

INTRODUCTION

I told everyone I could no longer have pets—too much responsibility, too great an expense, too painful the grief when their lives ended. Then my son bought his family a puppy, decided I really needed to have their puppy's sister, and bought her for me. Now I have Hosanna, who loves to visit and play with her brother, Theo. Again, I have the responsibility, the expense—and I worry: is she eating the right food, is she getting enough exercise, does she have everything she needs...?

Our Heavenly Father is responsible for those he has redeemed, those purchased with the sacrifice of his Son. He cares for us—and he does so perfectly. First quarter 2025 Discovery readings are filled with evidences of God's love and faithfulness. He has no question about our needs; he knows them all and lovingly provides for them.

Early chapters of Genesis set the stage for the entire narrative of the Bible and help us understand creation, human nature, and who God is. From the Garden of Eden to the Tower of Babel, mankind repeatedly rebelled against him; with each generation, God carried out his ultimate plan for them.

Joshua continues the narrative of God with his people. It records the Israelites' entrance into the promised land and God's faithfulness to his covenant. Ambivalence toward obedience to God continued, despite his faithful provisions for them.

The book of Jonah tells of the disobedience and repentance of a man and of a city. We can find ourselves in the humanity of Jonah and in God's persistent dealings with him. We also see God's grace and mercy displayed, not only for his own, but for those he desires to make his own.

Nineveh's history is continued in Nahum. The prophet pronounced God's judgment on the city that had responded to Jonah's call for repentance but then returned to rebellion against God. Again, we see mankind's propensity to wander from God. We also see God's concern for the oppressed and his judgment of evil, as well as his protection for his people.

During the reign of Josiah and revival of Judah, the prophet Zephaniah's message was one of judgment and encouragement, of punishment for those who sin against him and of salvation for those faithful to him.

John's gospel, continues to tell God's story that we have seen foreshadowed in the Old Testament come to pass. Jesus, through whom all things were created, came and dwelt among us to redeem us. In the early chapters his ministry shows us who he is and that belief in him gives us life, eternal life.

In his letter to the churches in Galatia, made up of Jews and gentiles, the Apostle Paul began by sharing his testimony and proclaiming the truth of the gospel. It is a gospel of grace through faith alone and not works, a gospel that leads to freedom and righteous living enabled by God's Spirit.

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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.

EAST OF EDEN

'Go west' can be said to encourage exploration into the unknown, which can sometimes lead to perilous circumstances. In Genesis 1-11*, however, it is going eastward that symbolizes disaster! The garden God had 'planted ... in the east, in Eden' (2:8) was not just the setting for the creation story but the place where Adam and Eve enjoyed God's presence and blessings. After the fall, humanity's movement away from God is represented as going further east, away from the garden. Adam and Eve were banished and sent eastward—with God's angel-guard on the 'east side' (3:24); driven from God's presence, Cain settled in 'Nod, east of Eden' (4:16); and the Babel-builders not only 'moved eastward' but settled in Shinar (11:1, 2), which is Babylon—the city that epitomized rebellion against God.

The beginning of another year is a great time to revisit Genesis 1-11, which records many beginnings: the universe, life, work, marriage; the beginning of things so 'good' going so wrong; but also the beginning of God's redemptive work: a seed-promise (3:15), a covenant (9:8-17), and then the stage being set for God's grand redemption story, as Abram's family leave Ur in the east to head westward toward Canaan (11:31; 12:1-5).

Reflect on how the characters in Genesis 1-11 either draw nearer to God or move further away from him. Consider your own life direction: How will you move forward in a godly and Godward direction in 2025?

*Chapter 11 will be covered in our 2nd quarter *Discovery* Bible guide.

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KISS THE WORLD BEAUTIFUL

The writing of this series commenced in Milton Keynes and was completed in Lahore, during two weeks in which I joined my wife visiting her parents in her native Pakistan. During that time, I made my home in a culture vastly different from my own. On an entirely different scale, these readings bring the bold declaration of John that, in Jesus, God ‘made his dwelling among us’ (1:14); that he came from eternity to earth to ‘pitch his tent’ within his creation.

John’s gospel is therefore an up-close and personal account of the life of God on earth—of what happened when ordinary women and men encountered God in the flesh during their everyday lives. This being so, there is always a danger that in writing on John’s gospel ‘the Word made flesh here is made word again’, to quote from a poem by Edwin Muir* in which he takes preachers to task for confining the mystery of the incarnation of Christ in lifeless, ideological words.

Aware of this potential pitfall, the notes that follow are offered in the prayerful hope of helping readers encounter the living Christ—the Word made flesh—through the opening chapters of John’s account of Jesus. John’s stated purpose in writing his gospel is that readers ‘may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God’ (20:31). This series, therefore, has that same purpose.

*Edwin Muir, ‘The Incarnate One’, in *One Foot in Eden* (Faber & Faber, 1956)

Final entry from author on John 4:43-54 is on February 10th.

