

1 Corinthians

Paul leads us through our own individual and corporate faith-community growth as we hear his concerns for the Corinthians. Readers are challenged to consider personal rights versus responsibilities to brothers and sisters in Christ. While Paul calls for personal holiness, he also reminds us to always take others into account when making ethical decisions. A particular focus should be on what is beneficial to the poor, vulnerable, and struggling. Paul finishes by reminding us of the risen Christ, our faith's foundation.

1 Samuel

The second half of 1 Samuel provides a detailed contrast between two kings appointed by God. Saul has much potential as God's first chosen king but continually bases his decisions on fear, jealousy, and striving for personal gain. David, also God's chosen, acts out of humility, service to God and others, and repentance when sinful. We are given the opportunity to learn from the discernment and obedience of Samuel through the years. There is also much to glean from Jonathan's behavior; his personal challenges reveal strong character with examples of honoring God and true loving friendship. The circumstances of these passages illustrate the very different outcomes for these first kings and those around them. Consequences of sinful decisions not only affect the individual but families, associates, and often, the entire nation of Israel.

Matthew

Our journey in this section of Matthew contains action interspersed with key teaching. Jesus interacts poignantly with his disciples and others. With open eyes and open hearts, we will learn not only through the 'red letter' words of Christ, but also by watching his decisions of who to engage and what kinds of activities he pursues. Jesus knows his time is short; paying close attention to how he spends his time is a lesson to us. Both his words and actions challenge us to self-examination as we seek Christlikeness in our lives. There is something here to challenge each of us; may we pay attention!

Malachi

Here is a devotional opportunity to prepare for Advent. Are we feeling discouraged, hopeless, or even forgotten by God? So were the Judeans. Malachi's prophetic message is one of challenge to the nation toward obedience and a return to hope for the fulfillment of God's promises.

Colossians

Paul is talking to a group of believers plagued by false teaching. He begins by reasserting Christ's sovereignty and preeminence. Paul is firm in his call to obedience but his deep love for this church pervades these verses. His strong language regarding sins, deceitful ideas, and harmful habits is paralleled with equally powerful exhortation to live fully in the other-focused light of Christ, exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit.

Luke

Heading into Christmas week, we receive Luke's Spirit-filled account of the beginning of Jesus' life. We are treated not only to the stark event details, but also to some of the emotions, hopes, and doubts of the people involved. We can slow down and notice these events and people in fresh ways with the help of the Spirit.

1 CORINTHIANS 9-16

CHALLENGE TO CHANGE

The Corinthian church was vibrant, but also beset by problems: Paul affirms the liveliness and tackles the problems head on. Here we encounter the New Testament church in the raw. There is so much we can learn as Paul lovingly challenges them. We find crucial doctrinal and ethical teaching which grounds us in the essentials of our faith. We also read passages which have been reckoned hard to understand and controversial – for example, on spiritual gifts. I have tried not to avoid the difficult verses, commenting on them even when it has been tempting to focus elsewhere within the allotted passage! May God give us understanding and obedience as we wrestle with his Word.

How might we expect to be challenged? Various discipleship thinkers talk about three dimensions of following Jesus: ‘up’, ‘in’ and ‘out’. These chapters will address each of these. The first dimension of discipleship is ‘up’, namely our relationship with God the Father, through Jesus, by the Spirit. These chapters give us rich resources to grow closer to him, for example through teaching on the Lord’s Supper. The second dimension of discipleship, ‘in’, focuses us on the life of the body, the church; the third, ‘out’, on how we relate to the wider world. I believe it is these last two elements of discipleship, especially relationships within the church, with which these chapters help us the most. A big part of Paul’s solution to the issues at Corinth is to get individuals and factions to think of others rather than themselves. I believe that once we are clear about this, some of the passages we struggle to understand come into clearer focus.

One of the great needs of our day is for healthy churches which are missional, loving, and full of the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul’s teaching shows us the way and challenges us to change. May our churches become communities which truly live up to the name ‘body of Christ’.

