

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!

ZECHARIAH

TWO PROPHETS. ONE VOICE.

In 587 B.C. (some say 586 B.C.), Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and Judah came under his complete control. He took many of Judah's most prominent people into Babylonia for a long period of exile. In 538 B.C., after Persia had conquered the former Babylonian empire, the Persian ruler Cyrus allowed the captive Jews to return to Judah. There they began the work of rebuilding the ruined Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, with the aim of re-establishing worship. However, the reconstruction was halted by opposition from their non-Jewish neighbors and eventually the Jews lost enthusiasm for the Temple project, preferring to concentrate their time, energy, and resources on rebuilding their own lives. Enter the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, whose ministries began and intersected in 520 B.C., the second year of King Darius' reign.¹

Haggai's and Zechariah's message to their Jewish compatriots is essentially the same: put God first in your lives! For Haggai, this means completing work on the Temple. He berates them for spending too much time and money on their own personal comfort. By failing to get their priorities right, they deprive themselves of God's blessing and are consequently leading an unfulfilled and unsatisfied existence. Focus on rebuilding the Temple, and they will see God's blessing restored. For Zechariah, rebuilding the Temple and giving God his rightful place are a preparation for the nation's cleansing and revival as a light for the whole world. God will return to them in glory beyond anything they could imagine, for through his righteous priest-king to come (whom we know as the Messiah Jesus) God will gather a people for himself from all nations and Jerusalem will be a great, prosperous and peaceful city, where all peoples will gather to worship him.

The exalted, hope-filled message we encounter in Haggai and Zechariah will be interspersed with commentary on Psalms 141, 142 and 143. There we shall see how David finds help from God in times of danger, loneliness, and despair.

¹ Hag 1:1; Zech 1:1

JOHN 18–21

A NEW PASSOVER

The passages covered during this series are so familiar that we might be tempted to skim over them. My invitation is to ask you to slow right down and read carefully – perhaps even to write some out so that you notice the details. A first key to God’s Word speaking is allowing it to reach us afresh.

Notice the stress on God’s sovereignty in these passages. There are numerous references to the fulfillment of Scripture. Jesus makes it clear that his arrest can only happen with his consent when the first attempt is frustrated (18:4–8). John presents us with a Jesus who is not at the mercy of events: he remains throughout the still center of the action. All of this serves to stress that God’s purpose mysteriously goes forward despite the bitterest attempts to thwart it.¹

Notice also that this is a gospel from Jerusalem, not Galilee. A significant proportion of the first 11 chapters of John consists of healings, controversies and teaching at feasts, all happening in Jerusalem and not recorded in the other Gospels. We meet characters (such as Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Lazarus), all of whom live in Jerusalem or nearby. Acts 6:7 and 15:5 tell us that many priests and Pharisees become followers of Jesus. I think it is the witness from Jerusalem that provides in John 18–21 much more detail of Jesus’ ministry there and substance to the behind-the-scenes discussions in corridors of power. Some of them were undoubtedly there.²

Notice finally how decisively the resurrection changes everything. It’s the resurrection that forces the disciples, who weren’t expecting it, to look for biblical passages to understand it as the fulfillment of God’s promises. And it’s the resurrection that proves God’s sovereignty, turning a monstrous death into a Passover that rescues God’s people, not just once but always and forever.

¹ Cf Acts 4:27,28 ² Eg John 7:45–52

ROMANS 9–16

ONE IN CHRIST

The epistle to the Romans can seem intimidating. It has been the subject of many theological volumes. It's easy to forget that this was a letter written to possibly one or two hundred Christians in what was then the largest city in the world (possibly one million people).

Writing from Corinth – he was yet to visit Rome – Paul has confirmed, in the earlier chapters of Romans, his calling as an apostle to the Gentiles and he has set down his agenda. He has explained the difference that Christ means for faith and the new life in the Spirit that is now available to all. In these next chapters, Paul explores what this means for Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome. There are strong words for both. Paul, the pastor, wants his Jewish listeners to understand how Christ is the fulfilment of all that God has planned. He wants his Gentile listeners not to flaunt their freedom from rules in front of their Jewish brothers and sisters. He wants both sides to love and accept one another – and to understand what it means to be one in Christ.

There is a sense throughout of Paul writing to a young church he loves and in which he longs to establish a new covenant model of a united people of God. Although he hasn't yet visited Rome, he knows some of the believers there (e.g. Aquila and Priscilla). Corinth was a hub for travel in the Mediterranean world and this interaction is not surprising. Threaded throughout are clues to the context in which Paul was writing.¹ As we wrestle with our own faith in the light of Romans, let's allow this to shine on our own uncertainties and differences in today's context. May we learn more, as Paul prayed, about the God who called us to belong to Jesus Christ – and to be united in him.

FOR FURTHER READING

John Stott, *The Message of Romans (BST)*, IVP, 1994

Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans (Part 2)*, SPCK, 2004

¹ See also Acts 18–28

EXODUS 28-40

WHAT MATTERS TO GOD?

