

Proverbs

Proverbs 1–9, written by Solomon during his reign over Israel, offers God’s people practical wisdom for righteous living—the essence of wisdom being fear of the Lord (1:7, 9:10). The journey toward wisdom is an ongoing commitment to seek and personify God’s virtues; Proverbs encourages us to consider our character and actions and to seek a higher standard, God’s standard, for our lives. Of priceless value, wisdom keeps us from sin and its consequences and enables us to experience God’s blessing.

Acts

In the book of Acts, we follow the ministry of Paul and Barnabas as missionaries and see the extension of the church beyond Israel to the gentiles. The transformative power of the gospel is shown in their steadfast faith and courage in spite of opposition, and in the changed hearts and lives of men and women they encounter. God’s power is displayed as human obstacles are overcome, the Good News spreads, and the church continues to grow.

2 Kings

The young prophet Elisha continues to preach to sinful kings and their people who are worshipping idols and disobeying God. Ignoring the repeated warnings of God’s prophets, both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms fall under God’s judgment (17:13–15).

Ephesians

Paul wrote this epistle to encourage both Jewish and gentile converts in the young churches around Ephesus by beginning with the mystery of God’s grace made known in Christ. His exhortations for unity of purpose, admonitions for commitment to the gospel’s teaching, and command to stand firm are as relevant today as they were for the early church.

Deuteronomy

Moses retold the history of the Israelites in Deuteronomy and spent extended time urging them again to obey God’s law, explaining principles and giving instructions for living as God’s chosen nation. In this book, which literally means *Second Law*, they were reminded of God’s faithfulness and of what he expected of his people so they would know his blessing.

Mark

Coming to the end of Mark’s gospel, Jesus enters Jerusalem as a humble King and continues to teach us, not only through his actions, but through his teaching, about who he is and how his followers should live. He prepares his disciples for what is to come before going to the cross and, following his resurrection, urges them to preach the gospel with perseverance and expectation.

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.

PROVERBS 1–9

IN SEARCH OF WISDOM

The book of Proverbs is often thought of as a compendium of short, sharp, and largely unconnected sayings conveying traditional wisdom and common sense. However, chapters 1–9 and 31 are different, containing lengthier, sustained arguments on wisdom-related themes. The first nine chapters function as an introduction to the book, helping to orient the reader to the material that follows.

Chapter 1 begins, ‘The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel’. This may refer to the whole book or just to chapters 1–9. Either way, the proverbs are associated in some way with Solomon. This may mean he wrote them, but it is just as likely that they were collected through many years of Israelite history, then presented in honor of King Solomon, whose name had already become associated with the genre.

Much of Proverbs 1–9 takes the form of an address written from a parent to a young man setting out in life with a lot to learn. The address, ‘my son’, occurs 15 times. On such occasions, those of us who are not young Israelite males are invited to use our imagination, to put ourselves in the sandals of the addressee and extrapolate warning and advice for our own circumstances. These chapters are bookended with ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge/wisdom’ (see 1:7; 9:10) and they contain some of the most loved sayings of the Bible. Wisdom is sometimes personified, most obviously in chapter 8, where Wisdom is presented as a woman of high standing. I try to use the capitalized ‘Wisdom’ whenever I think the personal form is in view. I hope that, as we read these chapters, we shall rediscover a vital resource for our own growth in wisdom and understanding.

FOR FURTHER READING

Ellen F Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000) Michael V Fox, *Proverbs 1–9* (Yale University Press, 2000) Ernest C Lucas, *Proverbs* (Eerdmans, 2015)

ACTS 12–16

MISSIONAL ACTS

The Acts of the Apostles is probably the most dramatic and adventurous book in the Bible. Luke composes this story with precise attention to detail and he includes many memorable episodes designed to have an impact on his readers. I have argued elsewhere that Acts is best read as a form of ancient persuasive writing, telling stories from the past to influence readers in their future actions.¹ The main theme of the book is mission. Luke tells these vivid stories not merely out of historical interest, but to inspire and equip his readers in their own lives and contexts. Reading Acts through this lens illuminates in surprisingly fresh ways many of the stories that Luke tells.