NIGEL HOPPER is an accredited Baptist minister and former Managing Editor for SU’s Bible resources. Nigel now works for the John Lewis Partnership. He is married to Nudrat, and they live in Milton Keynes.

THE SCARLET CORD

The book of Joshua tells how the people of Israel eventually entered the Promised Land after leaving Egypt and wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. Moses was dead, and Joshua had succeeded him as leader. The whole generation of those who left Egypt had died in the wilderness (excluding Joshua and Caleb), so it was a new generation that crossed the Jordan.

The story centers on Joshua and describes how he grew into leadership and how God used him to inspire Israel into taking the land. Yet the victory was not Joshua's but God's. Throughout the book we see that this was the Lord's doing. The land was his gift to his people, their inheritance which they did not earn. In this we are taught that God is the great Giver, and we receive from his grace. He initiates and directs; we respond with faith and obedience. This is the way of victory and how the Christian life is to be lived.

This does not mean we are passive, however. Joshua had to show great courage, and the people had to learn to obey. Above all they needed to consecrate themselves to God, separating themselves from sin and devoting themselves to doing God's will.

Joshua is an inspiring read, yet it presents a challenge to modern readers, especially in the level of violence. If we see beyond this, it will strengthen our faith and deepen our commitment to God.

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TESTIMONY TO THE TRUTH

When I have some leisure time in London, I like to spend an afternoon in one of the big galleries. I have learned over the years that rather than rush through each room spending a few moments with each picture, I get a better experience by spending more time with just a few paintings. That way I can really see what is going on and what the artist is doing.

Reading John's gospel is a little like touring an art gallery. We can read through it quickly with each scene like a painting in a gallery. If we do that then we get a good idea of the story, but perhaps we miss John's finer details.

These finer details can be seen in the themes that run all the way through the gospel, one of which is testimony: the testimony of other people about Jesus, and the testimony of Jesus about himself—especially his 'I am' sayings.

Chapters 5 to 7 center on one of those 'I am' sayings—'I am the bread of life' (6:35)—and they also look in detail at what it means to testify about Jesus. What authority does Jesus have to make these claims? How can these claims be trusted? These passages have sometimes been likened to a trial scene with lawyers arguing to and fro about who this man really is. As we read these passages, the same questions confront us. How might we answer them?

Final entry from author on John 7:40-52 is on March 10th.

TOBY HOLE is Director of Mission and Ministry in the Diocese of Sheffield, where he lives with his wife Amy, his three children, and two tortoises. He previously worked in a church in London and before ordination, was a solicitor. When he isn't working, he can usually be found in a cinema or walking in the nearby Peak District.

NOT YOUR AVERAGE PROPHET...

The well-known story of Jonah takes place during the reign of King Jeroboam 2nd of Israel (2 Kings 14:23–27) about 750 years before Jesus' birth. It's about one of God's prophets who tries to run away from God but finds he can't. No surprises there, but as we take a closer look, we'll see that there's much more to it than is immediately obvious.

God tells Jonah to travel to Nineveh and warn Israel's dreaded enemies, the barbaric Assyrians, that he will punish them for their wickedness. He wants them to have the chance to repent before it's too late. But, when they do so, Jonah isn't happy! Like Jonah, we may think there's no way that perpetrators of evil deserve God's mercy and we are reluctant to see them forgiven. However, Daniel 9:9 tells us that God accepts everyone who turns to him and asks for forgiveness: 'The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him.'

Sadly, the Ninevites' repentance doesn't last. History repeats itself. About 150 years later, through the prophet Nahum, God warns the Assyrians—once again—of judgment to come. But they ignore God's message, so his justice prevails. Subsequently, in 612 BC, the brutal Assyrian regime is overthrown.

How can these events speak to us? Pray for fresh understanding of the character of God, and how he deals with people. Ask God to challenge you about ways you respond to him. For example, perhaps we are more like Jonah than we care to admit!

SUE CLUTTERHAM is a former local Mission Partner with SU who enjoys writing and editing material that helps people of all ages explore the Bible in creative ways. Free time includes walking, reading, and watching crime thrillers, as well as outings with friends and family to local tea shops. Her favorite place in the world is a deserted beach.

SILENCE AND SONG

Zephaniah's prophecies begin with a command to be silent before the Lord's destruction: people, animals, birds, fish, idols—they will all be swept away by his judgment. Is it any wonder? He lived through times of pagan and occult practices, idolatry, and child sacrifices, led by kings Manasseh and Amon (2 Kings 21). As we will find out from Zephaniah's graphic descriptions of judgment, God's people had wandered far indeed.

But all was not lost. Somehow, through the few faithful servants of God left in the palace (maybe even Zephaniah himself), Amon's son Josiah followed the Lord's ways, not his father's. As he restored and repaired the temple, a Book of the Law was discovered (probably Deuteronomy) and he embarked on ambitious reforms, removing places of idol worship and renewing the covenant (2 Kings 22, 23).

