

INTRODUCTION

“No problem,” “I’ve got you.” “I’ll make it happen.”

Have you ever wanted to believe in someone so much, but they left you time and again with broken and empty promises? Or maybe you’re in a season of life that it feels like everything “promised” by the culture – living the dream – has been a lie. But God... God never breaks His promises. We may not understand what He is doing, but we can trust that He is good and that He will come through for us, every time.

In the beginning of our guide, we can only imagine the angst in the hearts of Jesus’ followers as they see the hope of their future horrendously murdered on the cross. It may have felt like every promise Jesus made had been broken, but through Jesus’ death and resurrection, God was working out the fulfillment of His greatest promise – restored relationship between God and man.

On that resurrection morning, Christ enacted the greatest victory as He completed His promise made thousands of years before to crush the serpent’s head and redeem humanity to a place of right standing with God.

We can follow the trail of this promise all throughout Scripture as we see God’s words come into being. In the book of Joshua, the children of Israel have finally arrived at the Promised Land – the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham hundreds of years before. After years of hoping and waiting, the people are charged to go in and possess their promise. God goes before them, more than living up to His word as He clears the way supernaturally before them.

In Ephesians, Paul reminds us of God’s promise that we are chosen and adopted into the family of God - chosen before the creation of the world to be His. He also speaks of the Holy Spirit - with whom we are sealed when we receive God’s gift - who is the guarantee of our future promise when Christ will bring all things into unity and we shall be with Him for eternity. Throughout the book, Paul challenges us to walk as children of Light, as recipients of this promised gift of God.

Finally, as we begin the book of Acts, we see Jesus’ disciples also receive the promised Comforter, the Holy Spirit who would remind them of everything they had been taught and would empower them to be witnesses for the Kingdom of God. Time and again we see ordinary people receiving the promised Holy Spirit and being transformed by His life-giving power. What an incredible God!

Though everything around us may fail, we can know that our God keeps His promises. And with the records of such great and precious promises being fulfilled in the most awe-inspiring ways for men and women throughout these passages, we too can walk empowered in the Spirit as we trust that He will continue to keep every one of His promises. Be encouraged today in the power of His Word.

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 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 to what happened? Who is Jesus for us today? Can He save even us?

Three main themes run through our texts. Two were outlined on March 22 in the note for Mark 14:1-11. In the statement ‘What a waste!’ we are invited to reflect on the futility of it all, the loss of the person 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 on exactly that in observing how others loved Jesus – or didn’t – and how we go about that now. What is our response?

Our reading on April 1 marks a transition and introduces an additional theme: ‘Believing what we see.’ This is not just to encourage us to believe what we actually read, but to look and reflect 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.

TRUST AND OBEY...

After the Exodus and long journey through the wilderness, it is now Joshua who leads God's people. The Lord speaks directly to him just as He spoke to Moses (chapter 1). In chapter 5 Joshua's encounter with the Lord echoes Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3).

In our readings we will see many issues that confront and challenge Christians today – such as feeling overwhelmed by what God is asking us to do and trusting Him in difficult times.

Following the Lord is, perhaps surprisingly, not only dependent on being born into God's people. The story of Rahab (Joshua 2 and 6) shows that anyone who is open to the Lord and His rescue can experience His salvation.

We also see ways in these chapters in which the people grow in their relationship with God: through sanctifying themselves (3:5); recognizing the holiness of God's presence (3:4); trusting His Word by stepping out (3:13); obeying His instructions (Joshua 4); re-establishing circumcision as a sign of covenant relationship with God; celebrating the Passover in the Promised Land (Joshua 5); and, finally, through trusting the Lord to fight the battle of Jericho on their behalf (Joshua 6).

These chapters encourage us to listen to the Lord's instructions, to live the holy lives to which He calls us, and to do all of that not in our own strength, but with God's strength. In situations where you feel overwhelmed or struggle to trust God, be encouraged by Joshua's experience.

CONQUERING FAITH

In these readings from the book of Joshua, God's salvation plan for His people continues to unfold. They have entered the Promised Land. Jericho has been defeated. God's promises are being fulfilled (Genesis 12:1-3).

But all is not smooth sailing. As we shall see, the people of Israel must keep on trusting God. If they are to be His people, they must reflect His character and purposes in all that they do.

This part of the book of Joshua is not easy. Many find its themes of dispossession and conquest challenging. Some find the destruction of the original inhabitants morally indefensible. Yet as one commentator suggests, to see it this way is to read it 'in terms of the conventions of a modern text rather than ancient one' (David G Firth, *The Message of Joshua*, Bible Speaks Today, IVP, 2015, p21). Even hard passages in the Bible are 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness' (2 Timothy 3:16).

As you read, be open to new insights that God will give you. Learn valuable lessons on leadership, trust, and how to serve God. See God powerfully act on behalf of His people. Be encouraged in the way that God includes foreigners such as Rahab in His chosen people.

