

# INTRODUCTION

Experience has taught me that many of the plans I had for my life had little, or even nothing, to do with what actually happened. Along the way, there were disappointments – both in my circumstances and with myself – that thwarted plans. There were promises broken, unavoidable turns, and insurmountable obstacles that kept my plans from being carried out. And probably, more than I liked to admit, there were other ideas for plans that were far better than mine.

From the beginning, God has had a plan. We see it in all of the history of the Bible. Promises are broken, but never His. There are countless turns and obstacles, but nothing interferes with His purposes. In fact, over and over again, we see Him use the challenges set before His people to show them more of who He is and to build their faith. God makes Himself known in the Old Testament. He shows His people His holiness; they witness His great power, they experience His unchanging love and faithfulness, and they learn of His mercy. God proves Himself to be their provider and deliverer.

In the book of Exodus, we see God fulfill His promise to Abraham, creating the great nation of Israel. He raises up Moses to lead Israel away from the oppression of Egypt, repeatedly delivering and providing for them. As we follow the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land, we must note that God's love and favor are clearly His choice and commitment is never based on the merit of His people. Over and over again, the Israelites prove that they are a demanding, complaining, quarrelsome people who continually forget the greatness of their God Who has chosen them.

More than a thousand years later, in the Gospel of Matthew, God's plan continues to unfold; the promised Messiah comes to dwell among humanity. We will read about His early ministry to God's people as He prepares and begins to teach them about lives that please God. He begins to teach them about their need of a Savior.

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul writes to God's chosen people – Jew and Gentile – about who their God is, what His plan is, and about their need of Him. Through faith in Christ, they receive the promises of their Holy God. Now we see the infinite expanse of God's plan, a plan for a hope, not just for the present, but for eternity.

Remember as you read, that the Bible given was by God so that you and I can see, page after page, who He is and what is His great plan for humankind. It is not just a great story of history, though; it is the means by which you and I can know Him and grow in our understanding of His love for us. It is the book that shows us, time after time, God's unchanging faithfulness to His promises and His unwavering love for His own.

Do you see your life as one that is not going according to plan? Look at God's unchanging, unstoppable plan – the plan that He has made for you – and put your trust in Him for today, the future, and for eternity.

## 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.

## GOD'S KING

The people of Israel had been waiting centuries for the Messiah promised by God: a king who would usher in a time of peace, rule with justice according to God's laws, and bring God's 'shalom' blessing and wholeness to all the people. From the very beginning of the Gospel, Matthew states clearly that Jesus is this King (1:1) and proves it by tracing Jesus' line back through Israel's kings to David and Abraham. Among the long list of kings there had been a few, like David, Josiah, and Hezekiah, who had endeavored to lead the people in God's ways. The majority, however, had spurned God, ignored his commands, and consequently led the people away from God. Matthew 2 shows us King Herod was no different: his actions showed scant regard for God's Word or the welfare of his people.

Then in Matthew 3 a new king steps forward. What kind of king will he be? How will he wield authority? Will he obey God's law and encourage others to do so? What relationship will he have with his subjects? Our readings over the next three weeks will help us explore these questions.

Many British citizens see their queen on TV, but few get to meet her. Even fewer have the privilege of a private audience, and only four people in the world get to call her 'Mother.'

One of the great revelations of God's new kingdom is found in Matthew 6:6. The King of kings is also your Father. Enjoy your unlimited access to him!

## FIX YOUR GAZE ON GOD ALONE

Over the next week and a half, we will find ourselves walking beside God's precious people, the Israelites. These passages will show us pain, discomfort, uncertainty – but they will also show us a God who loves his people, who is hugely powerful, holy, and in control, and who will ultimately have the victory. We will be encouraged to fix our gaze on God alone and hold firm to his promises.

Genesis ends with Joseph's death, and with God's people in Egypt – not yet in the land God had promised to Abraham. During Joseph's time in Egypt, the Israelites had prospered. But in Exodus, we find a new king 'who did not know Joseph' (1:8, ESV). He did not seek to honor God, but instead, to oppress the Israelites and to stunt their growth. We will reflect on what this meant for the Israelites – and what it might mean for us and for our world.

Moses is a key character in these readings. He is imperfect and flawed – but God uses him. The first six chapters of Exodus are, in part, a lengthy conversation between Moses and God. How amazing that God would speak to Moses in such a way, and get to know him personally, offering reassuring words and signs of encouragement!

May we all, over the next few days, also experience God's love and provision – as well as his holiness and might – as we read these passages of scripture.

## THE EXODUS

Now we are going on a journey with the Israelites. It's going to be some ride. Think of a movie like *Indiana Jones* or a book or movie from *The Chronicles of Narnia*. There are magicians, fires, storms, fights, and plagues. This is some story.

Having read the above, you might say, 'What has that got to do with me?' Or you may say, 'What has that got to do with Jesus?' The answer to these questions is... a lot! We will see that God cares for his people. We will encounter a holy God who cares about justice. These chapters in Exodus show us that there is a need for deliverance. God shows his people that they can rely on him and will find their strength in him.

Feeling a bit battle weary? Perhaps you're wondering what God is doing in the midst of your trials. Or wondering how God will enable you to live by his grace.

