

INTRODUCTION

It is Spring as I write this introduction, and I have already begun to plan for my family vacation. It's a rather big deal, you see, as the week will include my children, their spouses, and ten grandchildren. My grandmother purchased a vacation house for her children to gather with their children many years ago, and the tradition has continued for four generations. The old house has been replaced with a new and larger one and dynamics change as each group of children ages, but there is a significant constant. For four generations, we have seen God faithfully at work in and through each family member.

Our readings this quarter have much to do with God's working in and through generations of families; in the bigger picture, we will also see him at work for the sake of his kingdom family.

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.

Hebrews was presumably written to early Jewish Christians who were being persecuted and were disheartened. To strengthen their faith, the letter reminded them of the supremacy of Christ and encouraged them to find their rest in him, the One who is altogether sufficient and faithful—the One who is our compassionate Great High Priest.

In **1 and 2 Kings**, we will begin following King Solomon. We will see the glorious beginnings of his reign and his return of the ark to the Jerusalem temple. Later, however, his wandering from God's call for his life, both as a man and king, will impact his children with disastrous results, and not just for them, but for the nation. Unfaithfulness of the kings, with a few exceptions, will lead most of Israel into apostasy, and God will judge them as he said he would. The kingdoms will divide; Israel will be defeated by the Assyrians, and later, Judah by the Babylonians. God, however, will remain faithful to his covenant. He will provide Elijah, and then Elisha, to continue speaking truth to his people.

In the early chapters of the gospel of **Mark**, John the Baptist will prepare the way for Jesus, calling people to repentance and baptizing him in the Jordan. Jesus will begin his ministry, calling his disciples, healing the sick, showing his power over demons and nature, and teaching. He will often teach in parables, stories that only those seeking the secrets of the kingdom of God will understand.

These passages hold great relevance for us today. Aren't we prone to wander? Isn't it all too easy to be distracted by more things than we realize and forget that our priority is to put God first—to be who he calls us to be and do what he wants us to do?

As you read this quarter, be challenged to give Jesus his rightful place in your life and be encouraged to see that God has always been, and will always be, 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.

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. He was also well informed about world affairs. He gave statesmanlike council on foreign policy, though often in vain. He was a passionate and intelligent spokesman for the Lord.

He is also famous as the evangelist of the Old Testament, opening up to us the gospel of God, salvation for the world. The language 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 challenges 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.

THE TIME LORD

During the platinum jubilee celebrations for the late Queen Elizabeth II in 2022, it was often repeated that 14 prime ministers had served her during her 70-year reign. This new Elizabethan age had straddled seismic political, cultural, technological, and global changes. The book of Isaiah (claimed by many scholars to have been written by multiple authors) encompasses a longer period. It starts toward the end of King Uzziah's reign, who probably died around 740 BC and ends with the reign of Cyrus the Great and the Babylonian Empire (who died in about 530 BC). Spanning two centuries, it gives a bird's-eye view of God's activity in the world. By the time Isaiah began his ministry, the northern kingdom of Israel had been captured by the Assyrian armies. Judah in the south, with its capital Jerusalem, was vulnerable to predatory neighbors.

Isaiah offered a theology of hope despite the rise of these global superpowers. In his analysis of world events, he saw the growing might of the Assyrian Empire, which in turn would be overpowered by its Babylonian rival. To the south he described the rise of Egypt on the world stage, powered by an Ethiopian dynasty. They all saw themselves as the world's leading powers, but they would be disappointed. Isaiah's imaginative genius was to see the Lord as the ruler of time and space. He was working out his purposes, and one day his knowledge would fill the earth 'as the waters cover the sea' (Isaiah 11:9).

JESUS SAT DOWN

While I was writing these notes, a friend told me about his love of the book of Hebrews—so much so that he was studying it with a friend who is exploring Christianity. From a Jewish background, she is interested in the writer's reliance on the Old Testament.

People usually use the Gospels to introduce people to Jesus. Hebrews, however, complements their picture of Jesus. For example, Jesus sat down to teach, as was the custom: in the temple (Luke 2), in a local synagogue (Luke 4), in a boat (Luke 5), on a hillside (Matthew 5), by a well (John 4), and in a home (John 11). Hebrews focuses on different reasons for being seated: on a throne and at the Father's right hand (Hebrews 10:12; 12:2). Jesus sits to reign as King. He also sits as a priest because his one sacrifice makes all others irrelevant. The 'seated Jesus' has shaped these notes.

Theories of the writer's identity abound, including that the writer was a woman. Whoever it was, they knew the Old Testament Scriptures. With a pastoral heart, the writer longed that the readers, who had known persecution (10:32-35), would refuse to be distracted from deepening their relationship with Jesus.

