

2 Kings

Many challenges find the prophet Elisha as he tries to serve the northern kingdom. There are miraculous answers for some (chapter 4), and words of caution for others. In our readings, scenes of terrible consequences are contrasted with visions of great reward for the faithful. The overall message of obedience to the Lord pervades these ancient words.

Ecclesiastes

We are invited to ponder many questions about life that, though posed thousands of years ago, ring true for many in our culture at present. These chapters are emotional and poetic. Their place in our Scriptures assures us that God cares for us in all our emotions, even in despair when his presence seems absent. Throughout the emotional twists of these verses, we are reminded our only constant and reliable place to put our fragile hope is in God.

Mark

We spend some time being amazed at Jesus' words and deeds in the mid-portion of this gospel. Healings and miracles draw crowds to Jesus, who meets them in compassion with an invitation to follow. Our amazement continues as we follow Jesus, Peter, James, and John up the mountain to witness a view of God's glory in Christ. Like the disciples, will we also be changed by what we witness?

Isaiah

Our readings in Isaiah contain messages to many nations. In all the chaos of these various places, the enduring message is God's sovereignty. We swing from words of warning to words of deliverance but always centered around God's power, care for his people, and his desire for their loyalty and obedience. Again and again, the message goes out and forgiveness and restoration are extended.

1, 2 & 3 John

John writes with a gospel message of God's love for the church. We hear several concerns: John admonishes the church against false doctrines, lack of fruit in fellow believers, and sin in general. John has the credibility of an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry, words, and resurrection. The importance of love from God, for God, and for each other shines through.

Matthew

To accompany us into the Christmas holiday, we consider the beginning of Matthew's gospel. Matthew shares a fascinating lineage for Jesus, including four women! We come up close to the events from many perspectives and see the quickly-spreading impact of the Incarnation.

Habakkuk

This short but powerful book of the prophet's conversations with God helps us close this year. Habakkuk expresses frustration with the time it takes for God to act. He returns to a song of praise of the awesome creative power and sovereignty of the Lord.

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.

2 KINGS 4–8

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 were 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 died. 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.

ECCLESIASTES

LIFE IS NEVER SIMPLE

Ecclesiastes has fascinated me ever since I was a teenager. It is unique in Scripture, both in its literary style and in its content, reflecting on the meaninglessness of human life. It is not an easy book to study, since it appears to be at odds with Christian ideas of hope and joy. It often seems to provide more questions than answers.

The book envisages a world that is not simple, but through the complexity of human life we try to understand what God has done from beginning to end. It is an invaluable part of Scripture, because it reminds us that life is not easy to comprehend and it is all right to feel lost sometimes. Like Proverbs and Job, this book is concerned with the theme of wisdom and therefore is inherently a wisdom book. At its core, however, is the theme that it is impossible to know everything.

Ecclesiastes is an extended sermon/reflection by a writer who is never directly named. The introduction in chapter 1 and the epilogue at the end call him ‘the Teacher.’ The claims in 1:1, 12, that he was king of Israel in Jerusalem and a son of David, suggest that his identity is Solomon, but the book never uses his name directly. Instead he is called Qoheleth, a word often translated ‘Teacher,’ and it is by that name that we will refer to him.

It is important to remember that Ecclesiastes is a piece of literature. If the words are indeed those of Solomon, a man broken at the end of his life,¹ then Ecclesiastes is less a book telling us the truth of how life is, and more the vocalization of a feeling of emptiness that is universally felt by humans at certain points in our lives. God meets us and engages with us at these moments, just as much as he does in our triumphs.

¹ 1 Kings 11

MARK 5–10

THE STRUGGLE TO UNDERSTAND

We all struggle fully to understand God, even to understand God as revealed in Jesus. The Scriptures tell us that one day we shall fully know – but not yet.¹ The struggle of Jesus' disciples to understand him is the main theme of these readings. In Mark's short gospel, these six chapters cover a large slice of Jesus' ministry – in Galilee, in foreign lands, and his last journey to Jerusalem. The narrative contains many well-known events of Jesus' life – feeding the five thousand, walking on the water, the woman who touched his garment, blind Bartimaeus, blessing the children, the rich young ruler, and the transfiguration. Each event has much to teach us. Despite their familiarity, we must think carefully again about them. We must notice the way Mark orders his material. The carefully chosen events are arranged to reinforce what Mark wants his readers – or his hearers – to know.