This was the world of Zephaniah. His prophecies (probably written in the mid to late seventh century BC) exposed the sin of God's people and showed them the dangerous path they were on. Perhaps they preceded Josiah's reforms; perhaps they supported them. We don't know. His glimpses of hope would be fulfilled partially by those reforms, more clearly in Jesus and the cross, but fully and finally in the return of Jesus.

Zephaniah's prophecies end as they begin: with silence. Only this time, God's people are listening to the love song of the Lord their God, full of joy and contentment and perfect shalom peace. Zephaniah reminds us that the Lord our God speaks words of judgment and forgiveness, holiness and love, justice and peace. Let's listen.

BEN GREEN is married to Jess, and they live in Birmingham, where he is vicar. When he isn't vicaring, Ben is most likely to be found writing computer software. He also enjoys walking up mountains, playing the piano, and letting Jess plan their holidays.

HARD TRUTHS

From the beginning of his account of the life of Jesus, John focuses on Jesus' origins. The events he records illustrate that Jesus was human like us, but not like us: humans do not have the power to turn water into wine or multiply a few loaves and fish into a meal for 5,000! Neither do people make the sort of claims that Jesus made (judge over everything, John 5:22, 27; with power to give life to the dead, John 5:21, 24). If they did, they would soon be referred to a psychiatrist! Indeed, in our readings this week, we'll see the Jews reacting strongly against Jesus' claims.

The burning question for the Jews then and for people today is: Can we trust what Jesus said? What are his credentials? Who is he really? John 8 touches on all these questions as we listen in on Jesus acting as judge, confronting the Jews with the truth about themselves and about himself.

Although the verses of John 8:1-11 are not found in the earliest manuscripts (which is why they may appear in italics in your Bible), the scene follows a recurring theme in John's gospel: Jesus the Judge who confronts people with the truth (see John 4:16-18; 5:14, 15). The incident gives us a glimpse of a Judge who upholds truth and holiness but whose heart is full of mercy. That beautiful combination of justice and mercy would ultimately take Jesus to the cross.

PENNY BOSHOFF is a teacher and a writer. She currently teaches English as a Foreign Language to primary-aged children. She enjoys helping adults, teens, and young children explore the Bible together in small groups.

A HERO UNLIKE ANY OTHER

Our cinemas are often dominated by action hero films. Whether it's Spider-Man swinging from buildings, the X-Men saving the universe, or Indiana Jones battling to find lost historical artifacts, we have no shortage of this kind of film. We all love a hero and we probably all have assumptions about what a hero should be like: strong, athletic, brave, fast, sophisticated...

The 'hero' of John's gospel is, of course, Jesus. He is, however, a hero entirely different from any we might see in movies. In the chapters we will be reading over the coming days, we see a hero who heals the sick, teaches profoundly about his identity, raises a man from the dead, weeps with his mourning family, and is anointed with perfume before a dramatic yet humble entry into the great city of Jerusalem.

As you read these stories, look for the portrayal of the hero at the heart of it all. Jesus is shown to be kind with those who are suffering and yet firm with those who are plotting against him. He's a man who performs extraordinary miracles, yet rides on the back of a donkey and speaks of being a 'shepherd' who 'lays down his life for the sheep' (John 10:11). John shows him as the master of events and yet full of humility. In reading these stories, wonder afresh at the true superhero of the world.

RICHARD ELLWOOD returned to the UK after several years pastoring an international French-speaking church in Brussels, Belgium. He is now the Team Leader of the Salt & Light Advance family of churches. Richard lives with his wife and family in Oxfordshire.

IN CHRIST ALONE...

There were problems in the early church. Paul had planted the group of churches in Galatia, perhaps on his first missionary journey in central or southern Turkey. All had begun well, but then he discovered they had been enticed away from the true gospel of Christ and persuaded that the old practices of Judaism were necessary as well. Paul was angry with those who had disturbed them and was concerned for these young disciples.

The troublemakers had cast doubt on Paul's authority—hence his defense of his apostleship and call from God (1:11, 12). This was important not just for these early believers, but for future generations' understanding of their faith in Christ. For some Jewish Christians, the practice of circumcision identified new believers as God's people. But Paul insisted that it is in Christ alone, through his cross, that we can be made children of God, members of his family.

Centuries later we may feel today that we, or at least the church leaders, have it all sorted. The issues may be different, but Paul's letter to these Christians brings us warning too. Before we feel too smug about our own understanding of the gospel, let's take a moment to think about the practices, rules, and values we subtly bring to what we consider to be the correct understanding of faith. What burdens might we be laying on others? 'Watch yourselves!' says Paul (6:1): 'May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' (6:14).

TRICIA WILLIAMS worked with SU for many years, developing and editing Bible resources. In recent years, she has been researching and writing about faith and dementia. She and her husband, Emlyn, live in Norfolk, where they are part of a local Anglican church.