I have found myself drawn into the presence of the ascended Christ as I've been immersed in Hebrews. I hope you'll join with me in being captivated by the vision of Jesus that this writer offers.

IN CHRIST ALONE...

As I write these notes, we are living in a building site. The house we moved to in early 2021 is having some alterations done to make our kitchen and dining room much more user-friendly and to give us more storage. This involves a great deal of mess (thick, black dust everywhere), noise, and upheaval. It also involves moving stuff out of two bedrooms upstairs so the electricians can put in the new downstairs lighting. Fortunately, our builders are exceedingly friendly, obliging, and considerate people!

I'm in good company using this analogy. Tom Wright, in *Hebrews for Everyone*,* writes of something similar (a construction project to improve traffic flow) as he explores Hebrews chapter 9. He says, 'God has all along had a master plan for how the world would be put to rights.' The old covenant was not meant to be the finished article. The chapters ahead of us for the next couple of weeks or so look into how that inadequate, temporary model was fulfilled by the completely adequate new covenant, and how that informs and affects who we are as believers and disciples.

Hebrews has something of a reputation for being theologically dense. To be fair, some of it is complicated, and notes like these don't allow for greater depth or comment on absolutely everything. But I do pray that they will offer a fresh perspective—a new doorway if you like—into understanding something more of Hebrews. Just like we've gotten into our new kitchen-diner!

*N. T. Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2023)

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 not an 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.

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

Writers of historical accounts of nations select events and facts to build a picture of the past and to better understand the present. The writer of 1 and 2 Kings (let's call him the chronicler) unravels the past to understand the slippery slope of Israel's decline. His account explores the factors that led to Israel's eventual annihilation by Assyria. His history helps to explain why the people of Judah ended up as exiles in Babylon. If we want a forensic account of the domestic and foreign policies of Israel's kings, then the chronicler suggests we read 'the annals of the kings of Israel' which are, sadly, 'out of print'! His aim is altogether different.

The chronicler evaluates each of the kings of Israel and Judah through the lens of their covenant with the Lord God. His assessment is based on three main criteria: whether they worshipped the Lord alone, whether the kings led God's people in keeping the covenant, and whether they ruled justly and in accordance with God's law.

As the nation splits in two, the chronicler jumps between Israel and Judah, and the reigns of the kings overlap. It can be a dizzying read! If you are getting bogged down, take a step back and look for evidence of covenant-keeping in each chapter. Look also for the thread of hope that runs through our readings. Despite his people's unfaithfulness, God remains faithful and just. He keeps his covenant promises!

THE COMING KINGDOM OF GOD

For anyone who has been following Jesus for any length of time, it's never far into that journey before you first hear the phrase 'the kingdom of God.' And when we hear it, it causes us to ask questions: What is this kingdom like? Where is this kingdom? How can I gain entry to it? And more, besides.

The gospel of Mark is not primarily concerned with giving an ordered account of Jesus' life and times—the writer left that to Luke and Matthew. But it was written to convey what becoming a disciple of Jesus, the King of this kingdom, requires of us ordinary, everyday women and men from all walks of life.

It is like a manifesto of the kingdom of God. Perhaps you have read a manifesto of a political party. They tend to be brochures that make bold claims about what life would be like if a particular party gets into power. Mark's gospel was written to show its readers what the kingdom of God is and how it operates. And invariably, it's just as true now as it was for the people of Jesus' day—and often, it isn't how we might imagine.

The gospel of Mark is an unyielding ride that takes us into the very heart of why Jesus came, and what our response should be to that. So, strap yourself in and prepare to be inspired and challenged by Jesus.

IT'S YOUR TURN NOW!

Have you ever taken over a job from someone else? In practice it often doesn't go very well! In theory, however, you will watch your predecessor doing the job, learn from him or her, and build relationships with those you are going to work with. As you step into the role, you will seek to achieve a balance between continuity and making the role your own.

In 1 Kings 19 we read how God sent Elijah to anoint Elisha as his successor. Elisha accepted the invitation and went with him, becoming his assistant. Between 1 Kings 19 and 2 Kings 2 there is a clearly intentional period of discipleship and mentoring: Elisha served Elijah and assisted him for a number of years. When Elijah was taken up to heaven, Elisha was ready to step straight into the role, acting and speaking with confidence. The other prophets watched Elisha pick up Elijah's cloak and very quickly recognized him as Elijah's successor, although some insisted on going to look for Elijah. Elisha's spiritual authority was immediately displayed as he parted the Jordan (2 Kings 2:14) and then proceeded to perform the miracles we will read about over the next few days and into next quarter.

Though not a perfect parallel, there are lessons for us as disciples of our Master, Jesus. We walk with him and observe what he does, and we receive his Spirit so that we may continue to do his works (John 14:12-17; Acts 1:8).