The disciples' inability to understand Jesus is mentioned frequently, moving through Mark's narrative as a major theme. Mark is so intent on making this point that it becomes obvious that this was a truth that his informants did not want him to hide. Those informants would mostly have been the apostles, and it is evident that they did not want themselves, as Jesus' disciples, to be cast as heroes. In the young, persecuted churches to which Mark was addressing his writing, people needed to know that even their leaders had struggled.

The disciples had glimpsed something special in the person of Jesus. He had powers which only God could have. They left all to follow him, but the Jesus they followed was the Jesus of their simplistic reading of Old Testament prophecy, even the Jesus of their own imaginations. They refused to accept the idea that Jesus must die. The notion that Jesus would rise again was beyond their grasp. Only after the resurrection would they understand. Before that, we journey with them in these readings, as they struggle to comprehend the Christ whom they so faithfully followed.

¹ 1 Cor 13:12

ISAIAH 22–39

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Although Isaiah is the longest and perhaps the most popular of the prophetic books, the chapters we are about to read may be less familiar to many. We know all about Isaiah's call and vision in the temple (chapter 6) and the four servant songs (chpts 42–53), including what we can now see as a picture of what happened on the cross (chpts 52, 53). But what's going on in chapters 22–39?

The answer is threefold: there's a collection of oracles to all the nations, some specific messages for Jerusalem as it faced the threat from Assyria and, finally, a narrative section on how King Hezekiah struggled to be faithful in this tense geopolitical situation. Despite the ancient names and references, which can be hard to follow, we should do our best to understand what God was saying through Isaiah to his original hearers. The enduring significance of our readings is that they wrestle with themes that are still relevant today. These are a few that stood out to me.

First, I was encouraged by the reminder that God is sovereign over all the nations. It can be disconcerting to read about violence, wars, and nuclear threats in our world today, but it gave me 'quietness and confidence' (30:15, NKJV) to remember that none of this is beyond God. The sovereignty of God is not just a lofty doctrine; it can be a source of daily confidence. Next, I was challenged by God's judgment on the hollow worship of his people. It's easy to criticize the failings of the church today, but Isaiah prompted me to evaluate the sincerity of my own worship. Finally, I was interested in the Hezekiah narrative, because it has a surprise ending that's a warning to us all. The value of taking the road less traveled in the Bible is that we don't already know what it says, which helps us come to it with open minds and hearts. So, get ready to hear something new from God in the weeks ahead.

1, 2, AND 3 JOHN

LOVE LETTERS FROM THE ‘BELOVED DISCIPLE’

John’s purpose is found in 1 John 5:13, ‘I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.’ Although these letters were written in response to specific controversies in the churches where John served in the autumn of his apostolic career, they speak to believers in every age, facing any kind of challenge in faith or conduct.

The subject matter can seem a bit dislocated. There is no simple division into a section on doctrine followed by one on application or exhortation, as adopted by Paul in Ephesians.¹ It reminds me of a lighthouse, with an internal spiral staircase rising to the dizzy heights of the rotating lamp. At each level, a window looks out on a different vista. John’s letters are like that, offering a different perspective on vital subjects, as we climb the stairs. At the top are two great declarations: ‘God is light’ (1 John 1:5) and ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8), offering a rotating beam of hope and faith to souls in danger from storms of all kinds.

There were contentious opinions in the community in which John wrote his gospel and found himself in old age. By this stage, certain beliefs about the person and work of Christ had arisen that were unacceptable to John. There was a denial that Christ, the Son of God, had come in the flesh (1 John 4:2, 3) and that his death was necessary for the forgiveness of sins (1 John 1:7). However, in all the warnings and exhortations of these epistles, I remember the picture given by Jerome, who tells us that when the aged apostle became too weak to preach, he would be carried into the congregation at Ephesus saying, ‘Little children, love one another.’² What better advice could he give us as we turn to these short epistles?

