

INTRODUCTION

My husband and I recently performed a wedding for two of our spiritual children. As the age-old words were spoken, a covenant was forged, meant to withstand the tests of time. In these pages, we will discover another covenant, much greater than any that human beings could make together. This covenant is established by the never-changing God of the universe – and He always keeps His promises. Beloved, you are part of this covenant. God’s promise of salvation, grace and hope for eternity is yours for the receiving. Let’s discover God’s faithfulness together.

In Acts we see not only the birth of the church, but the incredible portrayal of God’s ‘New Covenant’ at work. The amazing display of God’s grace for Paul, the persecutor-turned-preacher, and God’s acceptance of the Gentiles shows that His grace is now available for all humankind.

The entire book of the Song of Songs is about the sweet human covenant of love, strongly tinted with undertones of God’s deep love for us that ‘many waters cannot quench’ as He beckons us to ‘come away’ with Him (Song of Songs 8:7,14).

Judges portrays God’s covenant love violated over and over again by His people as they cycle through sin, devastation, and repentance. Yet, God continues to rescue His people and give them glimpses of His unconditional covenant promise of coming salvation.

The book of Ruth perfectly blends the concepts of covenant love between a man and a woman with God’s covenant toward His people. Ruth’s kinsman-redeemer saves her life, unknowingly becoming a forefather of the One who would come to bring everlasting salvation.

Paul encourages God’s people in 1 and 2 Thessalonians to hold fast to their faith as they look forward to the final completion of God’s promise – the coming blessed hope of Christ’s return.

The minor prophets Obadiah, Habakkuk, and Nahum anguish over Israel’s breach of their commitment to follow God’s ways. Yet, in the midst of the mire we find glimmers of hope as the prophets reinforce that God will remain faithful.

The writer of Hebrews seeks to weave the covenants together in his epic unveiling of God’s plan from the beginning of time to the atoning sacrifice of Christ to our long-awaited hope for final rest. With Abraham we are brought around to the very crux of this covenant as God breathes the covenant, planned and spoken of since the beginning of the world, into being. Abraham believed God’s promise.

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 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 gotten 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.

A SONG OF LOVE...

This joyful song-cycle for a wedding celebration nudges our perspective, reminding us that God's fullness of life is present in the physical now of our living. Here is delight in love and beauty, creation, and human experience. Its forthright descriptions of romantic relationship have surprised and puzzled the church throughout the centuries. Yet here it is, in Scripture, God's Word to us today!

The ancient series of poems – written by, or possibly for, King Solomon – describe the story of the relationship between a man and a woman. Its style is typical of its time and culture. 'Friends' are the chorus who support the couple as the drama unfolds. Some have drawn spiritual parallels to the believer's relationship with Jesus. While this book clearly celebrates the physical dimension of our humanity, it needs to be read and understood in the context of God's big love story. The Bible is threaded throughout with references to the covenantal commitment and faithfulness of God to His people. The marriage of the bridegroom (Christ) to His bride (the church), is anticipated throughout the New Testament – and fulfilled in Revelation (Revelation 19:7-9).

So, what will you make of these mysterious words? In the midst of our messy world and lives, God's voice calls to us, 'Come away...' (Song of Songs 8:14). Whatever the difficulties or sadness we are facing today, we can know contentment and security in His faithful, loving embrace – the song of songs is love...

HEROES AND VILLAINS

'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit' (Judges 17:6; 21:25). This is how the book of Judges summarizes the period in Israel's history (around 3,000 years ago) with which it is concerned. Readers reflecting on their own contemporary contexts may well share the narrator's perspective of a society drowning in a sea of moral and religious relativism. Judges is the violently explicit account of the repeated failure of God's people to be faithful to Him as He sought to establish them in the Promised Land. It is simultaneously the record of God's relentless faithfulness to His people during this time. There is a recurring pattern: Israel's idolatrous disobedience leads to foreign oppression, causing the people to cry out to God to be rescued, resulting in God raising up judges (or leaders) to deliver His people. It is, however, a downward spiral with Israel's corruption becoming progressively worse (2:18,19).

The judges are both the heroes and villains of the story – some more flawed than faithful. Consequently, there is ambiguity surrounding the morality of some of these leaders, raising hard questions about the interplay between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Judges doesn't concern itself with providing answers to those questions, so readers must draw their own conclusions! It is enough for the narrator to assert the fact of God's sovereignty – even in the midst of His people's anarchy. Ultimately, it was not that Israel had no king in the time of the judges; it was that Israel repeatedly refused to recognize God as king. Sound familiar?

ANOTHER PLACE, A DIFFERENT TIME

'My favorite book!' my friend exclaimed, when I told her I was writing these notes. One of mine, too. We all love to lose ourselves in a good story. And this story from another place, a different time, is an amazingly good read on all sorts of levels. A story that moves us deeply and grips us to the very end.

It is an adventure story. Ruth had married a man of a different culture, but in her own country. Now, having lost him, she travels back with her mother-in-law to his homeland - another place. She goes into the unknown. The main action takes place at harvest time, when the men leave their homes to camp out in the fields. The life is hard, especially for the women who follow on, gleaning the last grains.

