

**Judges** – The Book of Judges is a manual for how to mess up one's life. Difficult to miss is the relationship between ignoring the Lord's commandments and inviting personal disaster. During the nearly four century period, several cycles form: apostasy, divine warning, calamity, godly sorrow, and eventual deliverance in the person of a judge. The judges are battlefield fighters rather than courtroom jurists. Most are of less than stellar character. The final sentence of the book says it all.

**Ruth** – The Book of Ruth is a shining star set against the dark backdrop of the period of the judges. Its central character is a noble Moabite woman who forsakes all to embrace the God and culture of the neighboring Israelites. Supporting characters are Boaz, her beneficent future husband and Naomi, her embittered mother-in-law. Ruth endures the ups and downs of starting over in a strange land, eventually emerging as one of the Bible's most admirable personages.

**Song of Songs** – Easily the least studied book in the Old Testament, the Song of Songs nonetheless has encouraged believers since it was penned. Allegorically, it depicts Israel as Yahweh's bride and the Church as that of Jesus. Its participants are three: the bride (the Shulamite), the king (Solomon), and the women of Jerusalem. Dripping with emotion borne of love, its story showcases the joy of married life.

**Obadiah, Habakkuk, Nahum** – Good things come in small packages. These three minor prophets proclaim a message that still resonates today. Although Nahum and Habakkuk were rough contemporaries, Obadiah predated them by probably two hundred years. None pulled any punches. Being on the receiving end of their pronouncements, especially Nahum and Obadiah, would be inadvisable.

**Acts** -- Acts is one of the two masterpieces authored by Luke. It is the transitional link between the ministry of Jesus and the Church for which He died. Without this consummately important book, we would have no idea what happened to the eleven consorts of Jesus after He ascended. Additionally, we would be clueless as to how the gospel message reached the gentiles. In addition to the apostles, Acts introduces several important men and women to its readers, some of them pivotal players in the narrative. The book's final four verses form a fitting conclusion.

**I and II Thessalonians** – The two epistles to the Thessalonians recall what happened in Acts 17:1-9 – a rough ride. But Paul genuinely loved this assembly (see I Th. 2:7-8), encouraging them to endure the hardships. End time events play a noticeable role in these two letters. Apparently, confusion had crept into this Christian assembly over the coming of the Lord and the rise of the man of sin. Most scholars believe that -- with the possible exception of Galatians -- the first epistle to the Thessalonians was Paul's earliest.

**Hebrews** – The Book of Hebrews is one of the most indispensable books in the New Testament. Written apparently to Jewish believers tempted to regress back into Judaism, its pages abound with warning after warning to persevere. Two words appear more in Hebrews than in any other New Testament book: better (13 times) and blood (22 times). The import is clear: we have a better covenant because of Messiah's blood. An ageless dispute surrounds the identity of the book's unknown author. But as Origen said centuries ago, "In the end, only God knows." Well stated.

## 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 skepticism and wariness at both 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.

Our readings end with Saul and his team embarking on the first missionary journey. A new phase begins.

## SONG OF SONGS

### DO NOT QUENCH LOVE

Six days of Song of Songs: as you contemplate this week's readings, where are you? Excited at the prospect of something different? Relieved at the opportunity to gaze on love in a God-bathed light? Probing for language to point to godly alternatives in an 'anything goes' sexual market? Grateful for times when your desires have found affirmation and voice within Holy Scripture? Wistful for delights long gone through age or disappointment? Cynical about the promises of intimacy that romantic poetry delivers? Grief-stricken by betrayal or loneliness and reluctant to have your nose rubbed in it?

The multiplicity of personal reactions is compounded by the massive diversity of scholars' views on the dating and authorship, the theme and structure of this book. Is it a drama with two or three protagonists? Does it depict the story of a young girl longing for her shepherd lover or is she arriving to marry King Solomon? Has the king separated two lovers? Is it one unified poem around a story or a collection of love lyrics? Is it wisdom literature, perhaps instructing women on affairs of the heart? Should it be understood allegorically, depicting the spiritual relationship between God and Israel or the church or the individual? Is it simply a song celebrating sexual love?

Wherever you are in this landscape of interpretation and experience, your encounters with the singers in Song of Songs won't leave you neutral. Be prepared for that. Let God speak to you, even in the uncomfortable feelings which are exposed. For whether single or married, old or young, male or female, we are sexual beings, made for intimacy and relationship. We yearn for our Creator's touch as healer and Savior, the one who is making us holy like Jesus, God made flesh. Fascinatingly, Song of Songs came to be read at the festival of Passover. The epic national celebration of liberation was punctuated with outbursts of domestic joy and exclusive delight: 'Many waters cannot quench love' (8:7). So, 'Come away, my beloved' (8:14).

