

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 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). My life all too often proceeds 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.

‘OH THE PLACES YOU’LL GO!’*

Oh, The Places You’ll Go! is Dr. Seuss’s wise and witty counsel to a young protagonist on the brink of great adventure. Optimism about what lies ahead is balanced by healthy doses of realism. The young adventurer will ‘soar to high heights’ but also experience ‘bang-ups and hang-ups.’ He will ‘ride high’ on waves of fame and popularity but also encounter danger, because ‘enemies prow!’ and ‘Hakken-Kraks how!’ He will get ‘mixed up with many strange birds.’ The ride won’t be easy but success is ‘98 and 3/4 percent guaranteed!’

Jesus’ baptism marks the beginning of his public ministry. After his ‘graduation’ ceremony at the Jordan, the Father publicly declares that he is ‘well pleased’ with his beloved Son (3:22). And I like to imagine that, as Jesus is sent on his way, the Father whispers in his ear, ‘Kid, you’ll move mountains!’

But Jesus’ first stop is not a mountaintop but a desert, an initiation test of sorts from which he emerges triumphant (4:1-13). Then he’s ‘off to great places!’—mountains, plains, fields, lakes, synagogues, and homes throughout Galilee—preaching, teaching, healing, and exorcising. Jesus stirs up both amazement and controversy, love and hate, joyful acceptance and angry rejection. As he rubs shoulders with lepers and tax collectors, he rubs the Pharisees the wrong way. His popularity ratings soar... then plummet. But Jesus plods on. He will never stop pleasing the Father. He will fulfill his mission. Success is not just ‘98 and 3/4 percent’, but 100 percent guaranteed!

*Dr. Seuss, *Oh, The Places You’ll Go!* (Random House, 1990).

FAITH TO FOLLOW JESUS!

The first half of the gospel of Luke offers us a rich feast of stories about Jesus. He is in Galilee and has not yet started the long journey south toward Jerusalem. In these chapters, we have an extended season of preparation, not only for Jesus, but also for his followers.

As we read through Luke 7-9, we need to be looking in two directions. First and most importantly, we will get to watch Jesus in action. What is he like, and what does he say? How does he act and react? How does he reveal his identity and his mission in these chapters?

Second, be sure to remain aware of the disciples. This diverse group of incredibly 'normal' men (plus women supporting him, too, as we will see) are people very much in the process of learning. To be a disciple was to be an apprentice—someone learning on the job as they lived and worked alongside their master. They had a lot to learn, and they sometimes seem to miss the lesson in front of them. But let's not criticize them. Let's join them. We, too, are called to be Jesus' disciples: to be with him and learn from him. We will be glad for his patience with them once we recognize his need for patience with us too!

Let's pray that these days in Luke 7-9 will leave a mark on us as disciples of Jesus!

LEAVING THE WILDERNESS

If, like me, you are more attracted to literature than to algebra, you will not be instinctively drawn to a book called 'Numbers.' In the English Bible it has that name because of all the census data it contains. However, the Hebrew Bible calls it 'In the Wilderness,' derived from the phrase in Numbers 1:1. It is really the story of the formation of the people of God in preparation to enter the good things he has in store for them.

We all find ourselves in the wilderness from time to time. Sometimes the Holy Spirit leads us into the wilderness, as he did Jesus, and the Desert Fathers in the fourth century. These intentional times of pressing into God, facing up to temptation and spiritual struggle can be so productive.

At other times, we find ourselves in the wilderness without any clear sense of purpose—dry seasons in our lives, when resources are scarce, and life is a struggle. The journey of God's people from captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land could have been as short as two weeks. Instead, it took 40 years. The physical journey was just the context for a deeper journey with God.

Numbers has three main sections and two 'transition' sections:

The wilderness of Sinai (chapters 1-10)

Travel (chapters 10-12)

The wilderness of Paran (chapters 13-19)

Travel (chapters 20,21)

The wilderness of Moab (chapters 22-36)

We are looking at the final travel section and the final period in the wilderness. There is a way out of the wilderness, but the lessons required can be tough!

