

INTRODUCTION

Are we there yet? How many times did you ask that question when you were a child? My parents took my sister and me for a vacation at the shore each summer. We would spend a week with extended family, which meant that I looked forward to swimming, playing, and exploring with several cousins, all about my age. But the 2 ½ hour drive to our destination (without air conditioning) was tortuous, especially since I would get car sick. I wish that I had a dollar for every time I whined to my parents, “Are we there yet?” I’m sure they wished for those dollars, too!

The whole story of the Bible is, in one sense, about a journey—where God is bringing his own on a journey back to him. In the beginning, he created human beings to fellowship with him and to share with him care of the beautiful and perfect world he had created. Then the serpent came with deception and temptation, and mankind sinned, breaking not just fellowship with God, but breaking all of the world.

But God promised a way back to him. It would be a journey planned by him, overseen by him, and made possible by him.

This quarter, we will spend more time in Numbers. The Israelites have been on a God-directed journey toward the promised land, but are not there quite yet. God has much more than a physical destination in mind for them. He will use their journey to teach them about his faithfulness and about what it means to be in relationship with him. They are slow to learn, and they are forgetful—God is loving, and he is patient.

With Job, we encounter another journey, but his is one of the spirit. Job struggles with his perceived injustices in God’s dealings (or lack thereof) with him. Again, we see God’s care as he quite forcefully interrupts Job’s detour and directs him to truth about himself and about his creator and sustainer.

We will read about another journey, but this one found in the book of Matthew is about Jesus’ journey—he is coming back for us! His promise of this journey yet to take place gives us courage and hope for our own journey toward him. And again, God’s concern is not just about destinations; it is about our being prepared for Jesus’ return, readily serving him as we wait.

In Revelation, we are there: we have arrived at the actual, triumphant end of our journey and return to God. He doesn’t just give us glimpses of the wonder of heaven, though; through the letters to the churches, he graciously gives us more direction to guide our hearts toward him.

So, are we there yet? No, not yet, but our loving and faithful God is with us along the journey, with the Holy Spirit guiding us, the Word encouraging us, and Jesus preparing our place. The place where, once again, we will be in perfect fellowship with him, and share a destination more beautiful than we can imagine.

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.

DANCING IN THE DARK

It is now an established feature of election reporting that journalists accompany politicians on the campaign trail. Traveling at close quarters with party leaders and their team, news correspondents are able to provide 'fly on the wall' coverage of their efforts to engage voters. Unfortunately for the politicians, this means the cameras are still rolling, and the microphones still working, when they are confronted unexpectedly by members of the public asking awkward questions for which they have no pre-prepared answer. The result may delight viewers, but is often disastrous for the public image of the party and its representatives.

There is a sense in which Matthew 19-23 presents readers with dispatches from the frontline of Jesus' campaign to establish the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven, as it gathers momentum. Commencing in Judea but moving quickly to Jerusalem, where the campaign will reach its dramatic climax, these chapters allow us to journey 'up close and personal' with the Messiah as he encounters a variety of people, each with their own agenda and questions. Some are innocent and inquisitive, others calculating and malevolent.

Jesus, however, is never caught off guard. He is ready to respond to all who cross his path. Sometimes with compassion, sometimes with creativity, and sometimes with correction - and always with a wisdom that is utterly compelling. Continuing to speak truth to power, even as opposition to his kingdom-inaugurating campaign intensifies along the way, here is Jesus dancing in the dark.

PILGRIMS ON THE WAY

Getting ready for a long journey takes time! What clothes to take? Is everyone ready to go?

Numbers comes at a pivotal point in the story of God's people. God has rescued them from slavery in Egypt. They have arrived at Mount Sinai and God has provided for their needs both physical and spiritual. They have a covenant law to live by (Exodus 19,20), a tent of meeting for worship (Exodus 35-40), and rituals to ensure their sins are forgiven (Leviticus 1-27).

In Numbers, we see the pilgrims finally ready for their journey to the land of Canaan. We will read of their preparations for departure (chapters 1-10), their setting out on the way (chapters 10-12), the challenges and setbacks that face them (chapters 13-19), and finally their arrival in Moab with the promised land just in sight (chapters 20-36). Along the way the people learn lessons about holy living, the importance of leadership, the dangers of temptation, and how God is ever gracious and faithful to his promises.