FOR FURTHER READING

David Jackman, *The Message of John’s Letters*, BST, IVP, 1988

¹ W Hall Harris, *1, 2, 3 John*, Biblical Studies Press, <https://bible.org/seriespage/4-structure-and-purpose-1-john>
² David Jackman, 1988, p11

MATTHEW 1 AND 2

CHRISTMAS WITHOUT CAROLS

In these opening chapters, Matthew leads us to a gallery seat from which we can observe the majesty of the incarnation. No tinsel here, no holly, nor ivy, no background music of carols – not even Luke’s angelic choir. Matthew’s gospel is written by a Jew for Jewish readers, intended to convince them of the Messianic credentials held by Jesus. For this reason, he begins with a genealogy traced from Jewish perspectives, from Abraham (the father of the Jewish nation) and through David (the greatest king of Israel).¹

After this introduction, we shall have a glimpse of the dilemma faced by Joseph as he received the devastating warning of his fiancée’s pregnancy in a dream. Thankfully, he made his choice to embrace God’s will, though at enormous cost to himself. The brief record of Jesus’ birth is set against a backcloth of Old Testament prophecies. Matthew’s gospel is saturated with such citations, of special significance to Jews.

These opening chapters have a global dimension, too. Magi come from the East to worship the newborn King. In an early pointer to the great commission with which the gospel will conclude,² Matthew reveals good news for people of all races and in every station of life, from wise men and kings to lowly refugees. Then, from our chronological vantage point, we will watch with amazement as a little family facing the threat of war and violence in their homeland makes the journey that millions have taken since, fleeing for their lives to a foreign land. Before the Prince of Peace learned to walk, he was a homeless refugee with a price on his head.³

Finally, the conflict with Herod and its evil consequences mark this gospel and this season with a heavy dose of reality. There is a place for tears and for expressing grief, even at Christmas, and God’s Son has come to share it and to overcome the sin and death that causes it.

¹ *Life Application Bible Commentary: Matthew*, Tyndale House, 1996, pxii ² Matt 28:19, 20 ³ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 1*, SPCK, 2004, p14

HABAKKUK

HEARING HABAKKUK'S HEART

Habakkuk prophesied in turbulent times, probably during the reign of Jehoiakim of Judah, perhaps 20 years before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 587 BC. Internally, corruption and injustice were rampant. Internationally, a crisis was brewing as the Babylonians rapidly consolidated power. Such situations are not just the stuff of history books. As I write, my own nation, Sri Lanka, is navigating turbulent times – ‘the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails’ (1:4).

Most Old Testament prophets were called by God to pronounce judgment; Habakkuk, in contrast, pleads with God to judge his wayward people. Prophets typically rebuked God's people for their unfaithfulness, urging repentance and a return to the covenant, but Habakkuk dares to question God's inaction (1:2–4) and he challenges God's actions (1:12–17). The name ‘Habakkuk’ is possibly derived from a Hebrew word meaning ‘to embrace’;¹ it befits this prophet, who makes no attempt to evade hard questions but holds on tight to God even while he grapples with disconnects between his lofty expectations of God and his disappointing experiences of him. An embrace represents closeness and comfort, but in intimate relationships we are also free to be real – to raise hard questions, confess hurts, and reveal raw places in our hearts. Habakkuk does this through his anguished questions.

Habakkuk not only speaks honestly, but he also listens humbly to God (2:1). Though the chaos-generating circumstances remain unchanged, God works wonderful changes in the prophet's heart. Ronald Blue captures the transformation: ‘Habakkuk's book begins with an interrogation of God but ends as an intercession to God. Worry is transformed into worship. Fear turns to faith. Terror becomes trust. Hang-ups are resolved with hope. Anguish melts into adoration.’²

FOR FURTHER READING

DW Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk & Zephaniah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, IVP, 1988

¹ *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Holman Bible Publishers, 2003 ² Ronald Blue, ‘Habakkuk’ in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Victor Books, 1985