

Luke

We tune in to the very end of Luke's gospel to experience a surprise walk with the risen Christ, a special communion meal, and Jesus' words of commissioning to his disciples and today's church.

James

Readers receive a clear reminder that our faith is more than theoretical mental assent. James addresses topics that apply to all of us: non-preferential treatment of others, wisdom when choosing our words, praying in faith to seek wisdom from God – very practical advice for living a Christ-following life. James reminds us that maturing believers will exhibit evidence of their proclaimed faith.

Leviticus

Sifting through these chapters, we can find a general respect and honor for the holiness of God and gain a sense of the spirit in which the law is given. We read carefully, seeing which precepts, if any, apply to our modern journey of faith. Laws about cleanliness and the sabbath have clear application and impact in our lives today. Always, we are reminded of the covenant God has with his people, from then until now.

Obadiah

In this short book, we hear about the importance of caring for each other. Edom is held in contempt for lack of concern toward Judah; this is a brief but meaningful message for believers today.

Nahum

A second prophet goes to Ninevah, and this time, the renewed sins of the people will be addressed and punished. Punitive destruction is imminent for Ninevah. Justice comes from God's action alone. This is good news for the people of Judah who have been suffering.

1 Kings

Solomon's reign is dynamic. He completes the temple and gives glory to God. A few chapters later, we can observe this king beginning to drift, distracted by loves other than God. We witness the glorious construction of the temple to honor God and invite his presence. We then hear Solomon's grand plans for his own home – where he spent almost twice as much time building it (chapter 7). Is this foreshadowing of the turning of Solomon's heart?

Acts

Full of activity and excitement from the start, Acts tells the chaotic beginning of the "Way" or the Christian Church. A manifestation of the Holy Spirit's presence and power leaves thousands changed and inspired. We watch as the church grows and spreads daily.

Isaiah

The poetic words of this book take us on a journey of varied emotions as we experience judgment for a fickle people displaced with a bright promise for the faithful.

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.

LUKE 24

GOD'S DIVINE PLAN

This last section of the gospel of Luke focuses on the final week of the life of Jesus as he embraced his destiny. This is the end of his earthly life and ministry, as he was betrayed, crucified, and then rose again. As Jesus entered Jerusalem as king, the crowd shouted jubilantly, while the religious leaders rejected him. Looking beyond the exterior beauty of the temple, Jesus saw that the true worship of God had been abandoned. Because of this, he wept, leading to the cleansing of the temple and the prediction of its destruction. Religious corruption during the time of Jesus was not only restricted to the Jerusalem temple. As we take time to examine our own temples, where God dwells, we may find things that need to be cleansed from them, too.

The religious leaders had been relentlessly trying to trap and kill Jesus. They found an insider, one of Jesus' disciples, who was willing to betray him, thus paving the way for Jesus' crucifixion. As dark as the night may seem, however, we must not forget that death does not have the final say. On Easter Sunday, Jesus rose from the dead. The women who went to the tomb, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and the eleven disciples, to whom Jesus appeared, were all skeptics of the resurrection who needed to move from doubt to faith. The gospel of Luke places repeated emphasis on the fact that the Messiah must suffer, die, and rise again in fulfillment of the Scriptures (9:22, 44; 18:31–33; 24:7, 26, 27, 46–47). This is part of the divine plan of salvation. Without the cross, there is no gospel. The gospel of Luke ends by inviting us to be witnesses of this gospel, where 'repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations' (24:47). We have a message to share!

JAMES

DON'T GET TOO COMFORTABLE!

I suspect that few of us read the epistle from James with any frequency. As one commentator wrote, it is 'one of the forgotten books in the back of the New Testament.'¹ Part of the reason for that is, I believe, historical – as we shall see.

The author of this letter is generally considered to be the James referred to in Acts and Galatians² as the leader of the church in Jerusalem and the Lord's brother, who became a believer following Jesus' death and resurrection. He writes to a community of Jewish Christians living outside Israel (1:1) who are in trouble. Not only are they struggling with trials (1:2), but they are also struggling with issues of speech, wealth and poverty, favoritism, quarreling, and a general failure to behave in a way that reflects their status as followers of Jesus. They are a community that is self-deceived (1:22). James is uncompromising as he writes to correct their behavior. As a result, this letter is immensely practical: James' aim is to highlight the behavior expected of Christians, because 'faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead' (2:17).