As you read these early chapters of the book, look out for new insights that God will give you. Explore your own pilgrimage of faith and consider what it means to live for the God who still journeys alongside us today. Why? For in the words of the apostle Paul: '...these things occurred as examples for us' (1 Corinthians 10:6, NRSVA). So, from one pilgrim to another: enjoy the adventure!

SO CLOSE, YET SO FAR

God's people were so close. In a few months they had been rescued from slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea, led through the wilderness by a cloud and fiery pillar, and been fed by miraculous manna and quail. Now, here they stand at the border of the land promised to their forefathers. It's like a film that feels as if it's about to end, but you have an hour left. 'What on earth is there left to happen?' you ask yourself.

God's people were so close, yet so far: they were a 'rabble' (11:4); Moses' own siblings had opposed him (chapter 12); and now in chapters 13-19 their rebellion goes from bad to worse, resulting in thousands being killed and the rest being condemned to wandering in the wilderness for forty years. It doesn't make sense that people who had witnessed such wonders would rebel within months and wish they were back in Egypt – as slaves (14:3,4)! The Israelites had been set free, but didn't want to change. They had seen, but did not trust. They had heard, but did not listen.

Looking back at all this Paul wrote: 'These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us ... So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!' (1 Corinthians 10:11,12). May we listen to and heed these warnings, and make sure we are standing on the only firm ground of God's forgiveness in Jesus.

THE JESUS LETTERS

I still get excited whenever I receive a handwritten letter through the mail. There is something special about a personal communication like this, quite different from an email or text message.

When the apostle John was imprisoned on the Greek island of Patmos, he received a revelation from God about the events that would soon take place. He was told to write down what he saw and send the content to the seven churches in Asia Minor. There was a specific message from Jesus for each church, so it was like seven letters in one. Imagine the excitement of the leaders in these churches as they read what Jesus had to say to them!

While each message is distinct, the format of the letters is quite similar:

An introduction - who is speaking?

An encouragement - what is going well?

A challenge - what could be better?

Some advice - how can we improve?

In these readings, we will focus simply on the word of encouragement that is given by Jesus to each church. We can learn from this what Jesus looks for in his church, and this can be a stimulus to help us evaluate how we are doing in our own churches.

THE PAINFUL ROAD TO GLORY

The book of 'Revelation' is Jesus' message (1:1) to his puzzled and persecuted followers.

As we've seen in chapters 1-3, its first readers were situated in local churches across modern Turkey. They were experiencing increasing hostility from the Roman authorities, making life hard for all of them and causing some to even lose their lives (2:13). Experiencing hardship and suffering must have left them puzzled. 'How can God be in charge if things are so bleak?' Perhaps we sometimes ask that question too. If so, these chapters begin to supply an answer.

Significantly, the first thing we see in heaven is God on his throne (4:2) surrounded by worshippers (4:6-11). Whatever chaos may follow, God's sovereignty is history's anchor. A scroll is seen in God's hand (5:1), symbolizing the unfolding of world history and Jesus (the Lamb who had been slain- 5:6) is given the responsibility of opening the scroll. As he does so, we see in the subsequent chapters how the unfolding, chaotic story of life on earth is shaped by events in the spirit world of the heavens.

Using its bizarre imagery, coded number systems, sophisticated structure, and frequent Old Testament references, the rest of Revelation carries a simple but vital message: God is on heaven's throne and, despite the evil that is all around, King Jesus reigns: so, keep the faith, and don't lose your eternal reward in God's renewed creation! (2:7; 3:5; 4:4; 21:1-5; 22:12,13)

FINDING HOPE IN SUFFERING

Job can be a difficult book to study, especially if you already know how it begins and ends. Little is known about its date and author.

In case you aren't familiar with the book, it opens with a conversation between God and Satan in which God asks Satan, 'Have you seen Job? Now there's a man who loves and serves me really well' (1:8). Satan replies, 'Of course he serves you; you only ever give him good things! If life wasn't so good for him, he would soon show his true colors' (1:9-11). So God allows Satan to strip away everything from Job to prove that his worship is much more than skin deep.