Above all, be reminded how God's provision of a land to Israel foreshadowed something greater. Due to disobedience, Israel was eventually sent into exile from the land. But through Christ's work of obedience on the cross, 'we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken' (Hebrews 12:28). Thanks be to God!

BE WHO YOU ARE!

Some experiences leave one speechless and open-mouthed: an unexpectedly rich sunset or grand view towards a distant mountain range; an act of completely unexpected and surprising kindness or generosity; a deeply affecting work of human creativity such as a favorite piece of music or a movie. These are the experiences that give life its richness and memories.

Ephesians somehow captures the experience of all three:

- We get a breath-taking overview of God's purposes throughout human history and even into eternity. What a view!
- We gain a deeper understanding of the wonder of God's grace in Christ Jesus. What a message!
- We eavesdrop on the creativity of one of the most brilliant minds ever seen in God's kingdom. What a privilege!

Everything hinges on God not just being involved in His cosmic creation; when human sin makes things go wrong, He intervenes in the most staggering way. Everything hinges on the 'But because...' of Ephesians 2:4. Without that, we would all be doomed. God's initiative in Christ is the rock-solid basis for all Christian hope and confidence.

What is perhaps striking for most believers in the West is how corporate this all is. Paul knows nothing of the lone-ranger Christian who reduces Christianity to 'me and my relationship with God.' The Gospel affects the whole of life, society and indeed the cosmos. It challenges all our prejudices, selfishness, and pride.

So prepare to be amazed and thrilled. But prepare also for the ride to get a bit bumpy too!

UNLEASHED

The first five chapters of Acts are an incredible account of the Gospel and the power of God unleashed. It's almost like a long-held cork has finally popped out of a champagne bottle, hurtling outwards with explosive and unpredictable results. Except this time, the recipients *aren't* drunk on wine (Acts 2:13, 15).

In these chapters of Acts, we will read about the early days of the church, of unstoppable life bursting out into the world, of thousands of people placing their trust in Jesus and being added to the church; how the Holy Spirit transformed Peter from knee-knocking to ruler-shaking; healings, signs, wonders, and miracles; boldness to tell others about Jesus and even people dropping dead when they tell a lie.

The stories are both compelling and inspiring but beg the question: how will we read these passages? As interesting historical accounts of how the church began or stories of faith – acts and actions – in the living God? Will we keep them locked in the past or dare we believe that our God who is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8) may want to revive us, our churches, our towns, our nations, our world?

My prayer for you as you read this series is that you will know the love of God, the life of God, and the power of God bursting out of your life in new ways as you meet with God in His Word.

UNSTOPPABLE

Imagine the leaders of the early church making a pitch for investment from some powerful and wealthy business people. What's the big idea? That a recently executed man is actually still alive and here to save the world. Who's behind it? A small group of keen but otherwise unimpressive individuals. What resources does this group have? Few, and squandered on the needy rather than sensibly invested.

Who would back such a venture? Who would think this endeavor would not only survive but also flourish, shaping history and transforming human culture? Over the next two weeks we'll be watching wide-eyed as the early disciples rebound from setback after setback, each flogging, imprisonment, and martyrdom only seeming to add to their momentum.

Why did this movement not die within months of the crucifixion? I think there are three reasons. First, because of the resurrection. As He had foretold, Jesus died, was buried, and then rose again. He was seen, touched, and heard by His followers, whose grief turned to inexpressible joy and relief. Secondly, because the Holy Spirit was present and at work. And thirdly, because those who believed Jesus was alive and were filled with the Holy Spirit proclaimed their good news loudly and persistently.

The Good News, 'that Jesus is the Messiah' (5:42), is still news to many today. How many of our colleagues, friends and even family members have never heard this simple message from us? And do we live as those who really believe the news ourselves?

THE GOD FOR EVERYONE

Have you ever wondered what happened to the disciples after the death of Christ? Have you ever wanted to find out how the Church spread out from this small group to the whole world? The Book of Acts has the answers.

The book starts with Jesus' ascension to heaven. Just before his departure, Jesus told his disciples that he wanted them to be his 'witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8) and the book shows the gospel spreading out exactly according to that plan. Our section of it, Acts 9-12, marks the beginning of the last stage of this outreach. It describes some momentous events that had to happen before the church was ready to reach out to 'the ends of the earth'. Firstly, God had to shatter some assumptions. All the first Christians, including the disciples, were Jews and they thought the gospel would also be just for Jews. God had to convince Peter through a vision that he wanted to reach all people.

We also learn about the dramatic conversion of Saul, better known to us as Paul, who through his missionary journeys would reach non-Jews (as well as Jews, see Acts 14:1) in Greece, modern-day Turkey and Rome.

If these events had not happened, most of us would never have got the chance to hear the gospel message. So, this is important stuff. Let's read and marvel at how Christianity spread right across the world from such tiny, unpromising beginnings.