

GENESIS – Where do we come from? How did all this get here? What was the first cause? Genesis has the answers. God’s creative ability is the first sentence in the entire Bible. In Genesis we learn about the fall of mankind, our ensuing wickedness which occasioned the massive flood and God’s eventual “restart” with Noah.

JONAH – Along with Genesis and Daniel, Jonah is one of the most ridiculed books in the Bible thanks to several purely supernatural events that strain credulity for the unbeliever. The book’s star attraction, the prophet Jonah, is a mixed bag. Not known for obedience or compassion, he nevertheless ends up doing the will of God, if grudgingly. The eventual repentance of the Ninevites, to whom he is sent, owes more to the Lord’s mercy than to Jonah’s efforts. The book ends on an icy note: a strained exchange between the Lord and His still sulking prophet.

MARK – At 661 verses, Mark’s Gospel is the shortest. Yet, it is long on action. Where Matthew’s Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy, Mark’s Jesus specializes in action. Mark’s favorite word is *eutheos*, “immediately,” found an astonishing 36 times, more than Matthew and Luke combined. And whereas Matthew wrote for the Jew, Mark obviously wrote for the Gentile, probably the Roman. This explains his tendency to explain Jewish customs to the reader. It also explains the author’s tendency to translate Latin terms into Greek. Finally, we are eternally indebted to Mark for including an array of priceless details not included by the other three evangelists. (Note: We begin with Mark 4 in order to highlight chapters 1-3 during the Advent season).

1 JOHN – First John, like the other two epistles which bear his name, is set forth as anonymous. However, the style, vocabulary, themes, and simplicity have moved scholars for centuries to attribute all three to the apostle John. This first epistle purports to inoculate believers against certain strains of heretical viruses. The injection contains a heavy dose of Jesus: His divinity, His love, His forgiveness, eternal life, and other familiar Johannine themes. The epistle ends with a stern warning against idolatry.

2 JOHN – One of John’s favorite words, “truth”, is found five times in the first four verses of this little epistle. Doctrinal truth obviously weighs heavily on his mind. John is happy that the elect lady and her children, addressees of the letter, are walking in biblical truth. But not all are, as she is told. Many deceivers are active. The true doctrine of Christ is on the line. Although she is admonished to walk in love, she is also directed to avoid - to the point of appearing rude - anyone who perverts this cardinal doctrine of the still developing faith.

3 JOHN – Gaius, a friend and co-laborer with John, receives a commendation from John for helping traveling missionaries and a recommendation to continue. But the supposed pastor in the local church is Diotrephes, who suffers from a Napoleon complex. This renegade pastor is at odds with both Gaius and John and not afraid to demonstrate it. A public showdown may be forthcoming. Gaius is exhorted to imitate what is good, citing Demetrius as an example. The epistle ends with John’s fervent desire to reunite with his friend Gaius.

JUDE – Like the Johannine epistles, Jude purports to sound the alarm about the arrival of false teachers insinuating themselves into local congregations. One of his favorite words is “ungodly”, found five times in v.15 alone, among other places. Jude opens and closes his epistle with benedictions and encouragement for believers, but the middle deals with God’s posture toward evildoers.

PSALMS – The Book of Psalms remains the most popular book in the Bible. Its universal appeal has made it a permanent fixture in the hearts and minds of believers the world over. Several themes predominate in the book, but the over-arching theme seems to be that the Lord is worthy to be praised.

1–3 JOHN, JUDE

THE ELDER STATESMAN

1 John is anonymous and addresses no specified recipients. Yet, early patristic testimony unanimously attributes it to John the Apostle. It was probably circulated to Christians scattered throughout the Roman province of Asia, in modern western Turkey (see Smalley, 2014; Marshall, 1995).

John, son of Zebedee, is also the author of the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation. The similarities are evident, particularly with his Gospel. Both are written in simple Greek, using memorable contrasts such as life and death, light and darkness, love and hate, truth and lies. Many scholars have noted the many strikingly similar passages, so it is imperative to read John's letters in the light of his Gospel and to remember who this impressive author actually is. John was a young fisherman during Jesus' earthly ministry and, with Peter and James, was one of Jesus' innermost circle.

