

INTRODUCTION

I am privileged to present SU resources at different conventions and denomination gatherings here in the US. The logistical challenges are sometimes entertaining, often daunting, and always exhausting, but they are always met with a sense of God's presence and provision.

Often, when Americans come to our exhibits, they will ask, "Who are you?" But when a person from England, India, or Uganda sees us, they hurry to us, beaming with delight; they know and love Scripture Union! SU global has existed more than 150 years and serves in over 120 countries worldwide. Coming here in 1959, Scripture Union-USA's impact is growing.

Every day in the SU national office, God makes his presence known, enabling each person to carry out the work he has called them to do. Those who work remotely or travel for SU sense his help and see him faithful to provide everything that is needed. All of us experience firsthand what the authors in this quarter's *Discovery* wrote about in their books.

In **2 Kings**, through miracles Elisha performed, we will see God not only show his power, but see his faithful care for the helpless and hopeless—and his promises kept, despite Israel's faithlessness.

Ecclesiastes is widely attributed to Solomon, written at the end of his reign. We learn from his recording of mistakes he made that seeking anything in this life other than God himself ultimately is worthless. Life apart from trusting in him has no real meaning or purpose.

We will continue reading at length in **Isaiah**. Through the great prophet's writing, we will read of his warnings to a faithless people, of judgment and repentance—and then of God's promises to bring restoration, and even salvation, to the world.

Habakkuk cried out to God and questioned why he allowed his people to suffer at the hands of enemies even more sinful than they. If God was good, how could there be such suffering and injustice? God patiently answered Habakkuk's questions with a promise of justice. In Habakkuk's prayer we will see his response, trusting God and expressing praise.

Beginning in **Matthew**, we will see that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies; indeed he is the Messiah. Continuing in **Mark's** gospel, we will witness more of Jesus' authority and power as he was rejected by his own people and as he challenged religious leaders and cultural norms.

In the three letters of **John**, there will be exhortations for the early church to stand against false teaching and to live lives consistent with the gospel—to live as Christians.

So, in this quarter of *Discovery*, let us learn from those who have gone before us, from their failings and successes, and what their lives teach us about faith. Let us find growing vision for the greatness and faithfulness of our God, and be encouraged to walk with him and find him ever faithful to his promises.

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 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 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 was 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 several miracles.

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 also receive his Spirit so that we may continue to do his works (John 14:12-17; Acts 1:8).

LIFE'S MEANING AND PURPOSE

Ecclesiastes is a book of the Old Testament known as 'wisdom literature.' The identity of the author is not known, despite the detail in verse 1:1. The author created 'the teacher' to act as his voice. His main intention is to examine the meaning and purpose of life without God. He looks at wealth, pleasure, status, and work as potential sources.

A recurring theme is that everything is meaningless or vanity (1:2 and 12:8), in the sense of being like a puff of smoke or wind that cannot be grasped, something that is temporary and fleeting. The phrase 'everything is meaningless under the sun' appears 38 times.

The teacher's answer is to accept that life is beyond our control. Wealth, pleasure, status, and work are gifts from God and should be enjoyed to the full, even amid the fleeting nature of life. The sense of God's presence becomes stronger in chapters 6 to 12. It is wisdom and fear of the Lord that provide meaning and purpose (see 7:13-18). Verses 11:7 to 12:7 see death as the great equalizer: wealthy, poor, wise, or foolish people all die. The teacher's explorations and questions fall into place in chapter 12, verses 13 and 14 with the conclusion that humankind should fear God and keep his commandments.

Ecclesiastes may feel discouraging. However, it has a very contemporary ring because of the similarities with the world today, where so many people look to wealth, pleasure, status, and career for meaning in their lives.

FOLLOWING BLIND

Following Jesus is simultaneously very straightforward and remarkably tricky. Just when you think you are beginning to get the hang of it, you stumble. Just when you feel you know him, your ignorance is exposed.

In these chapters we join the disciples in following Jesus. We do so with the advantage of knowing how the story ends. At times you may be shocked by their ignorance, inconsistency, and frailty. If we're honest, we will recognize that they are no different from us.

It is widely thought that Mark was writing for the persecuted church in Rome and that he used the first-hand accounts of the apostle Peter to write his gospel. Any failure of Christians there to follow Jesus well had huge implications for the whole community. In the same way, my discipleship will affect everyone with whom I am connected.

In the course of the journey, we are introduced to two blind men (chapters 8 and 10). Like them, the disciples struggle to see. They need to receive spiritual vision. It comes gradually and, until after the resurrection, incompletely. No wonder they stumble as Jesus leads them forward.

As readers, we can see how Mark is gradually revealing more and more about who Jesus is. This runs counter to the disciples' lack of perception. But following is different from understanding. It requires action. I hope that these notes will help you to follow Jesus with your eyes open.

