

INTRODUCTION

As a young adult new in faith, I would ask my learned friend for Bible “teachings.” Mathew would begin by reading his chosen text out loud, and as I listened and watched him, it was clear that our experiences in that moment were quite different. While I benefitted from what he read, he, being fluent in both Hebrew and Greek, was reading with a depth of understanding I could not begin to (nor will ever) have. Now, having been a Christian for more than fifty years, the Holy Spirit speaks and teaches me through the Word in ways that have become deeper and richer. As we work through *Discovery* this quarter, let us look to him for deeper understanding and greater wonder, for faith-building truths and life-changing direction.

In the **Genesis** chapters we will read, God will call Abraham to leave his country. Journeying with him, we will witness his challenges, his failures, as well as his growth in faith. We will see Abraham’s covenant-making God show intimate care for all that concerned him.

There will be other journeys in **Exodus** as Moses is born, becomes a part of Egyptian royalty and eventually, a shepherd in Midian. God will return him to Egypt to free the Israelites from slavery. Again, we will see, not only physical transitions, but spiritual journeys as God reveals who he is and shows his great power expressed on behalf of his people.

We will witness another birth, a miraculous birth, and then the call of God on young Samuel’s life in the early part of **1 Samuel**. He will become a prophet for rebellious, idolatrous Israel, calling them to repentance. The people will demand a king—to be like other nations—and Samuel will anoint Saul.

The book of **Proverbs** teaches wisdom to God’s people, the early chapters targeting younger people. All of us, however, are encouraged to see and relate to things as God does.

Continuing in **John** to its end, Jesus will teach us much about himself in word and deed, both before and after his crucifixion. He will journey to the cross with uncompromising purpose and accomplish that for which he came—redemption for you and me.

Jesus’ proclamation of God’s kingdom is continued by the apostles, empowered by the promised Holy Spirit, in the book of **Acts**. The gospel is proclaimed with power, both in what they say and do, and the church is begun.

1 Corinthians will relate to the early church in Corinth that is plagued with struggles that will feel familiar in many ways. Paul will boldly, but lovingly, address their problems, seeking to center them in Christ.

Galatians, written to the young Galatian church, confirmed that justification by faith in Christ alone makes us heirs in the kingdom of God and gives us freedom as we live lives that please God.

So, let’s begin. As we continue on our own faith journeys, let us grow in our understanding of who God is and of who we are because Christ died and rose again for us.

SHARON SACKS, lead editor for *Discovery*, has long been involved in ministry, mentoring children, as well as those young and young in faith. She has led Bible studies and writes for both children and adults. Sharon has also worked in missions serving workers in hard places of the world.

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.

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 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 yourself!' 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.

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 at the 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.

THE TRUE AND THE NEW

John's account of the hours leading up to Jesus' death and the days immediately following his resurrection takes up nearly half his gospel. The chapters preceding these show us, through his teaching and prayers (John 13-17), the priorities that Jesus longed to leave with his followers. This will be further explored in greater detail 4th quarter. Concluding that time, Jesus starts his final journey toward the cross and— looking over John's shoulder—we join him.

In narrating events, John's writing is rich with recurring themes, meaningful contrasts, stark irony, and eyewitness details. His stated purpose (20:31) is to engender life-giving belief in the truth of who Jesus is. These chapters highlight Jesus as the true Shepherd, true High Priest, true Passover Lamb, true Son of the Father, true King, true Adam, and Truth itself. Another theme to look out for is the newness that opens out of the empty tomb: new life, new faith, new peace, new purpose, new perspective, new calling, new wholeness—to name but a few! What truth about who he is might Jesus want to reveal to you this Easter? Into what newness might he be waiting to lead you?

As we come to contemplate the Passion, let me invite you to ask God for the grace to be present to Jesus in his suffering, to 'sorrow with Christ in sorrow' (Ignatius Loyola), allowing that to deepen your walk with and love for him.

NOTE: We are reading John 18-21 now during the days leading up to Easter and will be reading John 12-17 in our 4th quarter Discovery Bible guide.

CATH BUTLER enjoys working as a peripatetic music tutor, and she has just qualified as a spiritual director. Her primary 'love languages' are the clarinet, pancakes, walks by the sea, reading, and journaling. She writes for and edits @PilgrimsPages – a social media hub designed to help people explore journaling as a spiritual practice.

YES OR NO?

There's not much of an introduction to 1 Corinthians in the text. Paul allows himself just nine verses before he gets to business, addressing one difficult issue after another. Sometimes he answers the questions that have been sent, but more often he's responding to reports from trusted local witnesses. This letter is Paul's prophetic and pastoral challenge to the Corinthians to get back on track. Some of the issues covered in these notes are incredibly serious, but all are visceral ones that would have been deeply felt.

A key theme is God's 'no' to the culture in which they were set. Their context isn't neutral, from Paul's point of view, but a major cause of their struggles around style over substance. God says 'no' to that by choosing his weakness over human strength. Paul sees God's 'yes' in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit demonstrating the power of Christ crucified through his ministry. This is not only God's 'yes,' but also the fundamental antidote to the culture's wisdom. More than this, the 'mind of Christ' which the Spirit shares with us also gives us a divine wisdom from which to discern the culture around us.