Most scholars date his letters around A.D. 90–95, based largely on testimony from early patristic writers and the early threat of Gnosticism which John opposes. His advanced age helps to explain why he addresses his readers as “dear children” (1 John 2:1,28; 3:7), and also the authoritative tone that pervades the letters. In his lifetime he had seen Jesus' ministry, the birth of the church, and the first generations of Christ-followers. Let us learn all we can from this unique elder statesman of the early church. We'll see times when he lives up to his fiery nickname of “son of thunder” (see Mark 3:17), especially when he is fiercely denouncing various heresies. Above all, we'll see indications of a close friendship with the Lord Jesus, forged in those intimate moments as he reclined “next to him” (John 13:23); very few (if any) would have known Jesus more personally. We surely have much to learn from “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:20).

FOR FURTHER READING

Stephen Smalley, *1, 2 and 3 John, Word Biblical Commentary*, Zondervan, 2014. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John, NICNT, 2nd edition*, 1995.

JONAH

FORGIVENESS FOR FLAYING?

Jonah is an unusual book. It is full of exaggerations, even to the point of bordering on grotesque, and it plays with ideas. For instance, it reverses stereotypes, so that the pagans demonstrate more godly behavior than God's prophet. While there are lighter touches to Jonah, the book carries weighty messages – and the message that Jonah must give to the Ninevites is a matter of life and death. To phrase it as the book itself might, there are “great” messages in Jonah: “great” is a repeated theme throughout the book. “Going down” is another theme, particularly in the first chapter.

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, an empire that eventually conquered the northern kingdom of Israel (carrying her people into exile) and threatened the southern kingdom of Judah. Assyria was ruled by exceptionally cruel men. They probably overstated their claims in order to deter other countries from fighting, but one of its earlier kings, Ashurnasirpal II, boasted, “I built a pillar over against the city gate, and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins. Some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes, and others I bound round the pillar; and I cut off the limbs of the officers who had rebelled. From some I cut off their hands and from others I cut off their noses, their ears, and their fingers, of many I put out the eyes. Their young men and maidens I burned in the fire. The rest of them I consumed with thirst in the desert of the Euphrates”. Given that Jonah's own nation suffered under Assyria, is it any wonder that he was in no hurry to prophesy against it? For Jonah knew that the point of prophesying was to form repentance in the hearts of the hearers, who would then be forgiven by God. It is easy for us either to judge Jonah too quickly, or conversely, to be overly sympathetic to this disobedient prophet.

GENESIS 1–11

BEGINNINGS, LIFE, AND RESTARTS

The chapters we are going to read in Genesis are what are sometimes called the “prehistory” of Israel because they pre-date Abraham. They cover the creation of the world (1,2), the fall (3), Cain and Abel (4), the flood (6–9), the Tower of Babel (11), and two genealogies (5,10). As you can see, more space is dedicated to the flood than to creation. We shall focus on two themes within these chapters. The first is the issue of restarts that are implicit or explicit in the text. The most explicit restart is the flood, where God wipes out all life except Noah, his family and a few specimens of every animal, restarting life from those who came out of the ark. The second theme that runs through these chapters is life; and a third is salvation, which often overlaps the motif of life. Despite its failings, God is committed to humanity and to populating the world with humans.

In the flood narrative the numbers seven and forty appear a few times. Gordon Wenham identifies what is called a “chiastic” structure and shows that the numbers before the flood match the numbers afterward (Gordon J Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary, volume 1, Genesis 1–15*, Thomas Nelson, 1987, p157).

- 7 days of waiting for flood (7:4)
- 7 days of waiting for flood (7:10)
- 40 days of flood (7:17a)
- 150 days of water triumphing (7:24)
- 150 days of water waning (8:3)
- 40 days’ wait (8:6)
- 7 days’ wait (8:10)
- 7 days’ wait (8:12)

In this story of destruction there is an emphasis on salvation. The text is written so as to highlight the salvation of Noah’s family and the animals. With God, death and destruction are never the last word.

