

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.'

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...

GOD'S LOVE AND GOD'S PAIN

Jeremiah lived and worked in one of the most turbulent periods in Jewish history. He was called to his prophetic role in 626 BC and his prophecies cover the reigns of the last five kings of Judah down to the Fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The first of these, Josiah, introduced reforms during which he found the Book of the Law in the temple (2 Kings 22:1-13), but the rest ignored God. In the wider world, Assyria was in decline and Egypt and Babylon were the dominant powers with Judah trapped between them.

The northern kingdom of Israel fell in 722 BC, a result of turning away from God, but in the south Judah had failed to learn the lessons. They worshipped the local gods in the hope of guaranteed harvests. Oppression, injustice and a refusal to live by God's law were everywhere. The thrust of Jeremiah's message is that unless there is a return to God, disaster will fall at the hands of an invader from the north.

Jeremiah's message was not a popular one. Our world is very different, but we still assert our independence and reject God. God, as he did through Jeremiah, still calls in grace for people to come back. And in Jesus we see that grace more clearly. No one is beyond God's love if only they will receive it. Our calling is to warn of the danger of ignoring God, to share the good news of his love, and to call people to turn to God.

RUNNING WITH HORSES

Jeremiah's ministry as a prophet spanned almost 40 years. These were extremely turbulent years for God's people.

King Josiah and Jeremiah were contemporaries. Reform was attempted following the discovery of the Book of the Law (2 Kings 22,23; 2 Chronicles 34).

However, God's people persisted in going their own way and rebelling against God. Jeremiah's calling as a prophet was not an easy one. He had hard messages to bring to a rebellious people.

The chapters we are focusing on for the next week are full of oracles of doom! God has made it clear in the covenant given to Moses that if his people do not obey and follow his commands, then judgment will come (Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

Jeremiah's own relationship with God is a robustly honest one. He complains and argues with God (for example 12:1-4); he pleads with God on behalf of the nation (for example 14:19-22); he doesn't give up when the going gets tough (17:14-18) or when his own life is threatened (12:6).

Is there any hope to be found in what we will read this week? Yes! God's judgment is real and always has a purpose. He is trying to get the attention of his people (13:15) in order that they will repent and turn back to him. Restoration of covenantal relationship is always the goal.

God's ultimate answer to human sin and rebellion was to send his Son, Jesus as the Savior of the world.

NO COMPROMISE

Following from the last issue of *Discovery*, we arrive at the center of Revelation. This deeply challenging book is written for churches in the Roman province of Asia Minor on a collision course with the might of Rome. Followers of Jesus live in city states that lead the Roman world in the practice of the imperial cult, the worship of the Roman emperor. A rejection of this cult is an act of political and religious treason – there is no separation of church and state. Christians are uncomfortable outsiders: to choose to follow Christ can mean economic, political and social ostracism, even martyrdom.

A book about survival in extreme times calls for extreme language: apocalyptic language full of vivid imagery and layered symbols. This is a language of resistance where codes are used for those ruled by an oppressive power, outlining the real dangers of compromise. It's also a language that provides comfort for those longing for justice. Apocalyptic language 'draws back the curtain', revealing the reality behind apparent reality – a heavenly perspective on an earthly situation.

From Chapter 12 onward the vision is of an earthy empire that is doomed. Despite everything, John reminds his readers – and all of us – that God is still at work, powerfully acting in and through history.

The irony is that God unconventionally 'conquers' the world through weakness and suffering, through the death and resurrection of Christ, the Lamb who was slain. And the Christian community has an essential role in God's plan of salvation as a witnessing and persecuted church.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

In Revelation Jesus gives us a glimpse into the way things really are, the spiritual reality behind our physical world. And he reveals God's future plans. He knows how earthbound and limited our understanding is. He knows we need the gift of heaven's perspective so that we don't give up on him when trials arrive.