Knowing the reason for Job's afflictions gives us a very different perspective on them. In fact, much of the book is Job wrestling with the big 'Why?', and his so-called comforters trying to come up with answers. They try to diagnose the problem and help Job find the solution, but their diagnoses are way off the mark, and the book ends with God making them apologize.

So, is there anything we can learn from all the 'wrestling' chapters? The Bible teaches that 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness' (2 Timothy 3:16). So, Job chapters 22-31 must be there for a useful purpose. In the next few days, we will uncover together some hope-filled truths, as we consider how to think biblically about God, justice, righteousness, and suffering.

THE WINNER TAKES ALL

'In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil' (1:1). The Book of Job is often portrayed as a study of suffering. That is only half the story. Its roots are deeply embedded in chapters 1 and 2. Look back now to remind yourself of its beginnings. What is going on? Who are the principal characters? What is their relationship? Who pulls the strings? Who's in charge? Who allows what, and why?

By the end of chapter 2, we see the scenario. In a spiritual battle, God wagers the accusing Satan that Job will not curse God even once, no matter what misfortune befalls him. Suddenly, the kingdom of heaven focuses on one God-fearing man!

Job knows nothing of this - why his life changes so radically, losing status, family, friends and health - nor that so much rests on his shoulders. One careless curse against God could deliver a victory to the Evil One (1:8-11; 2:5-10).

His three 'comforting friends' are no comfort. Eliphaz says Job must have deserved his misfortune by sinning; Bildad criticizes Job's insistence on his righteousness. Zophar reminds Job that God not only punishes the wicked, but that Job is getting off lightly! Job remains defiant; he has done no wrong by God, but rails 'where is God' and why is this happening to him? Time for the young Elihu to join in...

WAITING FOR HIS COMING

Over the next week, we will be looking at two chapters from Matthew's gospel known as the 'Olivet Discourse', in which Jesus prophesies about the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of this age. We will be shocked by great suffering and challenged to be on the alert. These chapters have been interpreted in numerous ways, and many have tried to answer the disciples' question in Matthew 24:3: 'When will this happen, and what will be the sign?'

As the events of the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded around the world, a lot of apocalyptic language was used in an attempt to explain what was going on. Some suggested that the end was near, others that it was judgment for sin. For many of us, we could suddenly relate to the people in Noah's days, eating and drinking and getting married (24:38) until disaster struck. With these events fresh in our memories, this is a good time to look at what Jesus actually said. Perhaps living through a global pandemic has given us a new perspective on the instability of this life and on the hope that we have as Christians for a future that is certain.

Whether we live through pandemics, natural disasters, war, or personal tragedy, our question should not be the extent to which current events relate to prophecies in Matthew, Daniel, or Revelation, but simply whether we are ready today if Jesus either returns or calls us home. When he comes, will he find us doing what he has asked us to do (24:46)?

THE PIONEER OF OUR FAITH

I was a bit surprised when the vicar said, 'We do not serve an ever-living Savior.' But, of course, he was right. We serve a Savior who suffered, died, and was buried; then he was raised from the dead and, praise God, is alive forevermore. In the next fortnight, we read the last three chapters of Matthew's gospel, which give us a full account, in 161 verses, of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

We shall accompany him, day by day, as he pioneers his solitary way to the cross and through death for us. We shall watch as nearly everyone withdraws their support from him – disciples, the crowd, the religious authorities, the Roman governor, and, in the end, even his heavenly Father (Matthew 27:46). It is infinitely shocking. The Lord Jesus is intensely human, and sensitive both to the malice and to the needs of the different people around him. Consistently he shows love, understanding, self-control, and faithfulness to God and neighbor. It is compelling to read and very humbling. We are drawn not just to admire him, but to worship him.

As we turn to this timeless story, we might echo the words of Godfrey Birtill's song: 'I will set my face to seek the Lord ... I will listen for his voice: my Wonderful Counselor, my Teacher ... my Inspirer ... my Jesus, my Savior, my wonderful God.'