## JUDGES

### HORROR STORIES

According to John Goldingay, ‘Judges is one of the most unpleasant books in the Bible, a dispiriting story of rebellion against God and violence among human beings, not least, violence against women and sometimes violence by women.’ (*Goldingay*, p5) Michael Wilcock describes the book as ‘this fascinating though difficult part of Scripture.’ (*Wilcock*, p12) An ‘unpleasant’ aspect of the book is that throughout its pages God’s people are guilty of repeated ingratitude and rebellion; they do ‘evil in the eyes of the Lord’ (An oft-repeated phrase: see Judg 2:11; 3:7,12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). A further ‘difficult’ factor is the character of many of the judges themselves. They are not courtroom judges but individuals whom God uses to rescue Israel from invasion and oppression. However, the judges’ behavior is frequently appalling. We will first turn to the book’s historical setting and then consider a principle for interpreting its message.

The book is set in the period after the Israelite tribes have under Joshua conquered large parts of the Promised Land. However, they have not expelled all the Canaanites, and mingling with them leads Israel to the local gods, the Baals and the Ashtoreths. Perhaps these male and female fertility gods seem more relevant than the Lord in Israel’s new existence as settled farmers rather than desert wanderers.

There is one key principle in interpreting Judges and applying its message to our own lives: we must always see the Lord as the hero of each narrative. If we try to regard the judges as heroes, then we become horrified by their actions and, quite rightly, resist the notion that they should be emulated. There are twelve judges in the book, six covered very briefly and six in more detail. We will focus on three of them, Deborah, Gideon and Samson. Not only is God the hero, but these narratives repeatedly emphasize His grace in rescuing His wayward people and hence this ‘unpleasant’ book does indeed contain Good News.

### FOR FURTHER READING

John Goldingay, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth for Everyone*, SPCK, 2011  
Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Judges*, IVP, 1992

## RUTH

### A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE?

The Book of Ruth is significantly placed in the Bible: it follows Judges and precedes the books of Samuel and Kings. The story of Ruth takes place when the judges ruled Israel, and we know from the parting remarks in the Book of Judges that it was a time before a king ruled in the land, when everyone in the land did just as they saw fit (Judg 21:25).

In Sunday School, I recall Ruth being presented as a romantic figure, a Cinderella-like rags to riches story. She was well-behaved and biddable – perfect wife material. Boaz was her romantic lead and hero! However, it is impossible to read this book with such a perspective in the twenty-first century. The story is far from romantic (Mary J Evans, *Judges and Ruth*, IVP Academic, 2017, p217).

Sadly, women throughout history and in today's world face the same dangers as Naomi and Ruth. Women have needed and depended on the compassion and integrity of men in their society and are often tragically betrayed. The poor and vulnerable in the world are at the mercy of the rich and secure and are often left to suffer their fate. Ruth and Naomi's story, then, shines a light on how God calls people to genuine faith, because if faith isn't seen in action, it is no faith at all (James 2:14–20).

Ruth is a remarkable character. She is a foreigner who becomes part of the lineage of King David and the Lord Jesus. This obscure Moabite woman became a woman of faith and courage who chose to put her faith in Israel's God when the Lord's people were, on the whole, turning away from Him. Her steadfast love for Naomi reflects the love of God Himself. Boaz is not a brawn-and-bravado hero, but he is a hero, nonetheless. He is presented as a man of integrity and humility like his descendant Jesus, who honors God and others above Himself.

## 1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

### WINDOW ON A REMARKABLE CHURCH

The church at Thessalonica was probably founded around AD 49 or 50 (Acts 17:1–9). The city has a Graeco-Roman history dating back to the fourth century BC, when it was established by Cassander and named after his wife Thessalonice (John Stott, *Thessalonians*, IVP, 1991, p17). The city still thrives, largely due to its geographical location on the Thermaic Gulf, astride the Egnation Way, a major highway running from Rome to Byzantium (later Constantinople, now Istanbul). Merchants and travelers constantly used these routes, and the city became a cosmopolitan center with a significant Jewish community.

Paul and his team stayed only a short time there, but they made an impressive impact. It is possible that Paul stayed several months in the city and not simply the three Sabbaths described in Acts. When he left, he missed the believers greatly, feeling bereft of their fellowship (1 Thess 2:17), and he sent Timothy from Athens to report on their welfare. Timothy's response appears to have reached Paul in Corinth, where he wrote the letters. He wrote, first, to commend the faith and perseverance of the Thessalonican church under persecution, giving thanks and commendation that occupied nearly 60 percent of the first letter (Gordon D Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, Eerdmans, 2009, p7). Second, the letters were sent to address concerns that Timothy must have reported – sexual immorality, the need for love and unity, and confusion regarding the second coming of Christ – that had negatively affected the church. Because of some communication allegedly sent by Paul's team but denied by him (2 Thess 2:2), some believers were so sure of the near return of Christ that they had ceased their normal work. Paul regarded this as idleness and warned against it, correcting their misunderstandings about the end times.

Both letters open a window on a newly established church in the middle of the first century AD. As well as dealing with theological and moral problems, they reveal much about the heart of the apostle himself. They also offer a glimpse into God's plans for the end times and speak to us powerfully today.