FOR FURTHER READING: Anthony C Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, Eerdmans, 2006

1 SAMUEL 16–31

TWO WAYS TO LIVE

The two books of Samuel tell the story of Israel's first kings, Saul and David. Up to this point, God was Israel's king and the people only had ad hoc leaders (judges) appointed by him. However, Israel now demands a king, a more stable figurehead to fight the Philistine threat. Although they thereby reject God as king, the Lord agrees to grant what they want but commands Samuel, Israel's last judge, to warn Israel: established power brings the possibility of the misuse of power for selfish purposes.¹

Saul, the first king, initially looks ideal – tall, handsome, and gifted – but his disobedience on two occasions (chs 13 and 15) reveals a vital flaw and he is rejected as king. As our readings show, the Lord seeks a man after his own heart and David is anointed (ch 16), but Saul refuses to give up the kingship. As David's popularity grows (he kills Goliath and becomes a trusted warrior, musician and, later, son-in-law to Saul), so does Saul's jealousy: he increasingly recognizes God's choice of David and tries to kill him. Eventually, David escapes from the court, persecuted by Saul until the latter's death in the battle against the Philistines (ch 31). This opens the way for David's kingship in 2 Samuel.

Juxtaposing Saul's and David's storylines invites comparison. Their attitudes trace the larger patterns of human behavior, challenging us to reflect on which way we follow. In Saul, we recognize our temptation to grasp what God has not given (or has taken away): envy, jealousy and a self-destructive stubbornness not to let go of our will and repent. In David, there is hope for a different way, as he demonstrates trust in the Lord, waits on him for kingship and refuses to take it by killing Saul. He also proves to be faithful to his calling, in serving his people's interests while being rejected and suffering. In his character and in the road from humbleness to exaltation, we catch a glimpse of Christ's attitude and journey.²

¹ 1 Sam 8 ² Phil 2:5–9

MATTHEW 16–18

THE CHALLENGE OF FOLLOWING JESUS

Prepare to be challenged and loved! These three chapters of Matthew provide us with perceptive tests about the depth of our commitment to Jesus, as well as giving us deep assurances of his love and care for us. We see the wonder of who Jesus really is as well as seeing how he ministers and wants us to minister. This Jesus is one who demands our lives in every aspect, but he also assures us of his strength and loving concern for us.

Chapter 16 is a pivotal chapter in Matthew's Gospel. The previous chapters have shown much opposition to Jesus, as well as him revealing to his disciples who he really is and what he has come to do. This chapter shows how Jesus continues to lead his disciples along slowly so that they can grasp the grandeur of his true identity. We see the ongoing hardness of heart of the religious leaders as well as some of the crowds, but the disciples, who have been open to Jesus' identity and mission, are now given further revelations of God's Son. Jesus will be put to death and the disciples struggle to come to terms with this.

The subsequent chapters dramatically show us Jesus' glory, as well as how believers should live daily. They tell us how relationships within the church can make or mar its witness. As well as declaring the gospel message, God's people are to live as a family of faith, characterized by humility, purity, wholeheartedness, accountability, care, openness, forgiveness, and freedom from resentment. If we want to be great in the kingdom of God, we should look to Jesus and his loving care and ongoing response to those who daily put their trust in him, and seek his Spirit's help to face the challenge of all-out discipleship.

These chapters are both sobering and encouraging. Prepare for clear challenges from Jesus, as well as seeing his gentleness and care for his sheep.

MALACHI

IN THE WAITING ROOM

Waiting can be stressful. We wonder whether what we're waiting for will ever happen. We start to think our hopes have been misplaced. Malachi was called to address the Judaeans, who had been waiting a long time for the promises of God to be fulfilled in the way they expected.

The book lacks the information that is found in most other prophetic books: the prophet's father's name, where he came from, in which king's reign he prophesied. Malachi means 'my messenger' and is not found as a name elsewhere. It could be a designation adopted to express his role as God's spokesperson. The word for 'governor' (1:8, pechah) is used in the Old Testament for Persian provincial governors. So, Malachi addressed the Judaeans after their return from exile in Babylon, when it was a province of the Persian Empire. Work on rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem began in 520 bc, prompted by Haggai and Zechariah. It was finished in 516 bc. By Malachi's time, the Temple had been functioning long enough for cultic abuses to have crept in and been accepted. The abuses he addresses are similar to those Nehemiah dealt with on his second visit to Jerusalem sometime after 433 bc.¹ Such abuses might have occurred at other times, but the similarity suggests that Malachi was active around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, 450–400 bc.