GENESIS 12:1-9

BEGINNING THE LONG TREK

The call of Abram marks a crucial turning point in the book of Genesis. The focus of the story, up to this point, has been very broad, dealing with the universal themes of creation and the emergence of nations, but now it narrows down to a particular history which flows from the call of God to a single person. It is important to recognize the Bible's concern with families, with *community*. This is the starting point of the nation of Israel and it reminds future generations that the foundational building blocks of their existence as a people were the families whose stories are told in these chapters. Family life is not idealized or romanticized in the Bible and there are tensions, conflicts and divisions within these groups, yet readers are taught that they emerged from what happened in the history of these families. Claus Westermann concludes that 'no other form of community can ever completely replace the family' (Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, Augsburg Publishing, 1985, p23).

It is extremely important to see the connection with what has gone before. The sharpening of focus, or the *election* of Abram, is not an end in itself, but part of a far wider purpose, embracing all peoples on earth. When Abram is told that his faith is the first step towards a time when 'all peoples' will be blessed (12:3), we are reminded of Genesis 10, which has already indicated God's loving concern for humankind as a whole. Divine election, then and now, retains its meaning only as long as those blessed by grace recognize their part in the bigger story of God's purpose for all humankind. This applies as much to the church as it did to ancient Israel, as Paul makes clear when he warns Gentile Christians against arrogance and insists on the imperative of continuing in the 'kindness ... of God' (Rom 11:17-24).

MARK 4 – 6:29

DEMANDS OF DISCIPLESHIP

These chapters focus on the demands of discipleship. To emphasize what it means to follow Jesus, Mark weaves into his Gospel a series of narratives that highlight sharp contrast and heightened irony in the responses of various characters to the teachings and miracles of Jesus. In 4:35 - 6:6a, Jesus reached out to a number of vulnerable individuals. He crossed boundaries that divided the disciples and the people, demonstrating his power and authority over the forces of nature, demons, illness and even death. Yet when Jesus returned to his hometown, he was met with unbelief and rejection.

Through these accounts, Mark invites us to ponder our own journeys of faith. There are times when we may face conflicts and opposition in our service for the Lord. At other times, we may be discouraged because we may not see fruitful outcomes from our labor. Some people may even reject our message of the gospel. Yet we are called to be faithful disciples by bringing the message of the kingdom of God to all people. In doing so, we must be willing to cross the geographical, ethnic, religious, ritual and gender boundaries that divide us.

Following Jesus is not an easy journey, but it is an exciting adventure. It involves taking risks. It involves getting out of our comfort zone to reach out to others. It calls for our obedience. It calls for our faithfulness. The demands are certainly high, but nothing is more fulfilling than to see lives being transformed into the likeness of Christ – both those to whom we reach out and our own. Come, let's follow Jesus!

MARK 6:30 – 10:52

EATING AND TRAVELING WITH JESUS

Mark's Gospel is the earliest extant account of Jesus' life and ministry. It is relatively brief, fast-paced and packed with action: Jesus casts out demons, heals the sick, tells puzzling stories and has heated exchanges with the Jewish religious leaders. For the next three weeks, we will look at Mark's middle section, describing the latter half of Jesus' ministry up to his arrival in Jerusalem, where he will be crucified. This middle section has two parts: 6:30 – 8:21 is dominated by the theme of food; 8:22 – 10:52 focuses on traveling with Jesus on the road of discipleship.

Mark 6:30 – 8:21 describes Jesus' ministry in Galilee, but includes an important journey into Gentile territory (7:24–37). This section is bookended by Jesus miraculously feeding a large crowd (6:30–44 and 8:1–13) – with substantial leftovers (twelve and seven baskets, respectively); this detail becomes crucial to understanding the story of the Syrophenician woman. Each feeding episode is followed by a journey across the Sea of Galilee (6:45–56; 8:13–21). Both boat journeys are challenging for the disciples and reveal their lack of understanding – about food! In fact, Mark often highlights the disciples' lack of understanding (6:52; 7:18; 8:17, 18, 21). Food also dominates the clash between the Jewish religious leaders and Jesus in 7:1–23.

