

INTRODUCTION

The vision of Scripture Union is to see people of all ages coming to faith in Christ, committed to God and his Word and living as salt and light. Whether writing materials for children, youth, or adults, that vision is always our goal. There are many testimonies of seniors reading our devotionals who came to faith as young children through the ministry of Scripture Union, have engaged with God in Scripture and prayer as a daily habit, and lived a lifetime of service for his kingdom.

As we engage with this 4th Quarter of Discovery 2022, we will see that the vision of Scripture Union is really God's vision for us. From Genesis to Revelation, God shares a story of utmost importance; Scripture tells of our creator's plan to provide a way for relationship with him. It teaches us how to grow in that relationship and how to live in ways that bring him glory. And it assures us of God's love and faithfulness, of his commitment to be with us, to help us, and use us.

In 1 Samuel, we will read about two kings of Israel, Saul and David. God called both men to be king, but their responses to that calling and the courses resulting from their choices differed greatly. There is much to identify with; we can glean much for our own walks with God as we study the ups and downs, the victories and struggles of these two men.

Although a short book, Malachi has much to teach us as it chronicles post-exilic Israel's questioning of God's love, his goodness, his faithfulness. But it doesn't just record the people's unbelief and resulting sin; the last book of the Old Testament proclaims God's great love for his people and tells of his coming with redeeming grace to end all fear and doubt.

The book of Matthew offers us a transition from the Old Testament prophecies to Jesus, the promised Messiah. In the chapters you will read this quarter, Jesus teaches, he heals, and he foretells his death and resurrection. His words concerning humility and forgiveness have challenged the Church and its members throughout history, and are relevant today.

We begin the Gospel of Luke this quarter. In his meticulous narrative, Luke shares with us the miraculous gift of John the Baptist, the wondrous Christmas story, and amazing events surrounding it. We see, right from the start, that everything about the child Jesus is extraordinary.

Paul's letter to the church in Colossae, written while in prison, offers critical doctrinal instruction about the divinity of Jesus and his sufficiency for both our salvation and our sanctification. He exhorts the Colossians to live godly lives, with the words of Christ dwelling in them richly.

Our readings end with the Prison Epistle of Paul to Philemon and to the church meeting in his house. While consisting of only one chapter, this letter is rich with teaching that the church is made up of co-heirs and co-workers, all equal in God's sight and called to lives of love and forgiveness.

Do you see it? Do you see God's vision for you? In the readings for this quarter, Old Testament to New, God is showing you his great love for you and his provision for you in Jesus. He is invested in your walk with him and other believers, in your growth as you study his Word, and in your life that reflects that of his Son - a life standing firm in the truths of Scripture as you serve 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.

CHALLENGING CORINTHIANS

Being a Christian in first-century Corinth was challenging. As a major port, Corinth was a melting pot of different cultures and religious views. It was full of temples to different gods, many of which survive today. Christians there had come to faith from a variety of backgrounds: Jewish, Roman, Greek, North African, wealthy, poor, free, slaves, women, men, children. Paul spent at least eighteen months planting this church (Acts 18:1-18). He faced pressure from the Jewish population because some Jews became followers of Jesus during that time (Acts 18:7,8; 12-17).

The Corinthian believers had lots of questions about what it meant to follow Jesus in such a place, and so they wrote to Paul to ask his advice (1 Corinthians 7:1). When we read 'Now about/concerning', Paul is picking up a question from their letter (e.g., 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1,12). Paul had also heard about quarrels in the church from visitors (1 Corinthians 1:11). The news and the letter prompted him to write this letter to deal with these interconnected issues.

The second half of the letter mainly responds to the Corinthians' questions, although Paul hasn't lost sight of the issue of disunity that he centers on in the first half. He challenges them to refocus them on the gospel, the heart of their faith. The gospel alone will unite them with one another, and enable them to speak and live consistently as believers in challenging Corinth.

A TALE OF TWO LEADERS

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times' is the famous opening line of Charles Dickens' novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. In some ways that could be a good opening for these readings too. We will read of the gradual demise of King Saul, but also the start of the difficult and protracted rise of David, ultimately to the monarchy.

Saul had become king of Israel as a concession by God to Israel's request for a king. But three times he disqualified himself. Eventually, God rejected him as king (1 Samuel 15:26). He was 'one of the most pathetic of all God's chosen servants,'* and in these readings we will see why, as Saul's personality disintegrates almost before our eyes.

But having rejected Saul, God revealed David to Samuel the prophet, who anointed him as future king (16:13). So we'll see the rise of David from shepherd boy to national hero, king's son-in-law and closest friend of Jonathan, the king's son. But we'll also see him have to flee and become a fugitive. This is the start of a transition of power from a failed king to one who will be a forerunner of Jesus Christ, 'who was descended from David according to the flesh' (Romans 1:3, ESV).

