

# INTRODUCTION

One of my closest friends and I have shared life for decades. At times we have worked for the same organizations and have sometimes gone to the same churches. We have shared joy as we helped each other raise our children (and my grandchildren)—and have also supported each other through grief as we lost parents, and I, a son. We have traveled much of the world together for our work, but also because of my friend's extraordinary sense of adventure. Over the years, I have been entertained by a phenomenon. No matter where we would go in the world, as we stepped off a plane, bus, or train, without exception, she would declare that she had ancestors there. Her family tree seemed to stretch worldwide!

This year, we celebrated my friend's sixtieth birthday. I decided to give her a DNA test kit. It would be the perfect gift, I thought...until another friend suggested we gather birthday greetings, have them designed, and placed in a glass box. Friends and family eagerly participated with words of appreciation and love, and I knew that my gift paled by comparison.

Our readings this quarter are filled with comparisons. In **Leviticus**, written by Moses, Israel's holy God calls his sinful people to be holy; he must offer a way for atonement, and provides the way for them to be set apart for him. We will begin **1 Kings**, where Solomon is anointed king. He will start well, and Israel will prosper, but his gradual turning from God affects his life and that of the entire nation. The prophet **Isaiah** calls for Israel to repent, warning that Israel's lack of faithfulness to God will bring judgement. He continues to call for repentance, but he also assures Israel that God will send One who will bring salvation to the whole world.

The shortest book of the Old Testament, **Obadiah**, contains a global message: our sovereign God acts justly toward those who come against those he loves, he is true to his covenantal love and carries out his plans for restoration, and he will keep his promise to redeem and bless sinners from every nation. In **Nahum's** prophecy, we will read about the destruction of Ninevah. In that historical event, we will see again the terror of God's judgment, but also the greatness of his mercy for those come to him in repentance and faith.

In the New Testament, we will finish the book of **Luke**. Now in Jerusalem, Jesus experiences rejection, betrayal, persecution, and death. In just a few chapters, we will see the great price paid for our sin, and the triumph over sin and death that was won. In **Acts**, Jesus returns to heaven, the promised Holy Spirit comes with power, and the church is born and grows in its testimony, as well as in its spread throughout the known world. The letter of **James**, the oldest book in the New Testament, offers practical instruction, showing us how to act on what Jesus taught. A compliment to Paul's teaching, it helps us in our walk of faith.

We will see many comparisons, between God and mankind—between God and his people, between faithless and faithful living and the resulting consequences, between God's judgment and his mercy. We will be challenged to see our great need for redemption and God's provision in Christ, and then be challenged by Jesus' call on our lives and our own walks of faith. Read and be blessed as God speaks to you through his Word this quarter.

## 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.

## IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS

The Bible is a collection of books written by a multitude of different authors spanning many centuries. Books of wisdom and poetry find their place alongside stories of prophets, priests, and kings. Detailed legal stipulations precede brutal tales of war. Wild apocalyptic prophecies follow carefully constructed letters. It is an eclectic mix. Is it, however, a mix with any coherent semblance of unity?

From reading the final chapters of the gospel of Luke, the answer must surely be a resounding 'Yes!' As we read these chapters, we are taken to the central point of the whole of the Bible: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Luke recounts in detail the physical, emotional, and psychological pain Jesus suffered in the hours leading up to his death before recording the glory and power of the resurrection. It is his description of Jesus' explanation for the events of our readings that leave little room for doubt as to what, or who, the Bible is all about: 'And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself' (Luke 24:27).

Like a series of streams all leading back to the same source, the books of the Bible are all about Jesus. Easter is all about Jesus. As we read these familiar, yet enduringly powerful stories that close Luke's gospel, the challenge is to ensure our lives are all about Jesus too.

## FAITH IN ACTION

I wonder how you approach the construction of flat pack furniture. Do you study the instructions meticulously, gather the appropriate tools, and then research further? Or, ripping open the contents, do you assemble the pieces immediately? Most of us are probably somewhere in between. Perhaps, like me, you're happier when someone offers to tackle the project for you!

Given a similar task, I suspect James wouldn't have tolerated sitting around pondering instructions or outcomes over coffee, nor would he have approved of passing the job on to someone else. He was a man of action. Passionate about his faith, James, almost certainly the half-brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem, yearned to see others living in a way that reflected their faith and honored Jesus.