From food and sea crossings, we go on a long road journey from Galilee to Jerusalem in 8:22 – 10:52. The recurring phrase “on the way” (8:27; 9:34; 10:32, 52) is Mark's shorthand for the road of discipleship. Combined with Jesus' teaching on discipleship and his impending suffering, this section centres on travelling with Jesus on the road of the cross. The disciples' lack of understanding continues from the previous section but also finds resolution in the healing of the deaf man in 7:31–37 and the healing of the blind man in 8:22–26, which point symbolically to the healing of the disciples' hearing and sight.

MARK 11–13

TO JERUSALEM AND BEYOND...

Chapters 11 through 13 of Mark are a wonderful portion of Scripture in which to spend time, for here begins an account of the final week of Jesus' earthly life. We are taken from Sunday of Passion Week, with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, through to the Tuesday – just before the heart of the familiar passion narrative (William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark, The Banner of Truth Trust*, 1975, p429–430). We know that Jesus is aware of what awaits Him as he journeys to Jerusalem: “We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn Him to death and will hand Him over to the Gentiles, who will mock Him and spit on Him, flog Him, and kill Him. Three days later He will rise” (Mark 10:33,34).

What are the key themes in these final days of Jesus' ministry, as the cross looms large? One is His identity. Across chapters 11 through 13, we see Jesus portrayed as King, Son of God, Son of Man; indeed as the God-man and thus the true Messiah, who alone can save people from their sins (12:35–37). Another theme is that of God's judgment on Israel. Through prophetic acts, parables, and penetrating debate, Jesus certifies that God's chosen people will be called to account for their failure to honor God, to live fruitful lives for Him, and to acknowledge Jesus' true identity. We may ask: why this emphasis on judgment in Jesus' final week? Perhaps with the cross in view, there is an urgency in Jesus for people to heed His earlier call to “repent and believe” (Mark 1:15), for only those who acknowledge Jesus as Lord in this life will be ready to acknowledge Him when He comes again (cf. chapter 13).

As you read these chapters, may you wonder again at who Jesus is. Be open to heed the challenges presented to and by the people of Israel, as you ready yourself for Christ's triumphant return.

MARK 14–16

THE END AND A NEW BEGINNING

We have been in Jerusalem since chapter 11. The scene has been set for the confrontation between the Jewish leaders and Jesus. He has just spoken about the end of the old order and given warnings to His disciples. Now, at the beginning of chapter 14, we are told that the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are just two days away. The scene is set for the climax of Jesus' life and ministry. Mark will lead us to the cross and then on to the resurrection with his enigmatic final verse (16:8) which challenges our response to the proclamation of the angel at the tomb. The additional verses disclose the familiar stories of the resurrected Jesus.

When we read this story during Passion Week, we need to try to recapture the immediacy of Mark's narrative. As we see the suffering of Christ, the spinelessness of Pilate, the hostility of the Jewish leaders, the betrayal, denial, and desertion of the disciples, the confession of the centurion, and the faithfulness of the women who followed Jesus – but then their silence, we are invited to consider where we place ourselves in response to the story. For here is the center of our faith: Jesus crucified for us.

We often look at the cross through theological spectacles, further focused by the epistles and the history of the formation of doctrine. We cannot ignore this, but in these readings we see how Mark first tells the story. He records the abuse heaped on Jesus by the unbelievers and the repeated challenge to come down from the cross so that they might believe in Him. He gives us the agonizing cry of despair. Then, as Jesus dies, we see the temple curtain torn and the first Gentile confession uttered. For Jesus must die. Without the cross there is no gospel, and without the gospel, no message of the grace of God. We are saved only by faith on His death. And now we can hear that cry again.