Find comfort and joy in these chapters in Exodus. Know that we see in these a foreshadowing of our great deliverer. We will be reminded of how God spares his people through the atoning sacrifice of lambs. We will see how God delivers his people from slavery and despair. We are reminded that Jesus will be our ultimate defender and deliverer. He is our atoning sacrifice: the lamb who loves his people.

Buckle up and enjoy the adventure that is the Exodus.

## THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING

Social commentators write that we are living in an increasingly divided world. On social media we can place ourselves in 'echo chambers' where we are exposed only to opinions in line with our own. The result is a growing 'us' versus 'them' mentality.

The apostle Paul's letter to the Romans is one of the most influential books in Christian history. Paul wrote his letter around AD 57, to a divided church. Rome, situated at the strategic heart of the Empire, was a melting pot of cultural identities. Paul was an apostle to the non-Jewish world, the Gentiles, but he was trying to heal a rift between Jewish believers and Gentile believers. It's hard to overstate the huge cultural differences between the two groups. In this letter, Paul levels the playing field and brings everything back to the fundamentals, reminding his original readers, and us too, that in the end, despite our differences, believers are to be one people of God. We are all subject to sinful natures and are in great need of salvation. This salvation has been made available by God coming 'in the flesh' as Christ. This changes everything.

The early-medieval theologian, Augustine of Hippo, was converted to Christianity after reading a passage from Romans 13 that exhorted him to leave his old way of life and 'put on Christ'. This is the essence of the argument in Romans - that to 'put on Christ' changes us so fundamentally that we no longer focus on our differences but on what binds us together - Christ.

# THE INBETWEENERS

Romans has some of the most notorious and beautiful passages in the Bible. Paul isn't always easy to unlock. Perhaps these key verses from chapter 6 will help.

Consider... 'We ... have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?' (Romans 6:2). 'Anyone who has died has been set free from sin' (Romans 6:7). 'Do not let sin reign in your mortal body' (Romans 6:12). 'Do not offer any part of yourself to sin' (Romans 6:13). So, are we dead to sin, or not? Are we free of it, or do we still struggle with it? The answer – to both questions – is 'yes'!

Welcome to the world of 'already and not yet'. We live between the decisive battle which has happened (Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension) and the final victory which will happen (when Jesus returns). Sin and death have already been defeated, but have not yet been destroyed: our status and our future are not in doubt, yet enemies still prowl around. Our life in Christ has already begun but is not yet complete: the Holy Spirit is at work within us, transforming us and guaranteeing our future hope, yet we still struggle with sin.

We are the inbetweeners. Paul wants us to stand on the solid ground of what God has already done, while waiting eagerly and patiently for what God has not yet finished. As we wait, the Spirit is at work within, conforming us to the image of Jesus. Are you ready to join in?

# WHO(SE) ON EARTH ARE WE?

Exodus is a book which broadly falls into two parts. From the beginning to chapter 15 verse 21, we are told the amazing story of a group of abused Hebrew slaves living under the tyrannical Pharaoh in ancient Egypt. In their pain, the Hebrew slaves cried out, and their desperation was heard by their God who acted on their behalf, powerfully setting them free to begin a journey into the unknown under the leadership of Moses.

In our readings (15:22 – 27:1-21), we will travel onward with the Israelites. The journey does not go smoothly. The Israelites have spent generations learning what it means to be slaves, so they have no idea what it means to be free people. The struggle to emerge from the restrictive chrysalis of slavery is not an easy one for them. Who were they now that they were a free people?

The Israelites were to learn that their identity was inextricably bound up with the answer to a deeper question. Just who was this God who had intervened so dramatically and decisively on their behalf? Why had he exerted such effort to free them? What could he see in them? And what sort of God was he? Fickle or faithful? Cruel or kind?

As we journey with Israel through the challenges of the desert to their encounter with God at Mount Sinai, we will learn the answers to these two foundational questions with them. Who are we – and who is our God?

## HOPE IN DIFFICULT DAYS

The Jewish people, recently returned from 70 years in exile, now faced the challenge of rebuilding their Temple and city. Was this to be the promised golden age that the prophets had foretold? No, it fell far short of that. Nevertheless, God was at work among the people, and we are going to explore two of the three prophets writing during this era.

Haggai, a contemporary of Ezra, preached four short sermons that called the people to stop being distracted by their own priorities and come back to the Temple rebuilding project that had lost momentum. He also called them to personal purity and invigorated their efforts with hope for the future. Zechariah prophesied at the same time as Haggai. He shared a sequence of cryptic visions, addressing the immediate circumstances of the people, as they sought to re-establish themselves in the land. He also anticipated future tragedy and subsequent restoration. A major, messianic thread in his visions is the coming 'Branch' who will rule as Priest and King (e.g. Zechariah 3:8; 6:12,13). This anticipation of Christ includes his suffering, his exaltation and his ultimate return to rule the nations (Zechariah 14:9).

Our immediate situation is not that of a remnant returning to the Promised Land, but we do live in days of difficulty and discouragement. We also need to hear God's Word through Haggai and Zechariah as they call us to put God first and to trust him, both in the now, and for the future.