

Mark is generally considered the first written synoptic gospel. At 661 verses, it is also the shortest. All indications are that Mark was written for Gentiles and probably for Roman readers, given the instances of Latin terms translated into Greek. Mark is a fabulous storyteller. He adds priceless details not supplied by Matthew or Luke.

In the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Joshua is the first of the twelve historical books. Some scholars regard it as an addendum to Deuteronomy, forming a “Hexateuch.” Others see it as an independent composition which links the Pentateuch with the rest of the biblical narratives dealing with Israel. The book delineates three major military campaigns through which Joshua ultimately subdues the land (for the most part). All along the way valuable lessons are learned. Perhaps the salient lesson is that if the Israelites will simply obey God and do it His way, success will be theirs. Despite occasional dissension within the ranks, the tribes eventually collaborate and prevail. The book ends with the dual death of Joshua and Eleazar, the likely last surviving son of Aaron.

Ephesians is easily one of the most popular epistles in the entire New Testament. This is because it declares in protracted terms just how great it is to be one of God’s children, the salient theme of chapters one to three. Here, we are informed about election, forgiveness, adoption, inheritance, plus more – all due to God’s grace. Chapters four and five instruct the believer how to behave as a child of God, accompanied by several warnings. Pivotal language governing marriage sits in chapter five. Chapter six teaches the believer how to conduct warfare in the spirit. All in all, Ephesians makes the believer feel very good about his or her decision to leave the world and follow Messiah Jesus.

Acts is the transitional link between the gospels and the epistles. It details what the twelve apostles did with their commission from Jesus and describes how the churches addressed in the epistles came into being, at least most of them (the church at Colossae, for example, is not found in Acts). In Acts we see the turbo-charging of the church via the Holy Spirit, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and the eventual birth of what we know today as missionary activity. We also see the church transitioning from being predominantly Jewish to predominantly Gentile. It’s a rocky road and not without its predictable problems. But the mass conversions, both at home and abroad coupled with all the spectacular miracles, tell us that the hand of the Lord is upon them. The book ends with Paul’s arduous journey to Rome, where he testifies before Rome’s Jewish community for two solid years without interference.

The Book of Psalms continues as a favorite among believers. Although Israel’s official hymnal, Psalms has nonetheless fortified believers of every generation. Indeed, Martin Luther derived much of his spiritual strength from this book, of which he had the highest opinion. The operative word is “praise”, a word found more times in Psalms than in the other 38 books combined. Yet, this book presents an impressive array of themes for the interested inquirer. Subjects like worship, war, penitence, judgment, complaint, encouragement, and messianic prophecy in wholesale proportions abound. In addition, it recounts the history of Israel here and there. Each of its 150 songs is considered an independent unit. The New Testament writers quote the psalms more than any other book.

MARK 14–16

THE END AND A NEW BEGINNING

We have been in Jerusalem since chapter 11. 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 will give us the familiar stories of the revelation of the resurrected Jesus.

When we read this story during Passion week, we need to try to recapture the immediacy of Mark's narrative. 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 (and later, silence) of the women who followed Jesus. 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 view the cross through our theological spectacles, focused by the epistles and the history of the formation of doctrine. We cannot ignore that, but in these readings we see how Mark first told the story. He records the abuse heaped on Jesus and the repeated challenge to come down from the cross so that people might believe in him. He reports the agonizing cry of seeming dereliction. Then, as Jesus dies, we see the temple curtain torn and the first Gentile confession. For Jesus must die. Without the cross there is no gospel and therefore no message of the grace of God. We are saved only by our personal faith on His death. And now we can hear that cry again.

JOSHUA 1–6

THE END AND A NEW BEGINNING

Throughout Scripture we read of commissions of individuals – from Abraham’s calling in Genesis to Christ’s commissioning of the disciples in Matthew – and so we are involved in God’s story. He journeys with us, his people, and enables us to grow, fail, and be restored, while he challenges us to wholeness. The Israelites must have questioned what God intended for them after Moses died: could Joshua lead them as Moses had? Standing on the bank of a river with their enemies before them must have seemed an insurmountable problem. Joshua, like Moses, was picked for the unenviable, but honorable, task of leading God’s people into victory under God’s authority.

These studies explore Joshua’s calling and God’s affirmation of and promises to both him and the whole community. We encounter the miraculous (waters parted, a fortified city conquered) and learn that God inhabits the praises of his people. He doesn’t command from the heavens but leads His people into their inheritance. God demands holiness and obedience along with His underlying love and redemption. Tensions are exposed as he rescues Rahab the Canaanite, for ultimately God does not desire the death of the wicked (Ezek 18:32). These and other events challenge our modern-day concepts of getting along with others and how we are to understand ‘death at God’s command’.