That does not mean Revelation is an easy book! Its complex mix of genres – letter, prophecy and apocalypse – requires different methods of interpretation. Apocalyptic writing is tricky for us because we are not used to it. First-century readers, however, were adept at decoding the vivid and complex imagery, poetry and symbolism of apocalyptic texts. Single words, images and numbers were loaded with meaning from Old Testament writings and contemporary Jewish apocalyptic writings as well as references to contemporary life. Sadly, there is not space to do justice to the richly layered symbolism of apocalyptic writing in each passage this week. If you wish to explore the symbolism in greater depth, I warmly recommend Ian Paul's excellent commentary.*

In this week's readings, Jesus reveals two contrasting cities. Through complex apocalyptic metaphors and symbolism, we are shown the spiritual realities that lie behind each city. There are warnings ahead... and invitations. One city is destined for total destruction, the other is destined for everlasting glory. It is not possible to be a citizen of both!

*Ian Paul, Revelation – *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, IVP, 2018

GLORY INTO GLORY

Preparing to write these notes I read through 2 Corinthians 1–6 fairly swiftly, not focusing on the details, but wanting to gain an overall impression. What came through was the remarkable mix of theological reflection, gritty personal experience and shrewd ethical instruction. As Paul anguishes over the wayward church at Corinth, he is overwhelmed with emotion and his thought takes flight in glowing words and moving insights. His longing for reconciliation with the church leads him to profound reflection on the reconciliation that God brought through Christ on the cross which stands at the heart of the gospel.

Paul's relationship with the church in Corinth was complex and need not detain us here beyond noting that their sexual immorality, their welcoming of false teaching into the fellowship, and their questioning of Paul's authority had led to a visit which caused him much pain. Withdrawing, he abandoned a second visit, instead writing a severe letter which brought a positive response - leading to the writing of 2 Corinthians.

It is a deeply moving document and it is such a privilege to be studying it with you. May I suggest that you take time to read the chapters through at one go? And if you feel you haven't time, may I be cheeky and suggest you make time! It will be well rewarded, and it took me just 15 minutes!

WHOSE REPUTATION?

Paul had planted the church in the Greek city of Corinth on his second missionary journey (Acts 18). The problems that arose in a church struggling to live out Christian values in a pagan world had multiplied as the church fell under the spell of false teachers. We cannot be sure of the details of their teaching, but they seem to have been held in high esteem. In response to the reports he receives from Corinth, Paul writes letters, only two of which survive in our Bibles.

The issues Paul addresses in 1 and 2 Corinthians are familiar to twenty-first century Christians, and Paul's response has much to teach us about living distinctive Christian lives, both as individuals and as church communities in the midst of secular society today.

Our section here begins with references to another letter in which Paul had taken the Corinthians to task for tolerating sinful behavior in their midst (7:8). How have they responded? He then moves on to the need for God's people to share their resources and lays down principles of Christian giving.

Paul has to respond to attacks made on his authority by the 'super-apostles' who have gained undeserved respect in Corinth, much of it by denigrating Paul. We see Paul's true priorities, as, refusing to promote himself, he focuses on his own weakness and God's grace.

Donald Carson writes: 'Here is the heart of the true apostle, a Christian so steeped in radical discipleship and firm self-discipline that his every care is for the people he serves, not for his own reputation.'*

*D.A. Carson, *From Triumphalism to Maturity*, Paternoster Press, 1996, p180

KINGLY READING

The chapters we're going to read from 2 Samuel capture the tectonic plates of Israel and Judah shifting, seen in the power struggle between the 'house of Saul' and the 'house of David'. In just nine chapters, we encounter battles, grief and mourning, dishonor and unforgiveness, flawed human kings, judgment and retribution, the holiness of God and unexpected kindness lavished on a nobody.

We're going to see some wonderful qualities in King David, but we also know he's a deeply flawed, sinful man. Even in his best moments, David is only the faintest whisper of the greater King to come, Jesus, who lavishes kindness and unmerited grace not on one individual but on all who call on his name; who doesn't plan to build a temple but *is* the new temple through which we can meet with God; who doesn't seek to unify a nation but instead has won a people for God from every nation on the earth.

How can we make the most of these chapters? First, let me suggest reading the verses carefully, really believing that God has meant each one to be there, even when they perplex us! Secondly, slow down (I hope I'm not writing that only for my own sake). Our lives all too often proceed at breakneck speed, but if we quiet our busy hearts, we'll hear God speak through his Word. And thirdly, read prayerfully - talk to God about what you think and what you feel, and let his Word be a springboard into his presence.