James was writing to the messianic Jews living outside Israel who were facing persecution and were challenged by poverty. This lively letter offered them a series of wisdom reflections, often mirroring Jesus' teaching on the Sermon on the Mount. Within this letter, there are over 50 commands, a clear sign that the focus is on action rather than theological debate.

As you read James, reflect on how you approach your own faith. Wrestling with themes of social justice and unity within the church, James calls us to action, to build that piece of flat pack furniture and not just look at the pictures! Be open to where God is prompting you to move your faith into action.

## HOLY GOD, HOLY PEOPLE

Leviticus has a reputation for being a difficult book, full of obscure rules and regulations. Does it have anything to teach us as Christians in the twenty-first century? Although our circumstances may be very different, we serve the same God. Look behind the outward appearance at the principles and you can learn much about living in relationship to God.

Rescued from slavery in Egypt, the people of God were led through the wilderness toward the promised land. God traveled with them, and would be with them in their new homeland, but how could the Holy One live among unholy people? God called his people to be holy, as he is holy; that meant that they were separated out for him and were to be distinctive.

God had instructed Moses to build a portable worship area, the tabernacle. At its heart was the Most Holy Place, which contained the ark of the covenant, and, outside that, the Holy Place. For details of the tabernacle see chapters 25–27 of Exodus. Artistic representations can be found in many illustrated Bibles and reference books or on the internet.

The concept of ‘clean’ was introduced earlier in Leviticus. Only clean things and clean people could come into God’s presence. Becoming unclean was unavoidable, but cleansing was available and was necessary before approaching the Lord.

As Christians, indwelled by God’s Holy Spirit, how do we live holy lives in the world today? Leviticus gives us some guiding principles.

## GOD TAKES NO PRISONERS

‘To take no prisoners’ means to be ruthlessly aggressive or uncompromising in the pursuit of one’s objectives. And this is absolutely the God we are presented with in the books of Obadiah and Nahum. His mind cannot be changed. No one is invincible when God is around.

Nahum tells of the forthcoming judgment on the cruel Assyrians who live in Nineveh. Obadiah speaks about the ancient feud between Edom and Israel, which will conclude with the exiles repatriated. In both cases blood will be spilled. Justice, pride, and judgment are important themes. Justice must prevail, whatever the cost to the perpetrators of the evil. And better things are in store for those who have suffered at the hands of the proud.

Here we have two so-called ‘minor’ prophets, both speaking out bravely with stirring and powerful messages that would certainly not please the oppressors. Nahum and Obadiah are both very much in touch with the harsh realities of the world they live in—very good reason for them to be called to share God’s Word in difficult times. We, too, need to be on the ball to be effective as God’s spokespeople. As we hear news reports and see war-torn disaster areas on our television screens, we can begin to imagine what it was like for the people of Nineveh and Edom. We can be thankful that our God has a great track record for bringing good out of evil.

## DIFFERENT TIMES, SAME GOD

Whichever part of the world you live in, life in the twenty-first century must seem a long way removed from life in the Middle East 3,000 years ago.

Although cultures and accepted practices change, people are still people, with the same range of emotions, the same aspirations to live well and to honor God—but also with the same tendencies to fail and value ourselves more highly than we ought! Fortunately, though, God is still the same God, whose nature is to love fallen humans, to be generous, to show mercy, to offer fresh starts—but also to require wholehearted worship and allegiance. Looking at the life of King Solomon, we find much to warn, challenge, inspire, and encourage us as we seek to follow God today.

For me, Solomon's story raises a number of questions:

- How does God work out his purposes through the scheming and machinations of self-serving ambitious people?
- Does God only accept worship from people who are wholehearted?
- Does God prefer some people to others?
- How do I make godly choices when faced with several bad options and no obviously good one?
- What is true wisdom?

I have written the 'Reflect' sections of these notes as a diary of a fictional courtier in King Solomon's court (look carefully at the Bible passages to check out his accounts!). As he observes, questions, and comments on what he sees happening in Solomon's life, he tries to discern God's hand at work—and challenges us to do the same in our families, churches, communities, and societies.

## TO BE CONTINUED...

Acts is often described as a history of the early church. But forget dull, dusty schoolbooks. Acts is more like the Indiana Jones story on the New Testament shelf! Packed with arrests and escapes, storms and shipwrecks, impassioned speeches and miraculous signs, there is adventure at every turn. Luke penned its pages around 62 AD, capturing the escapades of the apostles Peter (chapters 1-12) and Paul (chapters 13-28) as they spearheaded the spread of the gospel 'in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8).