As we walk through striking stories focused on Paul's missionary journeys, we will notice repeated themes, including a focus on: (1) following and being empowered by the Spirit; (2) urban population centers; (3) people of peace and influence; (4) social networks; (5) signs and wonders; (6) relevant preaching; (7) a willingness to suffer; and, above all, (8) the priority of establishing and building the church. These themes shape much of Luke's persuasive missional teaching and their repetition provides helpful clues about what he most wants to communicate to his audience.

As you study this crucial portion of Acts, attempt to read each episode as if for the first time. I'm convinced that overfamiliarity is a significant barrier to receiving their rich message. Luke has written this work to affect his reader profoundly, and the resulting inspiration and provocation is transformative, though not always comfortable. May our eyes be opened to read and engage afresh, and our hearts opened to the Spirit's formation and renovation as we read and study.

FOR FURTHER READING

My recent book, *Missional Acts*,¹ is a helpful reading companion to Acts, analyzing the book from a missional perspective. Craig Keener's commentary on Acts² remains the most thorough and detailed commentary. Both sources will inform the background of the following Bible notes.

¹ Daniel McGinnis, *Missional Acts* (Pickwick, 2022) ² Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols (Baker Academic, 2012–2015)

2 KINGS 9–25

A GOD OF FAITHFULNESS

The books of Kings cover more than four hundred years of Israelite history, divided into three sections: the end of David's reign and the reign of Solomon (1 Kings 1–11); the divided monarchy of Israel and Judah (1 Kings 12–2 Kings 17); and the kingdom of Judah alone after the fall of Israel (2 Kings 18–25). It is noteworthy that the books are not all about the kings and their times, but rather more about God and loyalty to him.

These coming three weeks focus on 2 Kings 9–25. This section starts with Jehu's rise to power and then records the swirling downfall of Israel after the prime time of Jehu's dynasty. It displays a mixed bag of good and bad kings of Judah, among whom Hezekiah and Josiah are considered to be the best rulers. The destruction of Israel serves as a warning to Judah, but unfortunately Judah follows Israel's fatal path.

As elsewhere in both books of Kings, David is used in 2 Kings 9–25 as a standard for comparison to evaluate the southern kings. However, at some point, the corrupt kings of Judah (Ahaz and Manasseh) are compared with the kings of Israel (16:3; 21:3). Despite the great reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah, the cumulative sins of the nation led to the irreversible disaster in Judah. Amid the totality of the devastation of Judah, the book surprisingly ends on a note of hope (25:27–30), which serves to remind the Jewish exiles of God's promise to David.¹ The lamp of David never vanishes – even on the brink of extinction.

¹ 2 Sam 7:16; 2 Kings 8:19

GOD'S COSMIC PLAN OF BLESSING

EPHESIANS

Ephesians reveals to us the wonderful mystery of God's work, to draw all people to Christ and, in Christ, to create a new humanity. This new humanity is blessed by God and reconciled to him. It will extend that reconciliation and blessing to others and, in doing so, it will enable the powers that stand against God to be exposed.

Ephesus was a large city in the first century, with a minority Jewish population and four impressive temples to pagan gods, including the enormous temple to Artemis. It was a city of competing religions, where Paul had planted a church and then returned to minister there for over two years.¹ Paul is writing to encourage the believers to stand firm in their faith in Christ. He begins his letter by describing the revolutionary reality that Christ has brought into existence, before instructing the Ephesian believers on how they are to live to display this new reality to one another and the world around them.

Paul is writing from prison, a hugely challenging environment: uncomfortable, with little food or light, alongside other prisoners who were most likely sick and nearing death. Given this, it is even more remarkable how Paul's words are filled with hope and life.

