

INTRODUCTION

Like it was yesterday, I remember the day God brought me into a personal relationship with Himself. I had always gone to church: I had gone to Sunday School and faithfully attended youth groups, I rarely missed a worship service and was a soloist in the choir. But, on that day, I realized that Christianity wasn't about my church activities - it had everything to do with having a saving faith in Jesus. And it wasn't until sometime later that I came to understand that church isn't just a building or an institution; rather it is God's family, redeemed by his Son, gathered to worship him and to bring Him glory - to serve one another and grow in faith - and together, to minister wherever he leads.

Throughout Scripture, time and time again, we see God teaching people these very things. In his great story, Old Testament to New, we learn about his love and care for his people and about his plan worked out for them to live in community with him and with each other.

In Exodus, we see God's attention to detail, not just for the rebuilding of the temple, but for the priests and their consecration as they are called to intercede for Israel's sin. Despite their rebellion and idolatry, God once more restores his people and renews his covenant with them. Making them his own, God will now dwell in their midst.

The prophet Zechariah served God during the time when the remnant of Israel had returned from 70 years of exile in Babylon. While much attention was being given to rebuilding the temple, Zechariah reminded the Israelites that God cared for Jerusalem and longed for a covenant relationship with his people. Zechariah's visions and rich imagery present the clearest messianic passages of the minor prophets, pointing to God's love, grace, and forgiveness.

Job is a unique Old Testament book; it is not about a nation (like Israel in Exodus or Zechariah); it is about one man - in relationship with his God and with his community. It is an intimate telling of a man's overwhelming suffering, of his faith, and of his interactions with his friends. In this book, God has much to teach us about His purposes, much higher than ours, that invest in his people and bring him glory.

Matthew continues God's story. He writes of Jesus' power and authority, about his ability to heal disease, cast out demons, and even control nature. Matthew also writes about Jesus meeting spiritual needs, forgiving sinners, and calling those unacceptable in men's eyes to follow him. Prophecies have been fulfilled, and Jesus disciples through his words and actions.

Jesus shows his sacrificial love for all those he came to save in the latter chapters of John's Gospel. John gives his account so that we may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and believing in him, have life.

While expressing heartbreak over his own people's rejection of the gospel, in Romans, Paul affirms that God has kept the promises of his covenant, offering salvation to his elect, both Jew and Gentile. his mercy is now extended to everyone; his riches are for all who call on him.

Now God calls us to faith, one by one. He brings us into relationship with him, showing us his love and care. And he is building his church from every nation throughout the world. We have fellowship with him and one another. Together, may we glorify him!

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.

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.

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 Zechariah as he calls us to put God first and to trust him, both in the now, and for the future.

JOB DONE

All the Gospels give a lot of space to Jesus' last week. In John, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem in chapter 12, meaning that his last week takes up nearly half the Gospel. A biography that picks up the life of the subject in his early thirties, then focuses on his last week, seems strange. But it is deliberate. For John, Jesus coming into the world as one of us is important (John 1:1-14). His miracles are seen as signs of something deeper (John 2:11), his teaching features prominently; all are recorded to help the reader believe (John 20:30,31). But the heart of the Good News is that Jesus died to save us and rose to give us new life; so this is where the focus lies.

We pick up the story as Jesus leaves the city and heads to the Garden of Gethsemane. The action is played out against the backdrop of Passover; for John, Jesus' death is part of the plan of God that stretches back through time and through scripture. Just as the death of the Passover lamb ensured deliverance for the Israelites, so Jesus' death ensures deliverance for us. His cry from the cross (John 19:30) declares that he has done what he came to do.

We live in the light of the salvation that he secured. As you read, look for the signs of God accomplishing his purpose and be encouraged, reassured and challenged to live in your world as a follower of the crucified Savior and the risen Lord.

AN AMAZING PUZZLE

When I told a couple of friends I was writing notes on Romans 9–11 they gave me a sort of ‘rather you than me’ look. Certainly, these chapters are not the most immediately accessible part of Scripture!

Paul had his missionary eyes on Rome, that he saw as a base from which to launch the good news of Jesus to a wider world. Not having met the church there, he wrote this letter of introduction. Some introduction! It turned out to be the greatest exposition of the gospel ever penned, telling how a just God has made a way for people to be made right with him, through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ.

‘Justified by faith.’ But where does that leave God’s chosen people, Israel, who believed that being right with God was a matter of nationality and good behavior? This is the question Paul addresses, not in anger, but in sorrow (9:2; 10:1). He is heartbroken over the attitude of his own people. He tackles the issue by posing lots of questions. They come thick and fast, and the answers he gives gradually build a picture of how God deals with his people, both Jews and Gentiles. A wonderful picture emerges as the pieces of the jigsaw are put in place.

So, these are not easy chapters. Please be patient! We will travel together, and at the end we will be rewarded, I trust, with a deeper understanding of how God fulfills his purposes for the world Christ died to redeem.

MAKING THE TRUTH UGLY

Romans 12:1,2 looks backward, challenging us to remember all that Paul's been teaching since he declared his confidence in Romans 1:16,17. But it also looks forward, encouraging us to offer our whole lives in response. Fleshing out what a living sacrifice looks like is Paul's concern throughout this section of his letter until Romans 15:13.