FROM LONG AGO TO ETERNITY

If you are reading this I expect that, like me, you are unique: another anomaly of human history! I am guessing you share my sense that peace, security, and a wide selection of breakfast cereals is somehow normal. Now I fear that we have been kidding ourselves. The majority of our human race, through history and across the world today, endures lives much more like those described so graphically by the prophet Isaiah (probably in the later eighth century BC). This great writer enables us to appreciate how it would feel to live in a community where 'normal' has broken down, decency is a forlorn hope and powerful, wicked aggressors might at any time plunder our homes and drag our loved ones into slavery. We might find it easier to picture ancient Tyre or Jerusalem reduced to rubble. Isaiah would assert that there is nothing any more eternal about—say—modern Oxford or Paris.

The western society of my own days (since 1954) has been unusually blessed. Now it seems very possible that our grandchildren will confront threats as inevitable and unnavigable as those lived by Isaiah. Terrible wars, the current cost of living crisis, movements of desperate migrants, and world hunger suggest a near future in which humanity may reach the ends of our resources and of our wits. Will Isaiah chapter 29 verse 19 then be realized in our days? 'Once more the humble will rejoice in the Lord; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.'

SEEDS OF SALVATION

Isn't it amazing how relevant and immediate parts of the ancient Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic texts we now know as the Bible can feel? It is nice to have commentaries and expositors on hand, but it doesn't take a scholar to tell us what a verse like, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matthew 5:44) means.

But then there are those parts like Isaiah 31-39...a whole other story! We have to stretch our minds and imaginations to inhabit a society where lives were often short and bloody, kingdoms small, vulnerable, and unstable little god statues all over the place—worshipped in a desperate attempt to overcome impossible odds.

In this time and place, God was at work. He was speaking. He was calling a people to declare his glory, power, love, and mercy so that the whole world might know him. In this stony, weedy, dusty ground, he planted seeds of salvation. Through Jesus, salvation came.

We read of how, yet again, the people of Israel chose not to trust God, faced God-sanctioned onslaught from a stronger enemy force, ignored their prophet, and succumbed to pride. Let's marvel at God's astonishing faithfulness through generations and his awesome ability to bring his purposes to pass regardless of humankind's ability to mess up. The zeal of the Lord has indeed accomplished this (Isaiah 37:32).

LIGHT AND LOVE FOR LIFE

The apostle John was Jesus' closest friend. Years had passed, and the other disciples had all been killed. Now the elderly John was in his final years before joining Jesus and the original gang of disciples in heaven. In these latter years, traditionally, he is thought to have been the author of five books: his beautiful account of the life and ministry of Jesus, John's gospel; the vision from Jesus that we call the book of Revelation; and these three letters.

John wrote to believers in churches that he knew well. His first letter was to believers hurting from a church split. A group had pulled out of the church to pursue their elite super-spiritual alternative. That group had been critical of those who remained and what they believed. Actually, in John's thinking this other group was not Christian at all (1 John 1:5-10). John wrote to reassure the believers that they already had the light and love that God had revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

John wrote to two friends in the much shorter second and third letters. One was helping a church where truth was being compromised in the name of love, resulting in the church being vulnerable to traveling false teachers. The other was a church leader who hosted traveling teachers, but faced difficulty from a dominant personality within the church.

John wrote in his typically simple wording that carries rich spiritual wisdom for the thoughtful reader. Let's live in God's light and love (1 John 1:7; 1 John 4:15, 16).

HEAVEN ON EARTH

Life is tough, for Christians and non-Christians alike. Often everyone and everything seems to work against us, including our own weaknesses and failings. We long for better times and better lives.

That was certainly the case for the Jews, early in the first century AD, living under Roman rule and the growing burden of Jewish Law, as we discover in Matthew's gospel. For centuries they'd been crying out for God's presence, help, and rescue.

It was also true long before then, at the time of the prophet Habakkuk, about 600 BC, when the Babylonians threatened the southern kingdom of Judah. In fact, life was always like this, for everyone. If only God would come and fix things for good!

We're poised to celebrate the birth of Jesus, when he brought heaven to earth. In the gospels, with the coming of Jesus, we hear time and time again: 'The kingdom of God has come near' (e.g., Mark 1:15). I find the Bible Project video 'Heaven & Earth' a very helpful resource for this. Give it a try. Go to <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/heaven-and-earth/>, or search for 'Bible Project heaven and earth.' There's so much in it you'll probably need to watch it more than once.

Each day we'll see ways in which Jesus brought heaven to earth, fulfilling the longing that God's people had for centuries before his birth. Let's pour out our hearts in thankfulness to him this Christmastime.