## OBADIAH, HABAKKUK AND NAHUM

### MAJOR MESSAGES FROM MINOR PROPHETS

No, not minor in the sense of being unimportant. Far from it! But they are short books, compared with the ‘major’ prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. These three minor prophets had anything but a minor message for their contemporaries. The books are addressed to different audiences, but there are some recurring themes and some highly relevant applications for today. We read them in reverse chronological order.

We meet family breakdown, pride and its fall, and God’s ultimate judgment on cruelty and injustice. We see the very real hope of the coming of God’s kingdom, when all will be put right. We realize that God’s servants from many centuries ago were just the same as us, with the same thoughts and emotions and full of the same sort of questions as us: questions such as ‘Why is God so often silent?’ or ‘Why doesn’t God DO something?’ And yet they are full of trust when facing hard times, knowing that they can bring it all to the One who has broad shoulders. There are some really challenging examples of faith, especially in Habakkuk, but we also read of the seriousness with which God views all sin and how He is implacably against those who are irrevocably on the side of evil.

As we reflect on these somber messages brought to us from so long ago, we remember how Jesus entered our world, which is just as messy now as it has ever been, to bring salvation and hope to those who put their trust in Him. We recognize the wonder of the gospel and the urgency of sharing it with our own contemporaries. When you read today’s news headlines, do they depress you? Or do they act as a spur to prayer, that God will continue to work out His purposes, so that one day ‘every knee should bow ... and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father’? (Phil 2:10,11)

## HEBREWS 1–6

### IN ALL THINGS SUPREME (Col 1:18)

‘The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.’ (LP Hartley, *The Go-Between*, 1953) In Hebrews we encounter the world of first-century Judaism: religious ideology, thought processes, ways of handling the Old Testament that are alien to us. The temptation may be to give up and move on to easier territory; but to do so would be to miss great riches.

Hebrews does not look like a first-century letter, lacking the normal opening and closing greetings. With the personal address and the sense of urgency it reads more like a sermon. The writer seems to know the congregation to whom he was writing (Heb 13:17–19), possibly a house church in Rome (Heb 13:24). The writer is unknown; the early church attributed it to Paul, but style and content make this unlikely. There has been much conjecture, none of it conclusive. The writer was, like his readers/hearers, well versed in the Old Testament and from the more open Hellenistic stream of Judaism. He usually quotes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The readers were under pressure. To accept Jesus as Messiah was to break links not only with religious practice, but also with nation, family, and culture, a big step involving a loss of identity and bringing shame on the family. The same is still true for many who come to Christ from other faith backgrounds. In addition, Judaism was still to some extent accepted by the Romans and as persecution became more common, it might have seemed a safer haven. There was also pressure from Romans who saw Christians as subversive. The temptation to give up on the Christian faith was considerable. Hence the need for this letter-sermon with its genuine passion stemming from a deep pastoral concern: it can still encourage us to remain faithful in the face of our own pressures, whether secularism, consumerism, opposition from friends or family, personal doubts or...

To aid our meditation on the glory and supremacy of Jesus, each day starts with a verse to focus our attention on Him.



## HEBREWS 7–13

### AN UNSHAKEABLE KINGDOM

We were studying Hebrews 1–6 with John Grayston, under the title ‘In all things supreme’, a fitting title for this series of studies as well. As we now complete our study of this short letter (13:22), consider the possibility of reading chapters 7–13 out loud to yourself again and again. It will take about 30 minutes (and reading chapters 1–6 out loud will take a further 20 minutes). This is the way the earliest receivers of this letter would have heard the message. Reading it can have the effect of climbing a mountain through a coniferous forest (or through a thick mist) and emerging at the top to a splendid, far-reaching view in all directions. The individual trees in our readings are words like priest, altar, tabernacle, covenant, sacrifice, blood, law, Melchizedek, but the panorama is an unshakeable kingdom, the full assurance of faith, unlimited access, Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Writing out this whole story (not typing it) could have the same effect. This would take much longer, especially for those of us who no longer often write by hand, but the slowing down would enable us to notice details we might otherwise miss. In these ways, in our hyper-mediated age when we have to process much information as quickly as possible, we might jolt our brains into a new routine of reception. There are sections of the text we might even sing – in our hearts, or out loud.

Finally, this wonderful news of the supremacy of Jesus comes to us, not in spite of the Old Testament, but because of it and through it. Revel in the writer’s saturation with the Old Testament story and actually look up the Old Testament references. The result will be as if a flat jigsaw puzzle suddenly jumps up and becomes a three dimensional wonder!

### RESOURCES

David Gooding, *An Unshakeable Kingdom: The Letter to the Hebrews for Today*, IVP, 1989

<https://thebibleproject.com/explore/hebrews/>

## GENESIS 12:1 – 19:29

### 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 people on earth. When Abram is told that his faith is the first step toward 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)