Joshua enables us to consider the integrity of our walk with God, for ‘the promised land was simply the means God used to establish a unique relationship of trust and obedience with his people’ (Henry Blackaby, *Called to be God’s Leader*, Nelson Books, 2004, p134). This section demands remembrance of God’s faithful acts, but with a purpose: to inherit the land promised to them. It encourages us to explore the meaning of the cross and the new covenant and also how God has walked with us to enable us to be called His people and accept our great commission – for ultimately the battle belongs to the Lord.

FOR FURTHER READING

John Huffman, *Joshua*, The Preacher’s Commentary, Thomas Nelson, 1986
E Hamlin, *Joshua, Inheriting the Land*, Eerdmans Publishing, 1983
Marten Woudstra, *NICOT: The Book of Joshua*, Eerdmans Publishing, 1981

JOSHUA 7–24

THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN

This book, which is unified by the figure of Joshua, covers the period between the death of Moses and Joshua's own death. It consists of four types of material: speeches, narratives, geographical descriptions, and theological addresses by the Lord and by Joshua. The main themes are the fulfillment of God's promise to give his people the land of Canaan and how the Lord fought for Israel as a warrior. The command to worship God alone and maintain the covenant relationship is a recurring theme. Joshua can be a disturbing book. At one level, it describes brutal conquest, confiscation of the land of an indigenous people and acts of wholesale slaughter (See Deut 7). For the writer of the book of Joshua, this represents God's judgment on sin. To this we can add that the new regime involved the introduction of norms of justice far superior to those they replaced.

Joshua is a historical book, but not history as we know it. All historical works are shaped by the presuppositions of the author. Moreover, we must avoid the temptation to expect an author in the ancient world to write a 21st-century historical text. The author's purpose was to write a theological narrative rather than a systematic account of the invasion of Canaan. The book was probably written hundreds of years after the events, but using some contemporary sources. This explains some of the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies, for example between 11:23, which says that the whole land had been conquered, and 13:1, which says that large areas were still to be conquered.

The book of Joshua is about God interacting with his people: leading, teaching, rebuking, and restoring. As we work through these chapters, we will find many reminders that our unchanging God continues to interact with us today, leading us on life's journey till we land 'safe on Canaan's side' (William Williams, 1717–91, 'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah').

FOR FURTHER READING

David Jackman, *Joshua*, Crossway Books, 2014

Trent C Butler, Word Biblical Commentary vol 7, *Joshua*, Word, 1983 (second edition, Zondervan, 2014)

EPHESIANS

A LETTER FOR OUR TIMES

This letter could have been composed for the twenty-first century. God's people were in the mind of God before time began, part of a plan conceived before the universe existed. This means that it matters how we behave, as God's eternal people. The letter jumps from the cosmic to the here and now, from God's eternal intentions to the selfishness and immorality of the human world.

The significance of this letter to present-day readers is reinforced by its implication that Paul had never met the recipients (1:15) and that he hoped they might have heard about him (3:2). This raises genuine questions about whether the letter was originally intended for the Ephesians, especially since – so unlike Paul – the letter greets no one by name and discusses no local problems. Many important early manuscripts lack the word Ephesians. This is surely because it was intended for all the churches Paul had not visited but wished he had. Perhaps the copy originally included in our Bibles was one sent to Ephesus with the church's name inserted. This absence of local issues lends the letter a certain timelessness, as advice for all times and places.

Unlike his other letters, Ephesians does not hint that Paul might be released and able to visit the churches again. For this and other reasons, it is likely that Paul's execution was imminent. Indeed, there are scholars who wonder if he was unable to write and asked a colleague to write for him. So the scenario in my mind and heart as I write these notes is that this is Paul's final communication to us. Reading Ephesians as addressed to a wide audience and, even as we can now feel, a timeless audience, reminds us that Paul's ministry continued after his death and remains relevant today. Christian truth is never static but always applicable to new situations.

FOR FURTHER READING

Ralph Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon*, John Knox Press, 1991
PHEME PERKINS, 'The Letter to the Ephesians', *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon Press, 2000

ACTS 1:1 – 5:16

THE CHURCH BEGINS

The Acts of the Apostles is the sequel to Luke's Gospel. Written by the same author, it continues where Luke left off with Christ's ascension and describes what happened next. The outline of the book is reflected in 1:8, in which Jesus tells the disciples they will be His 'witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'. Hence, Acts begins with the establishment of the church in Jerusalem, tracking the gospel's spread from there until it reaches Rome through Paul.