It is this last statement, I believe, that explains the neglect of this letter, because it appears at first glance to contradict Paul's teaching.³ This is not the case, however, as the epistle challenges the Christian, saved by faith, to be whole-hearted in their subsequent devotion to God. We need Paul's teaching that faith alone saves us (how we enter God's kingdom), but we also need James' teaching that saving faith is never without consequences (how we live in that kingdom). James is not a comfortable read for many and perhaps it should not be. We all need a spiritual health-check to ensure that we are living a life of faith worked out through our actions. According to James, without such actions, our faith is dead.

None of us wants that said about us!

FOR FURTHER READING

C Blomberg and M Kamell, *James*, Zondervan, 2008

DP Nystrom, *James, The NIV Application Commentary*, Zondervan, 1997

¹ Blomberg and Kamell, James, 2008, p21 ² Acts 15:13; 21:17–19; Gal 1:18, 19; 2:9 ³ Rom 3:21–24

LEVITICUS 16–27

GOD'S LAWS: UNIVERSAL AND ENDURING

As we saw last quarter, Leviticus is a record of the laws that God gave through Moses to a people whom he had already redeemed from slavery. Two reasons stand out for the giving of these laws. First, God made it clear to Israel that they were given ‘for your own good.’¹ Second, by keeping them, Israel would demonstrate the love, grace, and wisdom of God to the rest of the world.² They were prescribed in the context of their times, but they stand out clearly – contrasting, for example, with the Code of Hammurabi, to which they are often compared.³

There are different kinds of laws. There are religious rituals, relating to how to worship God with sacrifices and offerings, and there are civil laws relating to different aspects of governance in the new nation of Israel. Some of them are simply bizarre to us; our challenge is to discern their relevance to God’s people in today’s world.

Asking the following three questions should help. First, is there any particular reason for us to conclude that these laws had only localized, cultural, or transient relevance? Can we say, for instance, that they deal with issues that affected Jews but not Canaanites or Egyptians, or that they had to do only with matters and situations which occurred in ancient times but not today? Second, from our improved scientific understanding of the natural order, would compliance with these laws lead to positive or negative consequences both to individuals and to societies at large? Third, what light, if any, does the New Testament, and the Lord Jesus Christ in particular, throw on this matter? Taken together, our answers to these questions should help us to determine whether or not any one of these laws applies to us today; and then we should seek the wisdom of the Holy Spirit on how best to implement it, if it does.

¹ Deut 10:13 ² Deut 4:5-8 ³ <https://evangelcs.org/news/2012/the-code-of-hammurabi-vs-the-law-of-moses/>

OBADIAH

PRIDE AND POETIC JUSTICE

A struggle between brothers – Esau and Jacob – over birthright and blessing¹ developed into an ongoing conflict between Edom and Israel, the nations they founded.² The message opens with God’s pronouncement of judgment on Edom (vv. 1–14), followed by an announcement of ‘the day of the Lord’ – a day of destruction for God’s enemies but deliverance for God’s people (vv. 15–21). The specific charges against Edom (vv. 10–14) relate to its treatment of Judah during the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 BC.

Edom considered itself invincible, because of its seemingly impregnable mountain stronghold (v. 3), wealth (v. 6), powerful allies (v. 7), wisdom (v. 8), and military might (v. 9). But ‘Pride goes before destruction.’³ Pride was Edom’s downfall (vv. 3,4). Pride continues to be a snare and a stumbling block at all levels of society: individuals, families, organizations, and nations.