PURSUE TRUE GODLINESS

Ephesus was a bustling cosmopolitan city, renowned for its wealth (it had the biggest bank outside of Rome), its culture (the temple of Artemis was one of the wonders of the ancient world) and its tolerance (all sorts of sexual behavior were common and accepted). I wonder how that might compare with the society in which you live?

The church was being led astray by one set of leaders who had gone off on a tangent from the truth, and another set of leaders who were adding layers of additional requirements to the gospel. Paul needed to send someone to help the Ephesian Christians be confident in the truth. Paul's chosen envoy was a shy, insecure, comparatively young man with poor health—maybe not the most promising candidate on first appearance. But Timothy was loyal both to Paul and, more importantly, to God (Philippians 2:22), he was gifted (1 Timothy 4:14), and he knew the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:15).

Paul was not able to write to the church leaders, as some of them were the ones who were leading the church astray. Although he directed this letter to Timothy, and included many personal comments, he was also addressing the church at Ephesus as a whole, and through them, speaking to us today.

As you read, do you identify more with Timothy, thrust into a daunting role, Paul, a mentor and guide for younger believers, or the Ephesian church, needing encouragement and guidance to pursue true godliness?

A MUCKY BUSINESS*

'The Ideal World' is a UK-based TV shopping channel, broadcasting from studios in Peterborough. However idyllic that sounds to you(!), we simply don't live in an ideal world. It's complicated, at times brutal, confusing, and distressing. Getting easy access to buying things doesn't quite address that!

2 Samuel 13-19 and accompanying psalms (63,64) face up to the real world. The moral dilemmas accompanying war are here, as are personal failure with its lasting impact, family feuding, misuse of power, sexual abuse, and plots to overthrow the government. Amid much mayhem, we are only given fleeting glimpses of God. That does not make us deists, believing that God the Creator has a hands-off, non-interventionist approach to his creation. Rather, we see God working within the rawness of human sinfulness, using flawed people but remaining true to his promises. When David sins catastrophically, the birth of Solomon becomes a sign of hope. When Absalom has a cast iron plan to destroy David, God ensures it is thwarted. We see God raising up people of faithfulness (like Uriah, Nathan, an unnamed woman, Barzillai) and giving hints of his kindness through David's acts. We gain fresh insight of God at work in the muddles of our existence and renew our trust that just as all this was background to the coming Messiah, so we are sure his promise of a new heaven and new earth will bring the ideal world (with no shopping!).

*A Mucky Business with MP Tim Farron on Apple Podcasts.

‘NOT WITH A BANG BUT A WHIMPER’

The title is taken from the final words of the poet TS Eliot's masterpiece, *The Hollow Men* (1925). Eliot's weary conclusion about the world's end could also be used of the main character in this series of readings. King David is nearing the end of his life and we sense that he is now a broken man. His political and military victories are distant memories. The man who united warring tribes and established a kingdom is now a shadow of his former self.

His daughter Tamar is raped by her half-brother Amnon (2 Samuel 13:1-21), who in turn is then murdered by another one of his sons, Absalom (2 Samuel 13:23-39). Absalom plots a coup d'état against David and comes to a brutal end (2 Samuel 18:9-15). Much of David's history does not make for easy reading, and without giving the game away, this series of readings will feel uncomfortable to our modern western sensibilities.

Themes of revenge and bloodshed abound (chapters 20 and 21), sitting uneasily alongside wonderful songs of praise (chapters 22; 23:1-7). The series ends on an ambivalent note, as David courts the Lord's displeasure by carrying out a national census (chapter 24:10). But despite his many failures, Israel remembered him as their greatest king, and Jesus himself was hailed as a Son of David (e.g., Matthew 15:22).