Chapters 1–5 are concerned with the initial stages of this process in Jerusalem. We read how the disciples were restored to their full complement of twelve. We also learn of the Holy Spirit's coming. From that time, we witness the transformation of the disciples into people capable of continuing the work Jesus began. They turn from being fearful, incompetent, and squabbling to grasping Christ's message, boldly preaching and demonstrating it, sharing close fellowship together and providing for each other's needs. Peter's preaching repeats many of the same themes, each time spelling out the basics of the gospel, known as the *kerygma* (*Kerygma* is Greek for 'proclamation') – and this message is shown to be even more powerful than the miracles the disciples perform (Gerhard A Krodel, *Acts*, Augsburg Publishing House, 1986, p124). As a result of Peter's preaching, thousands come to Christ, and the church grows rapidly among the Jews.

Our chapters also show that this rapid growth is not without problems. The popularity of this new faith has riled many Jewish leaders. Peter and John are arrested and threats are made against the fledgling church. Similarly, harmony within the church itself gets tested with the revelation that even believers, Ananias and Sapphira, have been deceptive about the amount of money made from selling some land.

Luke emphasizes throughout that Christ's death and resurrection are the fulfilment of Jewish Scripture, part of God's plan (I Howard Marshall, *Acts*, IVP, 1998, p24). The rest of Acts will build on this, to show that His plan includes the Gentiles too.

ACTS 5:17 – 8:40

GROWTH, OPPOSITION, DISPERSION

These chapters comprise a watershed in Acts. On the one hand, the church in Jerusalem was growing in leaps and bounds. Acts 5:12–16 gave us a cameo of the early church. The believers met in Solomon’s Colonnade, one of the two great colonnades that surrounded the temple area, where they could be clearly seen. The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders (5:12). More and more people believed and were added to their number (5:14). People brought the sick into the streets so that Peter’s shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by (5:15).

On the other hand, the church faced problems without and within. The Sanhedrin intensified its opposition. The miraculous healings and exorcisms naturally upset the Sadducees, while the growing power and authority of the apostolic leadership challenged the high priests and the establishment. At the same time, Satan was still active. As John Stott says, ‘Having failed to stop the church by either persecution or corruption, he now tried distraction. This was the cleverest attack of the three’ (John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, 1990, p122). This assault finally led to the death of Stephen and to further persecution.

Despite Jesus’ orders to engage in the Gentile mission and his assurance, ‘But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’ (1:8, the key verse in the book), the apostles had stayed in Jerusalem and had remained there until as late as Acts 15:2 (Craig S Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 1993, p339). The very early church was of a single ethnicity and was a kind of sect of Judaism. The members were happy with that, and they had not even reached out to Judah. God allows persecution to get them out of their comfort zone and to move to Samaria and beyond. This set of notes closes with the conversion of the first non-Jew, the Ethiopian eunuch.

ACTS 9–12

WHERE HISTORY TURNS

Luke's account of the history of the early church in Acts is episodic and packed with characters, some of whom, like Stephen and Philip, momentarily light up the page, whereas others, particularly Peter and Paul, exert a strong influence on events. The early chapters are rooted in Jerusalem, but the persecution of the church after the fatal stoning of Stephen leads to a scattering of believers throughout Judea and Samaria, a situation which results in the growth of the community. We begin this set of readings as the Jewish authorities attempt to restrict this development.

Chapters 9 to 12 contain two key moments on which the history of the church hinges: the first is the conversion of Saul (he is not known as Paul until chapter 13); the second is the mandate given to Peter to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Without the first event, Christian theology would be much impoverished. Without the second, the gospel would have remained a heretical branch of Judaism. The world-wide Christian church would never have existed. In describing these two key moments, Luke is careful to outline the reactions of existing believers to groundbreaking change. The young church and its leaders are already under pressure from the Jewish authorities and they display scepticism and wariness at Saul's conversion and Peter's bombshell. Coping with dynamic change is a key theme in Acts. On the one hand, there is the willingness to listen to first-hand witness accounts of what has taken place (Peter's account of his time with Cornelius and his household is narrated twice, in detail). On the other hand, there is Barnabas' role of intermediary, a role he assumes more than once in Acts. As members of a twenty-first-century church under considerable pressure to change in structure and message, we have much to learn.