

## MATTHEW 26-28

### 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.

## JOB 37-42

### 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 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))

## JEREMIAH 1-17

### DO YOU WANT THE GOOD NEWS OR THE BAD NEWS?

When we refer to someone as ‘a Jeremiah’, we’re implying that they are the bearer of bad news. So, in our exploration of these chapters, we shall often hear the word ‘Woe!’, we shall return constantly to the condemnation that Judah has broken the covenant with God, and we shall shiver at the repeated, terrifying descriptions of the enemy at the gates, crouching to pounce in retribution.

Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry speaks into a time of political and religious crisis in the southern kingdom of Judah, during the reigns of Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah. Caught between the competing powers of Assyria, Egypt and Babylon, Judah is a vassal state, attempting to balance tactical alliances with an urge for independence. Jeremiah’s message makes the point that mere structural and political change is not enough. There must also be a change of heart, particularly among the influential classes: the king and his officials, the priests and the prophets who advise him. There must be an obedient return to the covenant relationship with God.

There is no coherent chronological pattern to these prophetic words. This is an anthology, a freewheeling, stylistically varied collection of utterances. Sometimes it’s by no means clear who the speaker might be. The imagery is vivid: the Lord is the faithful husband and Judah the adulterous wife; Israel and Judah are like two contrasting sisters; the advance of the ruthless power of the surrounding states is threatening and imminent. Yet Jeremiah himself appears as a gentle, compassionate patriot. He is not a natural bearer of such a harsh message and he takes the national situation personally, clearly broken-hearted as his words are rejected. Maybe he’s the appropriate model for us, speaking truth to power in an age when much of society and government appears increasingly deafened. Like him, we may often feel isolated and lonely, but the message is still the same: a change of heart and an obedient life are the only foundations of a stable, just society.

## REVELATION 12-22

### JUSTICE AND HOPE

To many people, the Book of Revelation is a very strange book indeed. The kaleidoscope of images, the use of numbers, the strange structure – all of this can be very off-putting, making it a difficult read. As someone said in a different context, ‘If you aren’t confused, you don’t really know what is going on!’

More strange, even, than the book itself is the way that many Christians read it and use it. It seems to me that we should read Revelation considering the issues that arise – as with reading any book of the Bible. That will involve looking at the context it was first written in and what kind of writing it is. Most of us are not familiar with the conventions of apocalyptic writing, but it is clear that the first followers of Jesus were quite at home with it: note the puzzled response of the disciples when Jesus uses parables,<sup>1</sup> yet their happy acceptance of his apocalyptic teaching!<sup>2</sup> We will need to consider its place in the canon of Scripture – its use of the Old Testament and its parallels in the New. We must also attend carefully to the content – what does the text actually say?

The passages we are looking at involve some of the most challenging in the book – and perhaps the most challenging in the Bible. Yet all through, two themes stand out.

The first is God’s justice. John appears to be aware that judgment raises questions. He includes various asides emphasizing that God’s judgments are just and that those who do not accept the free offer of the gift of life will find that their destiny reflects their decisions. The second is hope. Shining through the darkness of chaos and judgment is the light of the hope of the new creation that is to come, that God will one day be with his people – a hope that feeds and sustains us as we look to him.

## 2 CORINTHIANS

### CONFLICTS AND RESOLUTIONS

The apostle Paul's relationship with the church in Corinth was not easy. He, with Aquila and Priscilla, had founded the church over eighteen months in AD 51 and 52, before departing for Ephesus, but he kept up a pastoral correspondence. He refers to an earlier letter that is now lost.<sup>1</sup> The Corinthians wrote back; their letter is also lost.<sup>2</sup> A variety of issues then arose to do with the health and good order of that gifted and growing congregation. Paul addressed them effectively in 1 Corinthians, but further complicating factors refused to make life easy, leading Paul to make a brief, extremely painful visit (2:1) and then to write a further letter 'with many tears' (2:4; 7:8) which is also lost. 2 Corinthians is the letter written by Paul in ad 57 after learning through Titus that the tearful letter, though it had caused hurt, had also achieved a result (7:6,7). By this Paul was deeply comforted, so much so that later he was able to return to Corinth and its local port Cenchreae, where he dispatched his famous letter to the Romans.<sup>3</sup>

If this seems complicated, it is nothing compared to the tangles in relationships that the letters reflect! But then, human beings have shown themselves well able to excel in misunderstandings and misrepresentation. Nor is this profound defect easily overcome within the churches, as experience makes clear. What is distinctive in this letter is the extent to which Paul reveals, and we glimpse, the heartfelt and physical sufferings that he underwent for the sake of Christ. Into no other apostle do we have such insights nor, we should add, do we encounter such personal confessions in much ancient literature. Once more, Paul shows himself to be extraordinary and, to be true to the man, he gives all the glory to God and takes none for himself (4:7).

Paul's conversion is a remarkable testimony to the truth of the risen Christ. So is his ability to endure.

1 1 Cor 5:9 2 1 Cor 7:1 3 Rom 16:1; compare the Gaius of Rom 16:23 with 1 Cor 1:14

## 2 SAMUEL 1-9

### EARTHLY KINGS AND HEAVENLY REALMS

These passages offer timeless, daily challenges, as we read how individual choices affect whole families, their legacies, and their relationships: choices which lead to murder, betrayal, love, envy – it is all here. With cautionary hindsight, we witness mighty men rise and fall, we see human strength emboldened by God or totally quashed by him. We witness human self-seeking in preference to seeking God's heart and how those with great potential can rise and fall.

As disciples, we understand the complexity of daily choices, but that is compounded here by promises of power and untold wealth. We are challenged to keep focused on the eternal, to avoid turning our eyes to the immediate glitter. Every story has two sides and these are no exception – Saul, who reigned for so long, fades disappointingly in comparison to David, the shepherd boy. Through David, God saw fit to establish an earthly throne of enormous influence and power and to go beyond David's comprehension by declaring that this was the never-ending kingdom.

The messianic throne of David would become clearer as the ages passed, revealed through a King who would leave everlasting glory to be born in a lowly place, to be crowned with thorns and to die. While other kings came and went, God was establishing a new kingdom built on decades of faithful servants, many of whom struggled and seemed insignificant. When they handed that insignificance to God and walked with him, when they obeyed God before their own desires, God revealed himself. We will read of changing kings and kingdoms, of divided houses being reunited, but what never has, or will, change is the overriding narrative throughout this story (and all stories): the King of Kings is the one who has been, who will be, and who always is to come.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

David Tsumura, *NICOT The Second Book of Samuel*, Eerdmans, 2019  
K Chafin, *The Preacher's Commentary, 1 & 2 Samuel*, Thomas Nelson, 1989  
R Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*, WW Norton, 2000