

Job

Walk with Job on his journey from comfort and plenty through complete relational, material, physical and emotional loss. We see Job's fear of God tested, his trust in God shaken almost to the core. Friends and advisors bring nothing but confusion, guilt, and further frustration in their attempts to help. Job's understanding of God's goodness is solid, despite his doubts that God will hear him. Parallels between Job's plight and the also undeserved suffering of Jesus stand out. When God finally does speak, He gives some hard answers to Job's legitimate questions and prompts consideration from anyone who has been through rough times.

1 Samuel

This fascinating book is not only a compelling story of the prophet's life but a study in leadership from several perspectives. We see all kinds of examples from Eli, Samuel, King Saul, and Jonathan. God calls each of these leaders and works His will through their obedience and, at times, despite their poor and even sinful decisions. There is much drama with the Philistines, some brought on by poor leadership decisions. Always, the power and holiness of God is revealed.

Matthew

Our portions of this gospel are active views of Jesus – teaching, parables, miracles amidst moving through the area to reach many. We focus on individual interactions with people – disciples receive instructions for ministry, regular people witness the miraculous, Jesus' own family doubts him, and Pharisees are frustrated and challenged by this Christ they do not recognize. A recurring theme is the Kingdom of Heaven – what it means, who can enter, how and when it will arrive. Jesus' words and actions are deeply compassionate yet challenging in some way to everyone who meets him.

1 Corinthians

Paul mixes vibrant words of encouragement with blunt corrective instructions for these active believers who are working out their new faith in Jesus. We hear about the mysteries of the faith: the scandal of the cross, the simple, yet obscure to some message of redemption and power of the Spirit. These believers receive honest instruction in true Apostleship. Paul is brutally direct at times but his love for this faith community is pervasive.

JOB

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 is 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.

MATTHEW 9:35 – 12:50

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

Traditionally this Gospel is held to have been written by Matthew, also known as Levi, the disciple who was a tax-collector. Some scholars have other ideas, but most agree that the writer was a Jewish Christian who composed the Gospel with his fellow Jews in mind.¹ We see evidence of this in the care he takes to stress how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament Scriptures. In the passages we will be looking at, for instance, he describes Jesus as the Suffering Servant talked about by the prophet Isaiah (12:17–21) and likens his death and resurrection to Jonah's three days inside the belly of a fish (12:39,40).

Tragically, even though Jesus performed healings and miracles galore, which demonstrated that he was, indeed, the Messiah the Jews had been waiting for, we will read that many of his own people rejected him. There is increasing tension between Jesus and the Pharisees as he clashes with them over their interpretation of the Law and this hostility heightens to the point where they begin plotting his death. Even among the ordinary folk who flocked to see him in his home district of Galilee, he did not find resounding success, for we learn that many chose not to follow him. Indeed, we will also see that even John the Baptist and his own mother and brothers had doubts about his mission. This is not as surprising as we may think, for he was a very different Messiah from the all-conquering hero often expected.

These chapters contain an uncomfortable message for us too, for Jesus warns us that we, like him, will experience opposition. Indeed, these verses contain some of his most difficult and challenging sayings as he teaches us to take up our cross, putting him before family, and tells us that he has not come to bring peace but the sword. There is no warm, fuzzy gospel here, but for those willing to hear it, there is a call to radical and exciting discipleship.

¹ Eg RT France, Matthew, IVP, 1985, p17

JOB 11–21

TRUSTING WHEN LIFE HURTS

Preparing these notes on Job 11–21 has been a blessing and encouragement to me. Though these chapters may not be the most well-worn paths in Job, they are adorned by some fabulous outcrops of faith and revelation. You might cringe at the insensitivity of Job’s friends and long for them really to listen to him in his deep pain and loss, but you will be stirred by the faith of this man whom God has trusted with intense suffering. Alongside his remarkable journey of trusting God in appalling circumstances, Job allows us to glimpse his humanity. Like many of the psalms, these chapters are full of searching questions and the honest cries of a suffering heart. You may find your own yearning expressed here.

As you prepare, look again at chapters 1 and 2 to reset the context for the whole book. A spiritual tussle is going on in a realm that is invisible to Job. God has chosen him to be tested by Satan. This is so different to the unfeeling, simplistic theology of the friends who insist that wicked people suffer and good folk prosper, with no exceptions. It almost seems that God is proud of Job: ‘Have you considered my servant Job?’ (2:3). The sufferings of Job were anything but a sign of his lack of faith, or deliberate sin, as his so-called comforters declared. He did not consider himself or his family sinless (1:5) but knew that he was not guilty of the crimes imputed to him by his friends.