The second part of Obadiah’s oracle announces the ‘day of the Lord’ (v. 15), when Edom – and one day ‘all nations’ – would experience God’s retributive justice: ‘As you have done, it will be done to you.’ This poetic justice takes place through various reversals of fortune (vv. 16–21). Such reversals will also take place on that final day of the Lord, when Christ returns and God’s kingdom is established. Mary sang about such reversals in her ‘Magnificat’⁴ and Jesus preached about them in his ‘Sermon on the Plain.’⁵ Edom’s destruction is Judah’s deliverance (v. 17). God’s warning of justice for the unrighteous is, simultaneously, a promise of justice for the righteous. In a world where evil often seems to flourish unchecked, Obadiah’s brief message is reaffirmed in the hymn: ‘This is my Father’s world. O let me ne’er forget, that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet.’⁶

FOR FURTHER READING

David W Baker, T Desmond Alexander and Bruce K Waltke, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Inter-Varsity Press, 1988

¹ Gen 25:21–34; Gen 27 ² Num 20:14–21; 1 Sam 14:47; 2 Sam 8:13 ³ Prov 16:18 ⁴ Luke 1:51–53 ⁵ Luke 6:20–26 ⁶ Maltbie Babcock, 1858–1901

NAHUM

BAD NEWS, GOOD NEWS

‘[God] will make an end of Nineveh’ (1:8). Nahum proclaims the message that Jonah probably longed to preach! In Jonah’s day, Nineveh – capital of the Assyrian Empire – had repented and God had relented;¹ but now, Nineveh ‘plots evil against the Lord’ (1:11) and its wickedness is so great that God declares, ‘I am against you’ (2:13; 3:5). God is ‘incensed at human inhumanity.’² CS Lewis comments: ‘the ferocious parts of the psalms serve as a reminder that there is in the world such a thing as wickedness and that it (if not its perpetrators) is hateful to God.’³ We could say the same of the book of Nahum.

Although both Obadiah (Obad 1:1) and Nahum (1:1) prophesied against foreign nations, their messages were directed to God’s people. The defeat of Israel’s oppressors – who are also God’s enemies – signals deliverance for God’s people. The ‘prophecy concerning Nineveh’ is ‘good news’ and ‘peace’ for Judah (1:15) precisely because it spells bad news for Nineveh (chapters 2, 3). Nahum means ‘comfort.’ God’s message comforts ‘those who trust in him’ with his assurance of ‘refuge’ (1:7) and the promise to ‘afflict you no more’ (1:12), but it is also a warning that opposing God will mean being left without comfort: ‘Where can I find anyone to comfort you?’ (3:7).

Nahum prophesied between 663 BC – the fall of Thebes (3:8–10) – and 612 BC, when Nineveh fell to the Medes and Babylonians. Assyria boasted a well-equipped and skilled army and was hated and feared by the surrounding nations for their ruthlessness, vindictiveness, and cruel treatment of captives. They had already conquered the northern kingdom, Israel, in 721 BC.⁴ It is the southern kingdom, Judah – whose daily headlines often spelled bad news – that Nahum now addresses with ‘good news’ (1:15): the word of the Lord in a ‘vision’ (1:1).

FOR FURTHER READING

David W Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, IVP, 1988

¹ Jonah 3:10 ² LaSor, Hubbard and Bush, *OT Survey*, Eerdmans, 1982, p321 ³ CS Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, Geoffrey Bles, 1958, p33 ⁴ 2 Kings 17:5,6

1 KINGS 1–8

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE WISE KING

The account of Solomon in 1 Kings 1–11 is a poignant one, with plenty of ups and downs. Solomon emerges as a skillful political leader, ruthless when needed and more gently strategic at other points. He builds alliances with neighboring nations and enters into partnerships that are mutually beneficial. He has all the makings of a godly and able leader.

The high point comes with the completion of the temple. Though it is relatively small, the detailed descriptions of dimensions and ornaments (chapters 6, 7) emphasize the thought, planning, and care that went into building a house for God to dwell in. The prayer of dedication (chapter 8) and the peace and prosperity that flows in the land show us that this is perhaps one of the most settled, albeit brief, periods in political Israel's history.

It often happens with great leaders, however, that after a time they lose their focus or their edge and the inevitable downfall begins. For Solomon the temptation to drift away from covenant faithfulness to God is exacerbated by his many marriages. By allowing and facilitating his wives to worship their own gods, Solomon breaks Israel's covenantal promises with the Lord and from then on disaster looms. Solomon has squandered an incredible heritage, and the nation will never recover.

