we have just described is how these opening chapters of the Bible work. They are the “prologue.” The author (God) has an amazing big story planned, and though most of it won't involve Adam and Eve, or Cain and Abel, or Noah or Terah, the later characters to come will all in some way be related to these opening stories and their implications. Our chapters will raise more questions than they answer. But that's by design. It's to keep you reading on into the rest of the book. Ready?

GOD'S BIG PICTURE

Genesis is a book of beginnings, which extend beyond the creation story to God's revelation of His big plans for humanity. He will not remain remote from the people He has made, but will come to visit them. He will not issue law from on high without establishing a relationship in which His law can be explored. He will not show Himself in splendid form only to disappear, but will bind Himself by a special kind of promise to be the God of the people in the ordinary events of their lives.

When we revisit Genesis in the fall, we will learn that the series focuses mainly on Abram and his wife Sarai, whom God called to settle in the land of Canaan. On this adventure of faith they make great strides – and some colossal mistakes. They try to second-guess what God's plans are (never a wise thing to do), and sometimes seek to improve on God's way of doing things (always foolish!). But through it all, God is faithful to them as He is to us. This elderly couple receives the unlikely promise of a son, Isaac, and God proves Himself faithful. We will also read of Lot and his family. Abraham's nephew was a troubled soul who couldn't settle. But even as he lived life on the edge of obedience to God's way, God remained faithful to him.

The picture we have of God in these readings is of His covenant with us, which is firmly based on His steadfast and unconditional commitment to us, long before our fickle and conditional commitment to Him.

CHANGING THE WORLD

Want to change the world? Me too. And I guess Jesus' impetuous disciple Peter might have signed up for that as well.

Mark's Gospel – the earliest of the four – may well have been written by John Mark, one of Jesus' followers. He became Peter's assistant in Rome. With much of the narrative sounding like a first-hand account, perhaps Peter shared stories of his time with Jesus, and John Mark wrote them down.

Maybe the fact that the word “immediately” occurs so much in Mark reflects the way Peter was and how he told the story. Just a thought. He was an “immediate” kind of guy, responding quickly and decisively, even though his hasty actions sometimes meant things went awry later.

In chapters 3 to 6 of Mark, we see Jesus as a kind of action man – here, there, and everywhere, teaching and healing, though there's much more healing than teaching. But Mark also shows Jesus to be *our* “action God,” as heaven – or God's kingdom – breaks in on earth, and people's lives and understandings are changed beyond all recognition. Ultimately, of course, Jesus' death and resurrection change everything forever.

So, as we breathlessly chase after Jesus around the countryside of these four chapters, how can we join Him in changing the world? By letting Jesus surprise us all over again in these well-known stories and by allowing them to impact our own relationship with Him. That's where the changing of the whole world must begin.

NOTE: we begin with Mark 4 in order to highlight chapters 1-3 during the Advent season.

ON THE ROAD WITH JESUS

I appreciate the simplicity and directness in Mark's account of the life of Jesus. He doesn't waste words, and he gets straight to the point.

Over the next three weeks we will be on the road with Jesus. We will join the disciples as they traverse the countryside following the Master and learning from Him. We will walk with them from Galilee to Tyre and Sidon; from Bethsaida to Caesarea Philippi; and finally from Capernaum to Jericho as Jesus heads to Jerusalem for the last time.

We will be able to eavesdrop on their conversations, see Jesus at work in a variety of settings, and notice how people responded to His teaching and ministry. Above all, we will be watching how Jesus trained His disciples. Like us, they were slow learners, but the Master never lost patience with them.

As you read, you may like to ask two questions: "What am I learning here about Jesus?" and "How does this challenge my discipleship?"

You may be very familiar with the Gospel story so ask the Holy Spirit to make it fresh to you, to show you things you have not seen before. But most of all, pray for the grace to work into your life whatever truth is revealed to you so that you are living out your faith day by day. That is the best way to show we are true disciples.

THE COMING KING

Have you ever joined crowds to see an important visitor to your city – a celebrity or a national leader perhaps? Can you feel the excitement, hear the cheering? Are you standing on your tiptoes, straining your eyes to catch a glimpse? This is the atmosphere at the start of Mark 11, as Jesus enters Jerusalem.

Jesus’ “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem is the event we celebrate as Palm Sunday, one week before Easter Day. The Last Supper, which immediately preceded Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, comes in Mark 14, shortly after our passage. So our readings for the next two weeks actually cover a period of only a few days. Like many others, Jesus and His disciples had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Only Jesus was aware that the symbolism of the Passover lamb was about to be fulfilled in His sacrificial death.

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was the only time that He received public adulation fitting for a king. Throughout the rest of our readings He is being questioned; either by His disciples who want to understand, or by the Jewish leaders who hope to catch Him out and trip Him up.

As we read Mark 13, we will begin to see the returning King revealed: Jesus coming again in triumph. This time He will not just be riding a donkey into Jerusalem, but instead riding a white horse out of heaven for all the world to see (Revelation 19:11–16). He is the King of kings and He is coming again to reign. Let’s await Him eagerly, like the crowds as He entered Jerusalem.

THE SHOW MUST GO ON

Welcome to this series of *Discovery* as we walk with Jesus through the last few days of His earthly life. To most of us the storyline is familiar. What might be less familiar is how we feel about it and what the significance of it is for us 2,000 years on. Is it still relevant? Can the familiarity dull our senses as to what happened? Who is Jesus for us today? Can He save even us?

Three main themes run through our texts. Two are outlined on day one. In the statement “What a waste!” we are invited to reflect on the futility of it all, the loss of Jesus and what could have been. The narrative regularly throws up lost opportunities to change the world as Jesus walks nearer to the cross. The question “So how do we love?” calls us to reflect by observing how others loved Jesus... or didn’t, and how we go about loving Him now, 2,000 years on. What is our response?

The end of chapter 15 marks a transition and introduces an additional theme: “Believing what we see.” This is not just encouraging us to believe what we actually read, but looking and reflecting more deeply into the text and its significance. In this exploration, we discover that not even the failings of human nature could prevent God changing the world and bringing about a lasting transformation in the hearts of those who love Him through Jesus.