

## Matthew

In the latter chapters of Matthew's gospel, we hear Jesus' words on healthy relationships in marriage, family, and larger communities. Jesus gives answers to some key questions, provoking thought and challenging his listeners, both then and now. Chapter 21 invites us to see Jesus in new ways from the triumphal entry, to the marketplace in the temple, to interactions with the chief priests and Pharisees. Jesus consistently chooses an unexpected perspective: a signal to us to pay attention. We then witness some of the last actions, thoughts, and stories of Christ before his death. We should always closely follow what Jesus is doing but specially to see what he prioritized toward the end. Jesus predicts destruction and persecution of his followers. He uses strong language and images to call his followers to watchfulness. His examples and warnings carry equal weight for us today as we discern what is true and good about our culture and our leaders. May our eyes be open and clear to see the way toward fellowship and oneness with our Savior.

## Numbers

Many of the accounts in Numbers serve as cautionary tales and we can notice the ways our own human nature resembles that of the Israelites. We are reminded of the mysterious holiness of God when we read the meticulous details given for the tabernacle setup. Moses' leadership challenges are the subject of Chapters 10-17: he faces rebellion and frustration from the people and even his own family. Perhaps we can relate?

## Revelation

We will take the courageous journey into this book, beginning with some blunt messages for the churches – we may recognize ourselves in both warning and acclamation. In Chapter 4, we enter the fantastical. A book written in exile, the Revelation is presented to us by John, who has many questions about the future of this faith, both personally and for his scattered siblings in Christ. We travel with John deep into his visions to see what truths are revealed for the global church then and now.

## Job

We pick up Job's story in the center of the book. There is much lofty, judgmental, and, frankly, wrong counsel from Job's friends. He is questioned, accused, and admonished for suspected sins he is not guilty of. We can take comfort that misguided advice in adversity is heard by God and those who give it held accountable. There is a caution in that fact for each of us. We also hear God speak directly and, ultimately, see Job healed and restored though many questions may remain.

## MATTHEW 19–23

### O JERUSALEM, JERUSALEM

With the words ‘When Jesus had finished saying these things’, and his exit from Galilee to enter Judea beyond the Jordan, Matthew 19:1 launches a new section of the Gospel, in which Jesus will enter Jerusalem for the final days of his earthly life. It will culminate with Jesus pronouncing woes on the Jewish leadership and his cries of grief for the city (23:13–39), preparing for the ‘Olivet Discourse’ (Jesus’ teaching from the Mount of Olives).<sup>1</sup>

In chapters 19 and 20, Jesus is repeatedly approached by people as he moves toward Jerusalem. Inquirers include Jewish leaders, people bringing children, the mother of James and John, and blind men. Through sayings, parables, teachings, and healing, Jesus continues to reinterpret Israel’s religion and theological ideas. He teaches inquirers and disciples what it means to be a subject of the in-breaking kingdom of heaven. Prominent in these chapters is the parable of the workers in the vineyard, where all who serve get equal reward (20:1–16).

The focus of chapters 21–23 is Jerusalem. Matthew builds on Mark’s narrative, amplifying the condemnation of Israel’s leadership and worship. As in Mark, Jesus clears the temple, curses the fig tree and engages in public debate with leaders challenging his credentials. The parables of the two sons and the wedding feast underscore his rejection and the radical inclusivity of the kingdom that embraces even tax collectors and prostitutes. After picking up more of Mark’s pre-Passion narrative, Matthew recounts Jesus’ blistering seven-woe attack on the scribes and Pharisees. Our readings end with Jesus’ grief-filled lament over Jerusalem. However, there is hope for Israel and the world, seen in the words of the psalmist that frame the section: ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’ (21:9; 23:39). By the end of the section, the scene is set for Jesus’ predictions of the fall of Jerusalem and the second coming. Then will come the cross, the resurrection and the Great Commission.

<sup>1</sup> Matt 24:3 – 25:46

## NUMBERS 3–19

### IN THE WILDERNESS

Our Bibles call this book ‘Numbers’, to reflect the many numerical lists found in the book. Jewish Bibles call it Bemidbar, ‘in the wilderness’. The two titles reflect the content of the book. There is a conflict between order and chaos. Sections alternate between regulations and structures appropriate for the people of God and the narrative of life in the wilderness with the daily reality of a sinful and willful people. The book covers 40 years of their journey, from slavery in Egypt to entry into the land of Canaan as the inheritors of the promises God had given to the patriarchs. As the book progresses, it becomes clear that the generation that came out of Egypt cannot be transformed into the pioneers of a new country. They would die in the wilderness and it is their children, born in freedom, who would inherit the Promised Land.

Paul refers to Numbers in 1 Corinthians 10, where he writes that these stories were written for our benefit, to caution us not to sin in the way that the Israelites did. This directs us to find parts of this story that are applicable in our situations. Paul warns us that we Christians are not as different from these Israelites as we would like to think. His warning<sup>1</sup> needs to be heeded. Like the Israelites, we are living in a time of transition: in our case, the time between our redemption from sin and our entry into the glory of fulfillment.

We will pass over most of the lists of names in this book. It is important, however, that we recognize why they are included. The God of Israel is also the God of individuals. Each one is known to him and each one is called to respond in obedience. Everyone has their personal identity defined in the context of their family and tribe. The actions of one person may have consequences for all who are part of their social network.