As we look at these two contrasting characters, we'll see that outward appearances can be deceptive and that as far as God is concerned, 'obedience is better than sacrifice' or religious ritual (1 Samuel 15:22 NLT). Those lessons are just as relevant to us.

*New Bible Dictionary (3rd ed., p1065), Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press

TURN YOUR EYES UPON JESUS

The last sound my father heard in this life was my mother's voice, singing the old Christian song: 'Turn your eyes upon Jesus.' (Helen Howarth Lemmel, 1863-1961). It's a good way to go!

St Paul would certainly endorse the sentiment. In 1 Corinthians 2:2, he wished to know nothing but: 'Jesus Christ and him crucified.' So who am I to argue? You'll be entitled to a full refund (metaphorically speaking!) if these notes on Matthew's Gospel stray from a sharp focus upon the person of Jesus!

That said, there is always a danger for those of us who have come to know Jesus as our friend. The man we meet in these chapters is not always an easy-going companion. Of course, we do find him gently healing, patiently teaching and chatting with little children, as ever. He can also be terrifying, both to those in authority and to his followers. He is a man with an extraordinary and agile intellect (something not often acknowledged) and someone grounded in the essentials of his own Jewish faith. These skills give him the confidence and authority to comprehensively outwit his critics in verbal exchanges. He shows a complete grasp of the metanarrative of history. He knows that he is himself the outworking of God's redemptive purpose for humankind. He is forever mysterious, revealed as supernatural: yes, one of us, but far, far more than that. And he is our friend. Let's turn afresh to him.

PULLING NO PUNCHES

I wonder if you've ever been convicted of changes that God is asking you to make in your own life. God often prompts us gently, helping us to reflect his heart and character, when perhaps we have become self-interested. Sometimes however, we need a wake-up call; God speaks in the earthquake rather than in a gentle whisper. In Malachi, we see God exposing Israel's disobedience and their disregard for God's covenantal promises; God condemns their way of life and their self-righteous attitude. He pulls no punches!

Completing the Old Testament, Malachi, meaning 'my messenger', addresses post-exilic Jerusalem around 450 BC, after the rebuilding of the Temple. Israel has become disillusioned and cynical about God's justice and, although Malachi admonishes God's people through a series of harsh truths, looking forward he also anticipates God's ultimate rescue plan, a prophecy which would be realized over 400 years later, 'I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me' (3:1).

It broke my heart to read, 'You have wearied the Lord with your words' (2:17). I wonder if like me you look at our world and our church and wonder if God is also weary with our half-hearted worship and our own interpretation of God's justice. As we engage with Malachi this week, perhaps we can also ask God to show us how we can respond wholeheartedly to this message.

THE HOPE OF GLORY

As I write these notes the world is deeply shaken by challenges created by a pandemic. Many people in many places are quarantined or constrained, either by choice or by law. Anxiety, loneliness, and anger are too often the fruit of this time.

Paul's letter to the church in Colossae was written from prison, probably in Rome. It is deeply encouraging to hear the words of the apostle as he reaches out in love to a church family he has never met. Despite his confined circumstances the letter overflows with love and joy as he seeks to encourage, teach and gently rebuke this young church.

The Colossians were struggling to define how they should live as followers of Jesus in a world with many competing voices and forces. They were being tugged in different directions by ideas and beliefs that were not consistent with the gospel of Jesus. The trouble was (and is) that those ideas and beliefs are attractive. They either take something away from the gospel in order to make life seem easier, or they add something to the gospel to make us feel like we can earn God's love.

Paul's concern is to remind them of the fundamental truths about who Jesus is, what he has done and how we should live as his disciples. Enjoy hearing this voice from prison and take up his challenge to live faithfully and joyfully in a challenging world, no matter your circumstances.

SIGNPOSTS TO SALVATION

The Gospel according to Luke. Doctor by trade, and a man who liked to treat folks as individuals. Through these passages we will become immersed in his narrative of people and events, from the humble to the jaw-droppingly glorious.

We see individuals young and old, like Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah. Devout people having their lives turned upside down by the power of God's Holy Spirit. We enter into their human stories, share their amazement at their other-worldly experiences. We see lowly shepherds in the company of heavenly hosts. We see single majestic angels. All, in their own individual way, signposts to salvation.

God's voice, through the prophets, hasn't been heard for 400 years, the time between Old and New Testaments. Now Luke can't get the words out fast enough (even if poor old Zechariah has to be struck dumb to play his part). Words of the past become prophecies of the future. The key humans are steeped in the teachings of their faith and it comes gloriously to the fore when God's Spirit moves on them.

Our year finishes with Paul's letter to Philemon about his runaway slave. This contains signposts of its own, perhaps of a more mundane nature, but no less important. Paul has had his share of divine experiences, and now seeks to build up the Christian community.

Time spent in the company of Luke and Paul will truly bless us, and signpost us to our Savior.