It is a love story. Family love between Ruth and her mother-in-law. God's redeeming love as expressed through Boaz. Married love in the happy ending. Each of the three main characters has a clear voice, which speaks out through values and actions. Some of these may seem strange to us, but they bring us right into the story. The widows, Ruth and Naomi; the kinsman Boaz, who has it in his power to make everything right. We get an amazing sense of family loyalty and responsibility, quite possibly far beyond our experience today, a different time. And through it all runs the theme of our God's redeeming love and protection.

LIFE AND LOVE

'Welcome home!' I was greeted with a wonderfully warm hug, and it was a joy to be back after almost a year. Helping myself to a cup of coffee, I felt like part of the family. After relocating to London from Manchester, I was visiting my previous church which meets in the basement of a university campus student union. It definitely felt like home, even though many of the faces were new to me.

This similar sense of longing after absence – of affection, of joy and of wanting to encourage a church that has climbed into your heart – is embedded within Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. Along with Silas and Timothy, Paul initially visited Thessalonica in AD 50 as part of his second missionary journey. They visited local synagogues, proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. As a result, some of the local Jews and Greeks joined them in their faith (Acts 17).

However, one night the three men were forced to flee to Berea. Paul traveled on to Athens having been pursued by their persecutors; Silas and Timothy stayed longer in Berea. Later, Paul sent Timothy to revisit the church at Thessalonica: it is as Timothy returns with news that Paul writes his affectionate letters to the Thessalonians. Be encouraged and be ready to encourage others as you read these letters of hope, written in the context of arduous journeying, warm relationships and fledgling but passionate faith in the face of frightening persecution.

HALLELUJAH IN THE MINOR KEY

Obadiah, Habakkuk and Nahum are among the most unread books of the Bible. They form part of a collection known as the minor prophets, so called because of their brevity and not a reflection on the seriousness of their content. These are short books: all three can be easily read within an hour. But they pack an unusual punch.

While many of the other Old Testament prophets direct their messages to God's people, these three are different. They address very specific audiences against the bleak backdrop of Assyrian and Babylonian domination. Obadiah speaks to the kingdom of Edom, one of Israel's oldest enemies. These descendants of Esau denied access to Moses and the people as they sought their Promised Land (Numbers 20:14–21), and judgment is now coming. They will soon be defeated by a stronger nation and God will rule over them (Obadiah 1:21).

Two thirds of Habakkuk's prophecy is an angry conversation with God. The prophet accuses God of tolerating injustice and corruption and of indifference toward His people's suffering. The prophecy nevertheless ends with a beautiful song of lament and praise.

Nahum directs his invective against Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian empire. Even though Judah is under its grip, Nahum sees another ascendant power that will destroy Nineveh. In time, the Babylonians will sweep the Assyrians away and take God's people captive.

These short books are a powerful reminder that God is sovereign and there's always more going on than we can see.

LIVING FORWARD

If you feel that you live in a world that continually tries to pull you away from Christ, Hebrews is for you. It's not an easy book, and it's not like any other New Testament letter. But it's worth the work.

Hebrews was written to a group of Christian Jews who were struggling and tempted to fall away and return to their old ways. But the writer urges them to keep going forward. Their whole Bible – the Old Testament – points to Jesus. He is not just the fulfillment of prophecies; the whole purpose of Old Testament religion was to pave the path to Jesus. He explains and fulfills it all. Jesus is shown to be the glorious Son of God the Father, who humbled Himself by becoming truly one of us. He is the final revelation of God, greater than angels and Moses, a better priest with a better covenant, a superior sacrifice in a superior sanctuary.

What's the effect of it all? To warn us against apathy and to spur us on toward godliness. To lift our minds and hearts to truly say: I want to fix my eyes on Jesus and follow Him until I rest in Him forever. As I say, it's worth it!

A 'BIGGER' CHRIST

“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you’re bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”¹

‘Expanding souls encounter an expanding Christ!’ writes Kent Hughes, adding that Hebrews has ‘a double dose of growth-producing power – first, because it presents the greatness of Christ ... second, because it repeatedly demands a response from the reader.’²

Hebrews is generously sprinkled with superlatives: Christ introduces ‘a better hope’ (7:19), guarantees ‘a better covenant’ (7:22), and exercises a superior ‘ministry’ (8:6) in a ‘more perfect tabernacle’ (9:11); He is the permanent, more powerful, perfect high priest (7:24–28), offering not merely ‘better sacrifices’ (9:23) but the supreme sacrifice of His sinless self (7:27; 9:28; 10:10–12). Everything about the person and work of Christ is bigger, better, beyond that of any other – patriarch, priest, prophet, or angel. Our world cordially welcomes Jesus as a good man, great teacher, exemplary role model; but considers it arrogance to proclaim that He is not just one among many or merely first among equals. The unparalleled, unrivaled uniqueness of Christ is frequently sacrificed at the altar of tolerance. Hughes claims, ‘Seriously considered, Hebrews will make us grow and find a bigger Christ.’ Make this your goal for this series – and pray for an expanding mind, heart and spirit.

¹CS Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2001

²R Kent Hughes, *Hebrews, Volume One: An Anchor for the Soul*.

GOD'S BIG PICTURE

Genesis is a book of beginnings which extends beyond the creation story to the beginnings of 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.

This 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.