The first half of Exodus is one of the most dramatic narratives in the Bible, so our readings in the second half may seem less exciting because they describe the details of a mobile worship center called the ‘tent of meeting’. At times you may even be tempted to speed read; the particulars of ancient Israelite worship may not seem relevant today. That would be a mistake, however, because you’ll miss a very important question in any age: what matters to God? As you’ll see, there are at least three parts to the answer.

First, worship matters to God. I was struck that from the top of Mount Sinai God explained the particulars of worship so that his people would know him better. How does your worship help you to know God better? Second, obedience matters to God. Throughout these readings you’ll encounter two phrases: ‘The Lord said to Moses ...’ at the beginning of a section, followed by, ‘... as the Lord commanded Moses’ at the end. God spoke, the people obeyed. It sounds easy but it’s not, as the golden calf and our own lives demonstrate. Third, holiness matters to God. As you read, try to imagine what it was like inside the tent of meeting: the sights, smells, and sounds. They were all designed to remind Israel that God was holy, that is, ‘exalted or worthy of complete devotion as one perfect in goodness and righteousness’.¹

There’s another important question underlying the descriptions in these readings: why does it matter to God? The answer is: he wants to dwell with his people. Commenting on the tent of meeting, God says, ‘There I will meet you and speak to you; there also I will meet with the Israelites ... Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God’ (29:42–45). The bottom line is this: what matters and why it matters is that God wants a relationship with his people, including you, and that’s exciting.

¹ Meriam Webster

MATTHEW 8 & 9

‘KING OF WONDER’

It's a breath-taking ride with Jesus, the miracle-worker! Into these two chapters, Matthew packs multiple healings, exorcisms, and displays of Jesus' authority over the forces of the world. Preceding chapters were devoted to preaching and teaching – here, the focus is on Jesus' miraculous deeds. Matthew is trying to build up as complete a picture of Jesus and his ministry as he can.

Theologically, this Gospel is primarily concerned with the person of Jesus Christ and how he brings into being God's wondrous new action in the story of Israel. In Matthew's Jewish worldview, the people of Israel – having gone through exile and now subject to Roman rule – are in desperate need of fresh and radical leadership. This is the context into which Jesus comes, proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom. For Matthew, Jesus is the Good News – God's anointed king, succeeding and surpassing David himself. The miracles must be seen in this light. They are not merely power demonstrations, to amaze the people (though they certainly do that). They are markers of Jesus' role and identity as Messiah, God's chosen representative. He comes to restore God's people from the forces of darkness: from sickness, from sin, from chaos, from death itself. His saving powers are so abundant, so full of grace, that they spill over to non-Israelites too. Perhaps Matthew is preparing the way for the extension of Jesus' kingdom well beyond Israel's borders.

A secondary but vital theme is the nature of faith. Repeatedly, Jesus comments – positively or negatively – on the faith of those who come to him for healing or deliverance. Matthew intersperses this catalog of miracles with two vignettes exploring what following Jesus involves. As we allow ourselves to be amazed again by Jesus' power and authority, may we also come to him in faith and worship.

FOR FURTHER READING

RT France, *Matthew (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries)*, IVP, 1985
Craig S Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Eerdmans, 1999
John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Eerdmans, 2005

JOB 1-3

THE TRIAL OF THE UPRIGHT MAN

The book of Job is one of the most painful and tragic stories within the Bible. It is a piece of wisdom literature, often grouped with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Unlike these, however, which read like instructions or sermons, Job is a story with two separate parts. The first two chapters and the epilogue at the end are written in prose, telling the events of the story. Most of the book, however, is poetic dialogue, as Job and his friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar hold debates. In chapters 32–37 a fourth friend, Elihu, speaks. Finally, at Job's request, God responds from the whirlwind to give his final word.

Just as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* contains a play within a play, the book of Job depicts a trial within a trial. The story begins with God holding court with the angelic beings in a heavenly throne room, declaring the righteousness of his servant Job. Job is upright and blameless and most of all fears God. Fear might seem a strange word to us, but it is the principal way the Old Testament describes our right response to God. All the wisdom books assert that fearing God is the way to wisdom. Fearing God and its connection to wisdom is the first major theme in Job.

Then Satan challenges God that Job's faith is just a result of his prosperity. Satan argues that Job is playing God along, because he knows that if he acts one way then God will of course bless him. Satan accuses God of creating human devotion only by handing out blessing. The second major theme in Job is a question of theodicy, whether prosperity and blessing are directly linked to righteousness before God.

So, we are taken to the trial within the trial where Job's prosperity and family are first removed before finally his health is taken away too. The third and final theme is a response to suffering as Job and his friends try to understand if there is a reason behind Job's tragedy.

TUESDAY, JUNE 28, 2022

THE HEAVENLY COURTROOM

PRAY Father, today I want to tune my heart to the frequency of the Spirit. I yearn to trust and obey you.

READ **JOB 1**

MEDITATE CONSIDER ‘When peace like a river attendeth my way, / When sorrows like sea billows roll; / Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say / “It is well, it is well with my soul”.’¹

THINK FURTHER This first chapter of Job is split into three distinct sections. First, it introduces us to Job, a righteous man who feared God. Second, we are transported into the heavenly throne room, where God is present with his angelic beings. Finally, Job becomes a pawn in a divine test where his faithfulness is challenged by the removal of his wealth and his family. Very quickly, over a matter of just a few verses, we are introduced to deep tragedy. We are taken to the extremity of human suffering.