His audience longed for fulfilment of the promises of earlier prophets about the restoration of Israel. They had become disheartened, disillusioned, lacking in faith, even cynical. In a series of six 'disputation oracles', Malachi challenges their attitudes and behavior toward God and one another, calling them back to obedience to the God who made them his covenant people and still loves them. There is a challenge here for us when we find ourselves in the waiting room, longing for God to act as we expect and wondering whether God really does love us.

¹ Neh 13

FOR FURTHER READING

Andrew E Hill, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, TOTC 28, IVP, 2012

COLOSSIANS

THE MAXIMUM JESUS AND ME

I was thrilled to be given this book for our next two weeks, for it contains so many glorious claims about the fullness of Jesus' authority. It will help us even more to prepare for Christmas and marvel at the incarnation when these colossal claims are shrunk into human flesh for our sakes. This prison letter by Paul, probably written in Rome around ad 60,¹ is his response to very disturbing news (ch 2) brought to him by Epaphras (1:7).

False teaching had infiltrated this new church to cause serious damage. Scholars call this the 'Colossian heresy' and though its exact nature remains unclear we can infer its characteristics by the refutations Paul makes. Its elements include Judaizing insistence on old rules, a pagan element worshipping elemental spirits and a Gnostic element that claimed special spiritual knowledge including angel worship and reliance on human wisdom. It seems rather perverse to be grateful for any heresy but, in response to its depreciation of Christ, Paul writes such magnificent theology about who Jesus is and what he has done for us.

He begins positively in thanks and prayer. Before launching into praise for the maximum Christ (1:1–15) – clearly directed at the heresy's false downgrading, Paul at full throttle affirms Christ's supremacy. He also writes openly of his own struggles and passionate concern that the Colossians should not be deceived (2:4). The lengthy heart of the letter goes on the attack against the false teaching (2:6–23), confronting its hollow philosophy, so dependent on human traditions yet daring to assert spiritual superiority by manufacturing so many extra demands. Chapter 3 gives a timeless picture of two wardrobes from which we choose daily behavior clothing, adding rules for Christian families. Finally, Paul returns to prayer before listing interesting fellow travelers. Signed off in his own hand, as well as in chains, this personal letter, though addressed to a specific problem, is packed with inspiration to challenge and encourage us.

¹ Acts 28:16–31

FOR FURTHER READING NT Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, IVP, 1986

LUKE 1:1 – 2:40; PHILEMON

TIME FOR A CHANGE

Luke's declared aim is to produce an ordered and well-researched account of the life of Jesus. He knows that other accounts exist (1:1) – he used some, Mark probably among them – but he can see the need of another, particularly to give certainty and assurance to his patron, Theophilus (1:4). He has investigated carefully and believes in the accuracy of his narrative. Readers, who will extend well beyond Theophilus, can trust it. He writes to give the church of the first century confidence in their convictions and we can expect the same outcome for ourselves.

He was writing history in the manner of his time – which may not be quite the same as ours. He also has a theological interest with an emphasis, as will be evident from the early chapters, on God and his saving activity. In both Luke and Acts, the work of the Holy Spirit is especially evident: look out for references to the Spirit over the next ten days. He also has a special interest in women and the poor, other themes that will emerge in our readings. God's concern for the poor will also emerge in Paul's short letter to Philemon, which we read at the end of the year.

Although Luke's intended audience seem to have a Gentile background, they are familiar with Jewish thinking and with the Old Testament. The many references and allusions are designed to demonstrate the continuity in God's plan and the fulfillment of Old Testament promise.

We can be grateful for Luke's trouble to investigate and write as he did, for his Gospel contains material that we do not find elsewhere: not only the birth narratives which we read this week, but also some of Jesus' best-known stories such as the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. Each day will start with a quote from an Advent or Christmas hymn.