

Isaiah

The message from God contains warnings, scenes of judgment, and promised devastation for a wayward people. Chapter 6 shows us the awesome, emotional calling of Isaiah. Isaiah is obedient to deliver both disastrous warnings of destruction interspersed with light- and hope-filled prophecies about deliverance and the coming Messiah. The descriptive images move our hearts to hear the ancient messages which still reach us in our day, drawing us to a God who longs for his people.

Hebrews

This letter begins with a description of God reaching for his people through the incarnation – the mystery that lives in Christ. We receive warnings against unbelief and rebellion, as well as reminders about the Sabbath. We are asked to consider the priestly nature of Jesus. Jesus is compared to the temple as God's dwelling place with the need for sacrifice forever removed. Our hearts are lifted and encouraged to keep the faith as we read an extensive list of those who have been faithful to God in the past.

1 & 2 Kings

Our readings bring us to the story of Solomon, at a moment of immense joy – the consecration of the temple. Sadly, Solomon loses his early focus on the wisdom given by God and is distracted by the many things great wealth provides and by the interests of his many “foreign” wives. Israel and Judah see a progression of kings, most of them leading the people further from God. Even the appearances of the prophet Elijah cannot convince the leaders or the people to return to God in obedience. Throughout the stories of the kings, we hear the warnings about the dangers of idolatry and through the stories of these ancient people, we understand the seriousness of allowing anything to rival God in our hearts and minds. We also hear again the longing of God for the love and devotion of his people.

Mark

Mark tells us the ‘Good News’ of the coming of the Kingdom of God. The first few chapters introduce Jesus and launch full speed into his public ministry. His identity as God incarnate is in evidence; the progression of healings, teachings, and people forgiven and transformed by their encounters with Christ leaves us breathless. With active, fast-paced language, Mark gives us an understanding of Jesus – who he is, why he came, and what it means for all people then and now.

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 5-21

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

HEBREWS

NEVER GIVE UP!

There is a story, perhaps fictional, about former British prime minister Winston Churchill who went to address a school assembly. He stood up and said three words, three times: 'Never give up', 'Never give up', 'Never give up'. Then he sat down. Those words could be written over Hebrews, which is an urgent pastoral letter written to a group of believers who are tempted to abandon their faith community. The author encourages them to remain faithful, for, if they don't, they risk the loss of everything.

In many ways Hebrews is an enigma. We don't know the author, the date, its place of writing or destination, and the title 'Hebrews' looks like an educated guess, first appearing around the year 200 AD. Nevertheless, we can deduce some things. In the early church, from (present-day) Turkey to Egypt, they thought Paul wrote Hebrews; in Rome nobody thought that until the fifth century. Few people today think it was Paul. The church father Origen probably said the wisest thing about the author: as for who wrote it, only God knows. As for the date, some verses seem to indicate that the temple was still standing and accordingly, most people consider it was written before 70 AD.

An ambiguous reference to Italy in 13:24 implies some connection with Rome. Until around 1875 most thought it was written to Jewish believers situated in Jerusalem. Since then, throughout the twentieth century, scholars have argued that they were in Rome. More recently, some have been suggesting Jerusalem again, and I am beginning to think it was written from Rome to Jerusalem. Jewish followers of Jesus living in Jerusalem were attracted to the ritual in the temple, and the writer argued that since everything that ritual anticipated had been fulfilled in Jesus, they needed to put it behind them. Jesus offered himself to God as the perfect sacrifice for sins and was crucified outside Jerusalem. They were to follow him there, welcoming the reproach that involved – and to never give up.

1 KINGS 8–11

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 (chpts. 6, 7) emphasize the thought, planning, and care that went into building a house for God to dwell in. The prayer of dedication (chpt. 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.

1 KINGS 12–22

NO OTHER GODS

Whom do you worship? That's the question at the center of God's story of these kings. The glory days of David and Solomon are over. David will henceforth be the benchmark (14:8): a man after God's own heart.¹ Solomon, his son, begins well, building the Lord's temple – but wealth, power, fame (and women) distract him (11:9–13). Judgment and division come among God's people, setting the scene for the coming decades – ending in defeat, destruction by enemies, and long-prophesied exile. The timescale of 1 Kings is from around 971 BC, until just after King Ahab's reign over the northern kingdom ends in 853 BC. 2 Kings then takes over the story until Judah's captivity around 587 BC.