The relationship between Jew and Gentile in Christ is a key issue throughout Romans (e.g., Romans 2,3,9-11), but with the discussion of the strong and the weak it becomes central. While there's widespread agreement that the issue here was friction between Gentile and Jewish Christians, there are different opinions as to how to characterize it.* The proposal that makes most sense is that the strong were both Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians no longer observing the Law. The weak were Jewish Christians struggling to put their previous religious practice to one side. Probably having to live among Gentiles because they've confessed Jesus as the Messiah,** they're now a minority caught between their new faith and their old traditions.

That the tension was significant, can be seen in the pejorative nickname the weak. The nickname has probably been given to them by their fellow Christians, who have little patience for their scruples. The behavior of the strong risks pushing the weak out of the church altogether (Romans 14:15). They're making the truth so ugly that they risk denying the cross.

* See Douglas J Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT), Eerdmans, 2018, pp 828-829. ** Moo, p 831.

MEETINGS, MAYHEM, AND MOSES

How can a holy God come near an unholy people and they live? As we read these vivid chapters from Exodus together, we'll be faced with this question many times and from many different perspectives. We'll be confronted with God's absolute separateness from us and our inability to somehow climb up to his level. We'll see the cost of atoning for sin and its clinging guilt, without politicians' apologies, excuses or rationalization: blood and sacrifices, shocking and disturbing perhaps for us modern readers. There's much detail in some of the passages and you may be tempted to skip through some of it. I'd encourage you not to, but to consider slowly and carefully every verse and ask God to speak to you through his Word. Even if it can be hard to relate to sometimes, hang in there and keep on focusing on meeting with God in his Word.

The Old Testament gives us unique insight into Jesus (Luke 24:27), through either predicting, preparing for, reflecting or resulting from the person and/or work of Christ. So, as you read through Exodus, this is an opportunity to consider Jesus further and more deeply. As we are dazzled by God's holiness, let's worship Jesus who left heaven and took on flesh. As we read of God's fierce and righteous judgment, let's thank Jesus for receiving it in our place. As we watch the Israelites' perpetual disobedience, let's thank Jesus for forgiving and saving people like us.

JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

My wedding planner friend uses the tag line Taking Care of the Details. Couples share visions of the 'perfect' wedding day, and she strives to make dreams come true. Success depends on paying close attention to their preferences, so she can 'catch' their vision, formulate a viable plan of action, then take care of a formidable array of details.

God had entrusted Moses with a mind-blowing vision: 'make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them' (Exodus 25:8). Exodus 35-39 closely resembles earlier chapters (25-31) and includes repeated affirmations that work on the tabernacle and its furnishings is done ' (just) as the Lord commanded' (Exodus 39,40). God's vision was executed by conscientious conformity to God's 'pattern' (Exodus 25:9) and careful attention to detail.

Over the next ten days, follow the progress of this ancient architectural wonder. Marvel at how such a wide and vast variety of materials, people and skills are marshalled and mobilized to build a sanctuary that will be filled to overflowing with God's glory (Exodus 40:34,35). Meditate on an even more breathtaking project in which 'you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit' (Ephesians 2:22), a living sanctuary destined to be nothing less than God's eternal home (Revelation 21:3). This is the vision God has entrusted to us. And he invites every one of us to partner with him in its execution.

JESUS' RESTORING POWER

Our Bible readings for this coming week are a series of encounters carefully recorded by the Gospel writer, Matthew. All are very different, but held together by the fact that, in each situation, Jesus' intervention transformed the lives of the people he met. It's the stuff of high drama – a man afflicted with leprosy, a Roman centurion, a mother-in-law and a possessed man, not to mention a herd of pigs! Add a paralyzed man lowered through the roof, Matthew himself, and a woman who interrupted Jesus just as time was running out for Jairus' daughter. Last, but not least, there are blind and dumb people whose sight and speech were miraculously restored. You couldn't make it up if you tried! Real people. Real needs. Real solutions in Jesus, the promised Messiah.

We're given glimpses of Jesus' divine authority and power, his compassion for individuals and his ability to meet people's needs in just the right way. Alongside this, as hostility from the Pharisees grows, is his desire for people to turn away from their sins and follow him.

What about us? How can we relate to these stories 2,000 years later? The world we live in now is very different to first-century Palestine, but Jesus is constant. The power and authority that he has are as real today as they were then. Jesus wants that same power to transform us as he works in us, through us, and for us.

SPIRITUAL PAIN

Dame Cicely Saunders, the founder of the hospice movement, coined the term 'total pain' to describe the emotional, psychological and spiritual distress that may accompany the physical pain of a serious illness. The book of Job gives us an insight into spiritual pain. It tells the story of a good man, with a strong faith in God, who loses everything. We share his distress, as he and his friends struggle to make sense of his situation and its implications for his faith.

I am writing these notes as the Covid-19 pandemic takes hold, another situation in which people struggle to make sense of suffering. The book of Job does not give us an easy answer, but it does enable us to see why some solutions fall short.

The first two chapters set the scene and give us background not available to Job and his companions. The rest of the book of Job, apart from a brief epilogue, comprises speeches made by Job, his companions and, finally, God himself. Over the next few days, we will hear from Job and two of his companions.

Each speech is a carefully crafted poem; it may help to read them aloud, or to listen to them from an audio Bible (there are several versions available on the internet).

'The book as a whole illustrates that a full understanding of God's reasons for events is not a prerequisite for faithfulness amid terrible suffering.'

*ESV Study Bible, Wheaton: Crossway, 2008, p 870