The birth and expansion of the New Testament church were something like an ecclesiastical big bang, initiated by the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This series focuses on the very first phase of that: the moments around the Spirit's outpouring and the subsequent witness in Jerusalem. As the title suggests, the story (itself a continuation of Luke's gospel) continues both within Acts and beyond, right up to the era you and I occupy today. But the 'continuing' theme crops up in other ways too: each day we'll be exploring something the early church continued with or in—and that we can continue in too. So, see if you can trace the theme as it threads through our studies and, as you do, allow your own 'continuing' to be clarified, challenged, formed, and shaped for the furthering of his kingdom.

## GROWTH PAINS

Every step forward for the early church was accompanied by painful episodes that came at the church from both inside and outside. We rightly look back to these early days for examples of Christian community and courageous evangelism.

But that's not the whole story. Perfection is never claimed for these first Christians. As we'll see, growth produces a diverse community with troublesome members (5:1-11) and the clash of different backgrounds (6:1-7). How the church handles these challenges is fundamental to its development just as our managing of times of tension determines ours.

To describe the opposition faced by the new community of Jesus from the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin (5:17-42; 6:8-15; 7:54 - 8:3) as 'external' is only partly true. 'Friendly fire' might be a better description. The apostles saw Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, the fulfillment of Israel's story. That's why we find them taking up residence in the temple, initially working only within the Jewish community. The Jewish leaders found their claims about Jesus deeply offensive, and their rage resulted in Stephen becoming the first Christian martyr.

God has always asked that we 'sing to the Lord, all the earth' (Psalm 96:1) and that 'all peoples see his glory' (Psalm 97:6), so the followers of Jesus will break free from the conception that this is a message only for Jews, demanding Jewish tradition and practices to be imposed on Gentiles. These chapters then form the launch pad for what will become a global mission.



## GROWTH AGAINST THE ODDS

These chapters describe the early church growing in the face of opposition. It was an exciting but challenging time. The persecution recorded at the start of our readings took place shortly after Jesus' death and resurrection (probably around 33 AD). Paul's meeting with the risen Jesus likely took place in 34 AD. Dates after that are difficult to identify until the death of Herod in 44 AD. (This is not Herod the Great who killed the babies in Bethlehem, nor Herod Antipas who ruled Galilee during the time of Jesus' ministry, but Herod Agrippa, Herod the Great's grandson.) This suggests that the execution of James and the imprisonment of Peter took place in 43 AD.

Luke selected his material carefully, concentrating on specific episodes. He emphasized the powerful activity of God through the Holy Spirit. He showed ordinary people telling others about Jesus. He demonstrated that the good news of Jesus was for all people—Jews and non-Jews. To us this may not seem a big issue, but it was a key truth that the early church struggled to learn. There is an honesty in the way Luke recounted the events; the early Christians had weaknesses but were still used by God.

Despite the differences in our context and circumstances, there is much that we can learn from these chapters. Be encouraged by the way that God's power is displayed through his people. Be challenged by the welcome that God offers to all. Believe that God is still building his church.

## ISAIAH OPENS UP

I'd like to meet Isaiah. As we read his book, Isaiah begins to open up to us as a person. He lived in Jerusalem with his wife and two boys. One wonders whether anyone in the city knew more about what was going on than he did. He moved with ease among kings. He was familiar with everything happening in the temple. He spoke of the judges and legislators, the elders and the leaders, the snobs and the fashionistas, the poor and the deprived. He fumed at the exploitation of the oppressed and how no one cared or spoke up for them. Isaiah was also well informed about world affairs. He gave statesmanlike counsel on foreign policy, though often in vain. He was a passionate and intelligent spokesman for the Lord.

Isaiah is also famous as the evangelist of the Old Testament, opening up to us the gospel of God, salvation for the world. The language of his book is always vivid and rich, full of pictures and metaphor. Chapter after chapter is an inspiring call to repent and grasp the hope and redemption of God. Sometimes tender, sometimes blistering, the prophet challenged the people about their lives and behavior. What does the Lord expect from his people? Faith without hypocrisy, justice without favoritism, righteousness in how we treat other people, and compassion for any in need.

Isaiah prophesied from about 740 to 701 BC. Supremely, he 'saw the Lord.' May we see him too.