There is scholarly debate about the authorship of Ephesians, but these notes accept the statement in 1:1 that the author is Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus. The letter contains sections of complex theology (4:7–10) and contentious theology (5:21–33; 6:5–9). There is further reading below to help readers to explore these areas more fully.

FOR FURTHER READING

On authorship: David DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Apollos, 2004), 716–721, for a classic devotional approach: John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (IVP, 1991)

For a contemporary technical but pastoral commentary: Lynn Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, (Eerdmans, 2020)

For a complementary approach: Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Thomas Nelson, 1990).

¹ Acts 18–20

DEUTERONOMY 1 - 15

MOSES' CALL TO LOVE THE LORD ALONE

Deuteronomy is one of my favorite books. If I have one hour, I read chapters 1–11 out loud (or listen to David Suchet, for example, reading them in the NIVUK audio version). If time is lacking, I begin by reading Psalm 19:7–11 and Matthew 5:17–20, which remind me of Jewish delight in the Law—its piercing quality like the Middle Eastern sun. This is why there is a mezuzah on the doorpost of every pious Jewish home, that residents brush with their fingers every time they leave and enter.

I imagine myself gathered with ancient listeners and many modern readers to hear Moses' last will and testament as a description of my own inheritance; everything our beloved leader wants us to remember, cherish, and embody. Chapters 1–4 set the scene, with many reminders from the Torah's earlier books; chapters 5–11 lay out the basic framework of the covenant, including the first passage every Jewish child learns. Then we plunge into the first part of the detailed legislation which will govern the shape, texture, and ethos of Jewish community life—because a nation is in the process of formation; history is being made.

Prepare for a turbulent ride these next few weeks. The book has a sermonic quality and so many significant words in the Old Testament are here. The Lord - awesome in love, majesty, judgment, fire, anger, and mercy. The people of God - corrupt, stiff-necked, grumbling, listening, promising, forgetting, obeying, hoping, and fearing. Moses - the prophet, teacher, intercessor, mediator, and man of sorrows. And chilling words—destroy, wipe out, no pity, and conquer. Implore the help of the Holy Spirit as we read and make our way to 'a land flowing with milk and honey.'¹

FOR FURTHER READING

C Wright, *Deuteronomy* (Hendrickson, 1996)

J Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation* (Maggid Books, 2017)

H Painter, *God of Violence Yesterday, God of Love Today?* (BRF, 2019)

¹ E.g. Exod 3:8; Deut 27:3

MARK 11–12

THE WEEK THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

The first readers of (or listeners to) Mark's gospel didn't have the luxury of four gospels to compare with each other. For the largely gentile audience, probably living in Rome, this was the first organized account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It reads like a series of video shorts, actions taking priority over words, deeds over teaching. Based on the experience of Peter, there's a first-hand vividness to the gospel. It's frank and honest, particularly in relation to the highs and lows of Peter's role, but with Jesus central to every episode.

Chapters 11 to 16 of Mark encompass the final phase of the account. In the earlier chapters we have seen Jesus' early Galilean ministry and the enigmatic excursions into northern Palestine. The disciples have been called and trained. Everything then hinges on Peter's confession in chapter 8, the recognition that Jesus is the promised Messiah. From this point on, the direction of the action turns south toward Jerusalem, with the departure from Galilee. The men and women from the north approach the capital.

Chapters 1 to 10 of the gospel were selective, covering three years of Jesus' ministry. They read like the edited highlights of an eventful time. By contrast, chapters 11 to 16 give a day by day, often hour by hour, account of a single week. Miracles are few. Instead, it's a time of controversies, some initiated by Jesus, others the work of the religious and legal authorities, threatened by the powerful presence of Jesus in a city already overcrowded by the influx of pilgrims for the Passover festival. The climax is devastating, an abyss of injustice, torture, and death quietly transformed in a garden early one morning. Just as Jesus said it would.