### FOR FURTHER READING

Raymond Brown, *The Message of Numbers*, IVP, 2002

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 10:12

## REVELATION 1–11

### MOVING BEYOND THE VEIL

The revelation given to the exiled John on the island of Patmos, with its vivid symbolism and dramatic images, has baffled many readers and the difficulties are multiplied by some of the strange ways in which it has been interpreted. In the notes that follow I refer to studies that have helped me to grasp the overall purpose of this book and I invite interested readers to follow up these sources. It would also be helpful to have a map of the eastern Mediterranean to locate the churches described in chapters 2 and 3.

As with any biblical text, an understanding of the writer's context is important. The author identifies himself as a 'companion in the suffering ... and patient endurance' (1:9) and as an exile on a remote island 'because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus' (1:9), suggesting the kind of questions he is wrestling with. The book does not come from the first phase of Christianity, but from a time when the Roman legions had destroyed Jerusalem and established an iron grip on Palestine, suppressing preachers or prophets who might pose a challenge to their dominion. John thus faced a tension between what he believed the gospel had promised and the harsh realities of a world in which little seemed to have changed.<sup>1</sup>

The book unveils a different, hidden reality. It invites us to follow John through the 'door standing open in heaven' (4:1) to view the world from the perspective of the throne of God. The Apocalypse breaks open the closed, earth-bound knowledge of reality, providing a transcendent vantage point on the unfolding of history. If that was important in the late first century, how much more crucial is it today when our culture has become secular, leaving millions of people alone in a world ravaged by greed and by the anguish caused by global pandemics? Don't be afraid of John's visions; ask the Holy Spirit for help in grasping the central meaning of this wonderful book.

<sup>1</sup> See Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*, Westminster Press, 1984, p84-110

## JOB 22–42

### WORDS FOR WHEN LIFE HURTS

Words might seem innocent enough, but they are weaponized in the mouths of Job's friends. Words can be dispensed easily enough, but they may carry barbs that make their retraction more damaging and painful than their ingress. Where they could be comforting, they kick Job when he is down. When they could be uplifting, full of hope and healing, they are bullying, laden with bitter condemnation. All in the name of cold theology.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar inhabit a simple world where good people always prosper and only evil folk suffer. Young Elihu burns with passion and spiritual zeal but shares their fundamental intolerance with Job's sufferings. They believe Job to be a serial sinner and inveterate liar. They are wrong.<sup>1</sup> They are of little use to him in his struggle. Job finds it hard to discern God's plan amid pain, but fundamentally he trusts. His friends may have meant well but their words angered God (42:7). Reread the first two chapters (the prologue) of Job and remember God's description of Job, especially when you are tempted to agree with the friends' opinion of him. We are what God says we are, not what others presume us to be. As we begin to read, pray this prayer by the late Eddie Askew of the Leprosy Mission:

Lord, if I'm faced with someone's need today,  
help me to offer silence.

Not in the coldness of indifference, but in warm welcome,  
to hear their version of events ... Teach me, with open mind and heart, to hear  
their words and thoughts.

To substitute the clichés I mistake for truth with quiet love.

Spoken through eyes, not mouth, in hand, not sermon.

In love, that comes before advice.<sup>2</sup>

Amen

<sup>1</sup> Job 1:8; 2:3 <sup>2</sup> Taken from *No Strange Land* by Eddie Askew, published by The Leprosy Mission, used with permission ([www.tlmtrading.com](http://www.tlmtrading.com))

## MATTHEW 24–28

### JESUS, FAITHFUL TO THE END

The final five chapters of Matthew's gospel take us to the conclusion of Christ's earthly ministry, culminating in his death and resurrection. Chapters 24 and 25 begin this section with the disciples admiring the magnificence of the temple in Jerusalem – and Jesus prophesying its destruction. This theme of the end times describes cataclysmic events which will herald Christ's return. References to the Hebrew scriptures give warnings against false prophets and living without heed to the judgment to come. Christ's followers are urged to be ready for his impending return. Parables of the ten virgins, the returning master and the sheep and the goats drive home the need to live before God with preparedness and compassion.

The remainder of the gospel concentrates on the last week in Jesus' life, beginning with the plot against him and continuing through to the final outcome. We watch as Jesus is anointed by an unnamed woman; we see him eat a last symbolic supper with his disciples; we hear him struggle with intense fear in isolation in Gethsemane; and we shudder as he is betrayed in the garden to those who hate him. We follow Matthew's account through Jesus' arrest, phony trials, torture, crucifixion, death, and burial, recognizing the injustice and ruthlessness of his enemies, the abnegation of responsibility by the Roman ruler and the weaknesses of his friends.

Matthew's narration is powerful. As he takes us through these events and relationships, he unfolds the magnitude of the contrast between the world's evil and God's love. The empty tomb and Christ's resurrection demonstrate the overwhelming power of that love over sin and death. The story ends with the risen Jesus appearing first to the women and then to the men, commissioning them to make disciples of all nations. As Jesus speaks to his disciples, we know that he speaks to us too. His concluding message is one of challenge and promise. The world needs us as witnesses to God's love, and we need Christ's constant promised presence to work through us.