These books may seem to have little relevance to our lives today, but this history is written from God's perspective. At its center – despite power struggles, politics, warfare, murders, and suicide – is the leaders' relationship with God – whether or not they walk in his ways. Pernicious idolatry (golden calves, 12:28) begins as a political convenience, but within King Jeroboam's reign it becomes endemic. Temple worship in Jerusalem is degraded from golden to bronze.² The people are encouraged to forget old ways, with new gods to worship. The litany of good and evil kings continues. When Ahab, the most evil of kings, comes to the throne, God intervenes through his prophet Elijah – the 'troubler of Israel' (18:17). He never stops courageously speaking out against idolatry. The cloud of promise on the horizon may only be tiny (18:44), but Elijah stays focused and, for a while, the people turn to God again.

Note that the lives of these leaders influence others. Our own choices about how we live are not just a personal matter. Inevitably, they affect those we live among – possibly for generations to come. How do we influence others? Are we speaking out for God, challenging evil ways with troubling words from him? Is our own worship of God wholehearted?

¹ Acts 13:22 ² cf 1 Kings 14:26,27

MARK 1–4

HOPE AMID SUFFERING

Mark's gospel is held by most scholars to be the first gospel written. It does not name its author, but tradition ascribes it to John Mark.¹ John Mark was a companion of the apostles Paul and Peter, and his mother's house in Jerusalem was a gathering place for the first Christians.²

Our study is on the first four chapters of Mark's gospel. These verses encourage us to draw conclusions about Jesus' identity from the authority he demonstrates: the authority shown in his teaching, his forgiveness of sins, and his power over evil spirits and nature. Mark sets out compelling evidence for Jesus' being the long-awaited Messiah. However, he also makes it clear that, despite this evidence, many people opposed Jesus from the beginning. Hence, Jesus' death on the cross is shown as an inevitable part of a ministry which divided people from the start, rather than something that could have been avoided. It was important to show Jesus' suffering as part of God's plan, for many of Mark's contemporaries would have questioned whether someone who had been executed as a criminal could really be the Messiah. After all, the common expectation was that the Christ would defeat Israel's Roman oppressors, not be killed by them. Early Christians who faced persecution for their faith must also have had questions: if Jesus came to bring in God's kingdom, as he taught, why were they still suffering at the hands of evil?³ Mark's message is that Christ's suffering does not disprove that Jesus is the Messiah, for the cross was central to his ministry.

This is an important message for us, too, in our in-between times. Although Jesus' ministry has given us a taste of God's kingdom, his kingdom is yet to come fully, which means that evil persists. As we navigate this fallen world, Mark's gospel reminds us of the victory Jesus won through his suffering and it encourages us that, even though we may face opposition, nothing can stop the progress of God's kingdom.

¹ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.15 ² Acts 12:12 ³ See further, JB Green et al (eds), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, IVP, 1992, p524–5

2 KINGS 1–3

THERE IS NO OTHER GOD

2 Kings starts with Ahaziah the king of Israel intending to consult foreign gods when he was injured. Elijah asks him, 'is it because there is no God in Israel ...?' (1:6, 16). This chapter and the subsequent ones repeatedly demonstrate, through an abundance of miraculous stories, that there is, indeed, a God in Israel. God primarily works through 'the man of God' (1:9, 10, 11, 12, 13), Elijah, until Elisha takes over his mantle in chapter 2. Whereas Israel's king behaves as if there is no God in Israel, two foreigners do turn to God in their sickness, notably the Aramaean army commander Naaman in chapter 5 and Ben-Hadad the king of Aram in chapter 8. Naaman even declares, 'Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel' (5:15). The Israelite woman from Shunem, too, is a faithful believer in God (4:8–10; 8:1–6). She is a recurring character and demonstrates that God is interested in everyday matters and affairs.

Elisha is concerned with the northern kingdom of Israel, as opposed to the southern kingdom of Judah – the twelve tribes split into two kingdoms after Solomon dies. Samaria is a key city in the northern kingdom and throughout this time is involved in wars and skirmishes with other nations. When the book starts, Moab is a key enemy, but by the end of chapter 8, Aram has besieged Samaria and continues to be an ominous threat. It is ironic that Aram's king and the commander of its army should inquire of their enemy's prophet and God in times of sickness.

Not long after asking for a double portion of Elijah's spirit, Elisha used that power to curse young boys (2:9, 23, 24). The story is open to different understandings. Does God then vindicate Elisha? Or, given the Bible's emphasis on compassion and mercy elsewhere, does Elisha misuse divine power? The incident is not too dissimilar to Elijah's calling down fire from heaven (chpt 1), but where Elijah's life was at risk, Elisha was merely mocked.