I lived in this book during twenty-two years of chronic pain, severe ill-health and recurring disappointment. I needed reminding that God is in charge, not Satan, nor the doctors and certainly not me. I was confronted with some of the accusations made by Bildad, Zophar and Eliphaz. Job’s faithful perseverance in trusting God, combined with his humanity and honesty, were an example and comfort to me. I hope they will be to you too. Let’s consider God’s servant Job.

1 CORINTHIANS 1-8

KEEPING THE FAITH IN DIFFICULT TIMES

When I agreed to write these notes, I thought I knew exactly how I would approach them. The challenges facing the Corinthian Christians were similar to those facing Christians today, particularly in affluent Western societies. Corinth was a cosmopolitan, religiously diverse community. A busy commercial hub, its upwardly mobile citizens enjoyed wealth but along with their competitiveness came divisiveness and a shallowness of spirit.

The local church, as so often, reflected both the character and the problems of its social environment. I intended to highlight parallels between the issues that marred the life of the Corinthian Christians and those that challenge the Western church today. I will still examine those aspects of church life but, between agreeing to write and actually putting down words, my world has changed and with it the life of my church.

The essential responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have suddenly changed my life – my personal life, my family life and the life of my community and church. My challenge is to apply Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians to a church today whose physical communal life is drastically altered. We meet only on the internet. Our financial situation is complex. We struggle to maintain our sense of community. We do not know how to be salt and light in a world where we cannot see or touch those who are in need. I do not know if the crisis will be over or not when these notes are read.

Yet God has not changed, nor have God's requirements for his redeemed people. How should we then live? The Corinthian church faced issues which still disturb the church today – divided loyalties, personal ambitions, racism, relationship questions, and sexual problems. Our failure to address these issues will continue to haunt the church into the future.

1 SAMUEL 1-15

LEADERSHIP: THE POTENTIAL AND THE PITFALLS

We're going to be immersed in 1 Samuel 1–15 for just over three weeks, and it seems to me that there's quite a lot we can learn about leadership here. Whether or not we are official leaders, we all have some degree of responsibility for others. We meet the priest Eli, who, albeit with many faults, disciplines the young Samuel. Samuel himself grows up to become a significant character in the history of Israel, specifically in his supportive role for Saul. Saul, as Israel's first anointed king, shows a mixed bag of leadership traits and we can learn from each – both how to and how not to do it! Jonathan gives us an insight into the kind of leader who just gets on with the job, trusting God. We will read of successes and failures, of power and powerlessness, of the potential of a child in God's purposes. We learn something of God's holiness and his refusal to be manipulated. We are challenged again about our own personal devotional life of submission to God and about the importance of personal integrity in our lives and leadership roles. We're reminded of the essential place of prayer for those we lead, and that there are times when we need to wait, rather than rush into precipitate and disastrous action.

The three psalms that we read on Sundays also have much to inspire us. All three are realistic about the problems that threaten us and show us how we can trust God, however terrible the trouble we may be in. I'm writing these notes in the UK, in the spring of 2020, a time when the whole world is in lockdown because of the coronavirus pandemic. Readers in all parts of the world will know how harrowing this trouble has been and may well have personal stories of tragedy and hope. We welcome the honesty of the psalms as we recognize that in the midst of evil we don't need to wrap up our feelings in pious expression, but we can tell God how it is.

MATTHEW 13-15

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

We find ourselves over the next couple of weeks at the heart of Matthew's Gospel. The parables that we'll initially consider reflect on much of what has already happened in the ministry of Jesus, whilst also looking ahead for glimpses of what is to come. As we'll discover together, the seven parables in Matthew 13 focus on the kingdom of heaven, dwelling on those who are citizens alongside those who are not. Just as the words of Jesus challenge our contemporary cultural context, these stories introducing the kingdom of heaven would have cut to the heart of those in the Galilee region where Jesus spoke.

Having introduced the kingdom by using parables, we will observe Jesus validating the truth he spoke of in his actions. During the next two weeks we'll see the truth of the kingdom being presented to different groups and individuals. Initially, we'll observe Jesus teaching in his hometown of Nazareth. Subsequently, we'll consider the impact of the kingdom of heaven on royalty (King Herod), a crowd of hungry Jews, frightened disciples, Pharisees, a Gentile woman and finally a crowd of hungry Gentiles. Within these three chapters we'll see the message of the kingdom of heaven challenging nationalistic divides as well as the individually powerful and weak in society. Noticeably, as the seed sown by the farmer flourished in just one of the environments in which it landed, so in the message of Jesus we are confronted with a mixed response. As we read what may be familiar stories to many, may we have the courage to allow God to challenge us in the contexts we find ourselves. As we contemplate the words recorded by Matthew, may we have the urge to respond as did the author, who when hearing the call to 'follow'¹ was willing to leave everything behind to pursue a life of discipline and devotion to his Savior.

¹ Matt 9:9