The author of 1 Kings, writing probably to a community in exile, demonstrates the purposeful hand of God behind every situation. There is plenty here that depicts human scheming and planning, yet over and above all, the plans and purposes of God prevail. There is always a delicate balance between doing nothing, relying on God to intervene, and doing too much, trying to steer God's work with inappropriate control. Discerning a path between the two often comes when we set our gaze upon the Lord and determine to live for his praise. Solomon's downfall comes when he takes his focus off the Lord. May God inspire us through this story not to do the same.

ACTS 1–12

FROM JERUSALEM TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Over the next few weeks we have the privilege of reflecting together on the marvelous story of the creation and growth of the movement that Luke identifies as followers of ‘the Way.’¹ The narrative of the book of Acts is carefully structured to describe the expansion of this movement from its origins in Palestine, specifically in Jerusalem, across the Mediterranean world and reaching its climax in the imperial capital – the city of Rome. In the course of this story, Acts charts the first great cross-cultural spread of what came to be called ‘Christianity.’ In contrast to the modern missionary movement, this one began at the margins of the empire and was carried to the center by people, many of whom were migrants or slaves, who had discovered in Jesus of Nazareth the Savior of the whole inhabited world.

It is very important to notice the connection between this story and that contained in Luke’s gospel, which the author here describes as ‘my former book’ (1:1). I suggest pausing here to read Luke 1:1–4, where Luke explains the purpose of all of his work. Notice that in both volumes he addresses ‘Theophilus,’ whom he describes as ‘most excellent’² – suggesting a person of high status and honor who is curious concerning the people of the Way. Luke himself was well educated and had a privileged background, and he narrates the story of Jesus and his followers in response to growing numbers of gentile inquirers who are attracted to the Jesus movement. In other words, Luke writes to privileged people who are fascinated by the spread of a community which embodied the radical teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. The story told in Acts makes very clear the personal, economic, and relational costs of following Jesus.³ Be prepared for the book of Acts to present serious challenges concerning the life of discipleship today!

¹ Eg Acts 24:14 ² Luke 1:3 ³ See Karl Allen Kuhn, *Luke The Elite Evangelist*, Liturgical Press, 2010

ISAIAH 1-5

VISIONS OF JUDGMENT AND HOPE

Isaiah 1–21 involves us in ‘unremittingly dark’ passages of judgment (chpts. 1, 3–5; 9:8 – 10:34; 13; 15–21) and ‘unbelievably bright’¹ messages of hope (chpts. 2; 9:1–7; 11, 12, 14). The transitions are stark, leaving us somewhat disoriented. These ups and downs help us to interpret our world, providing a warning not to become overly pessimistic or triumphalist about the future. We are called to examine the extent of our sin and to rejoice in the purposes of God.

Isaiah conducts a probing examination and condemnation of sin, lack of concern for the poor and disadvantaged being a prime target. Prophecies are mainly directed at the southern kingdom of Judah, although later chapters speak against the nations surrounding Judah, including Israel: chapters 13–21 speak to northern powers (chpts. 13, 14, 21), near neighbors (chpts. 14–17), and southern powers (chpts. 18–20). The fierce expressions of disaster to come should be read in the context of two factors. First, the disciplinary chastisements are aimed at alerting God’s people to their deviations from his character and calling them back to himself. Second, and relatedly, they are often conditional. As in Jonah, a repentant heart brings release from the consequences of rebellion. Sadly, the warnings largely go unheeded, which means disaster for Judah, but not obliteration. In God’s mercy, a remnant will remain. He will restore and begin his work with these few. Small children become signs of God’s promised kingdom (chpts. 7–11).

The setting for these visions is seldom made explicit. That is partly explained by their relevance to many contexts and generations. Tying them too tightly to historical circumstances may lessen their applicability. However, Isaiah does set out his historical context in chapters 1 and 6, pointing to a period around 740–700 BC, ending with the threat of Assyrian attack on Jerusalem. The Assyrians are the major threat of these chapters. The test for Judah (and also for us) is where they will look for help in addressing their fears – to God or to others?

¹ John N Oswalt, *The Holy One of Israel*, Cascade, 2014, p4