As fellow humans, it is easy to superimpose our own sufferings onto those of Job, but we must be careful not to lose focus on the fact that the story begins not with the trial of Job but the trial of God himself. The arrival of Satan in verse 6 introduces us to a familiar adversary, but here he is called ‘The Satan’, a legal term meaning ‘The Accuser’ or even ‘The Prosecutor’. The heavenly court becomes a heavenly courtroom. The Satan accuses God by saying that Job’s faith is only dependent on God’s blessing. If it is taken away, Job’s faith and righteousness would be worthless. Does Job only love God because of his propensity to bless? Satan accuses God of being like a cosmic vending machine, dispensing blessings in response to good faith. To demonstrate that this is not so, God then allows Satan to inflict Job with the tragedies that follow. Job becomes the evidence that faith is not dependent on prosperity.

At the end of the chapter, Job proves that faith transcends his situation. God is worshipped in sorrow as much as in joy. Job is an amazing example to every believer of how we can worship even in times of suffering.

APPLY If you are going through a difficult time, take a moment to try and worship God, finding that God is in our suffering as much as in our joy.

PRAY Dear Heavenly Father, through all the ups and down of life, sometimes I need special grace from you to see me through. I surrender anew to your will for my life.

¹ Horatio Gates Spafford, 1828–88

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 29, 2022

IN DUST AND ASHES

PRAY Speak to me Lord, so that when I speak to others, my words will be an echo of your voice.

READ **JOB 2**

MEDITATE **CONSIDER** ‘Change and decay in all around I see. / O thou who changest not, abide with me.’¹

THINK FURTHER Job chapter 2 continues with a near repetition of the court scene in chapter 1. The conversation between God and Satan intensifies as again God asks Satan if he has seen his servant Job. Job has become the evidence that faith is not linked to prosperity – his integrity has held even though his life has fallen apart (v 3). Here we are told an important but challenging detail of the whole book, one that will frame the discussions that follow: Job’s misfortune has come without reason. God is not punishing Job: rather, Job is the evidence that human beings can love God whatever the circumstances.

Satan, however, is not content that the evidence for this is good enough and so he continues the test and removes Job’s health. At this moment, Job reaches his lowest ebb: verse 7 tells us his body was covered in sores. Amidst this suffering, God’s evidence holds true. In the middle of oppression, Job still does not sin. Despite calls from his wife, Job refuses to curse God but instead he claims that trouble needs to be accepted in the same way as blessings.

At this point Job’s three friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar arrive to console their friend. Over the next few days, we will see that the friends do not do a great job of comforting Job. At the end of chapter 2, however, in verses 12 and 13, we are given an example of good pastoral care. They identify the magnitude of Job’s suffering; they weep with him; and then they simply sit in silence with him for seven days. Can you imagine that? They simply abide with him.

APPLY Often at times of great tragedy your presence with those who are suffering is more important than your words. Who at the moment is need of your love and support?

PRAY Loving Lord, forgive me when I turn aside from others’ problems. Renew my compassion so that I will draw alongside those who are hurting and struggling.

¹ Henry Francis Lyte, 1793–1847, ‘Abide with me: fast falls the eventide’

THURSDAY, JUNE 30, 2022

DESTITUTION – IN WORDS

PRAY Gracious Father, I'm thankful that you give me strength for today's demands, patience in problems, and power for pressures.

READ **JOB 3**

MEDITATE **CONSIDER** 'Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.'¹

THINK FURTHER The importance of Job's words in this chapter cannot be overestimated.

They are the words of a man who has reached rock bottom, who can no longer understand the point of his own existence (vs 1–3). Their presence in Scripture gives permission to anyone who needs to cry out in a similar way. Here, as in the psalms of lament and Jeremiah's words after the destruction of Jerusalem, the Bible doesn't try to silence those who need to vocalize their distress. In chapter 3, Job finally articulates the visceral pain of his loss. His speech proposes that the world would be a better place without him in it.

Job's words resonate with the story of creation in Genesis 1. In verses 3–10, he draws on the themes of day and night as well as light and darkness. His words almost invert the creation process as day and night are fused together and the light is extinguished – leaving the primordial darkness that was originally over the face of the deep.² Job's suffering has led him to the point that he wishes he had never been born and that he thinks creation would be better off without him.

This leads him to question why life is given to those who are suffering. It is a cry of destitution, since Job has nothing else to give. As he listened to Job, God gives us permission to express our own moments of destitution to him. Even if our situations do not seem as extreme as Job's, we all have moments where we feel weighed down and destitute. At those points, we may find that speaking or praying to God becomes really difficult. Job's cries give us an example of how to relate to God in these times, whether or not we use words.

APPLY Pray for those, known to you or not, who are at the point of destitution. Pray that they may know they have permission honestly to express their emotions before God.

PRAY Lord, I am reminded today that when I reach rock-bottom my feet are on you, the Rock of Ages.

1 Prov 31:8 2 Gen 1:2