The confidence with which Paul describes God's 'no' to the culture around them is both refreshing and challenging. How discerning are we about the culture around us? To what extent might we have become too affirming of the wisdom of our culture?

MIKE ARCHER is married to Sarah, and they have two adult children, Mims and Sam. Ordained since 1994, Mike is passionate about the renewal of the local church. He wants to know the Father well and help others to know him too.

THE NAME OF THE LORD

Last month, Jewish families celebrated the feast of Passover, retelling the suffering of the Israelite slaves in Egypt and their dramatic rescue by God. The story of the exodus is told in the psalms and by the prophets (e.g., Psalm 78:12-16; Jeremiah 2:6) and is central to the identity of the people of Israel.

We do not have an exact date for the exodus. Some have suggested the pharaoh in question may have been Rameses II, but the Bible does not name him. The central character of the book is not Pharaoh, or even Moses, but the Lord, the God of Israel. Through successive plagues (in chapters 7-11) God reveals himself to Pharaoh until, finally, he is forced to submit to the Lord's authority.

At the beginning of the book, the children of Israel, having been in Egypt for several generations, seem to have become less familiar with their God. In this book the Lord makes himself known, revealing his name to Moses, to the Israelites, and then, through dramatic displays of power, to Pharaoh and the Egyptian people.

God's name revealed to Moses shows him as Yahweh, the unchangeable 'I am' (Exodus 3:14), upon whom his people can depend. It was a name so holy that later Jews dared not pronounce it, but it was the foundation of their faith.

As the psalmist later said: 'Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God' (Psalm 20:7).

PHIL WINN is now retired from full-time ministry, but occasionally preaches and leads worship. He and his wife, Pauline, enjoy exploring the local countryside and spending time with their grandchildren.

A WORD TO THE WISE

Wisdom can be a tricky thing to define, though we can probably all think of people we consider wise. Perhaps ‘applied knowledge’ is a good way of describing it.

In this series of readings we will be looking at some of the wisdom Solomon wrote down for his son. In these early chapters of Proverbs, however, there is less practical wisdom and more exhortation to pursue wisdom—less of the ‘what’ and more of the ‘why.’

Solomon was, famously, the king who asked God for wisdom instead of wealth or power or anything else he might have wished for. This was in itself a wise request, showing a deep level of understanding of the task facing him, and a humility to recognize he would need God’s help to carry it out. In this book we find him trying to pass on his wisdom to his son—and to any of us who will listen.

He uses every rhetorical device he can think of to try to drive his point home—warning of the dangers of folly, promising the rewards of wisdom, enticing us with images of wisdom’s beauty, threatening us with the consequences of evil. Wisdom, he is telling us, is really important. Whatever else you do in life, be sure that you get wisdom.

His passion is contagious. As you read, try to hear and catch Solomon’s enthusiasm for his topic. And ask God to help you care about it as much as he does: ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’ (Proverbs 9:10).

JENNIE POLLOCK is a writer and editor. She is the author of *If Only: Finding joyful contentment in the face of lack and longing*. Her website is jenniepollow.com.

‘COME, HOLY SPIRIT...’

The Acts of the Apostles is widely regarded as the sequel to the gospel of Luke. The author is referred to as the ‘dear friend’ and ‘doctor’ (Colossians 4:14), as well as being one of the apostle Paul’s longest-serving traveling companions (2 Timothy 4:11). More than anything, Luke is a highly skilled writer who uses a variety of styles. Around the midpoint in Acts (16:10), things change. He shifts from speaking in the third person plural (they) to the first person plural (we). He becomes an embedded reporter, narrating events as an active participant and not simply a witness. Luke is an activist.

The ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit is one of Luke’s dominant themes. In his gospel we see him at work in the ministry of Jesus, ending with Jesus promising his followers that they, too, will be clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:49). Acts begins with Jesus repeating the injunction to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the Holy Spirit (1:4, 5). The pivotal moment between the promise and the fulfillment is the ascension (Acts 1:9), where Jesus returns to the Father. On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit falls on the emerging Christian community and fills them with the Holy Spirit. He inspires Peter’s proclamation and energizes the new faith community. Luke is showing us that the same Spirit who was at work in Jesus is now present in the church.

GETHIN RUSSELL-JONES is the minister of Ararat Baptist Church in Cardiff. He is also a runner, podcaster, therapist, writer, occasional singer, husband, dad, and granddad.

THE LONG ROAD OF FAITH

Eugene Peterson described the Christian life as a long obedience in the same direction. In reality, for many of us, the journey has many twists and turns. Sometimes it is difficult to keep going as the promised destination slips beyond the horizon. We may even feel like giving up. How can we keep believing when circumstances and society challenge faith so relentlessly?

In this series we will retrace Abraham's archetypal journey of faith. It's no secret that the story ends with the birth of Isaac, the promised child. However, we will conclude the series before this happens and focus on the journey itself. It is full of hopes raised and dashed, deviations from the course God had in mind, and faith strained almost to breaking point. But it is also a journey of maturing faith, deepening understanding of the ways of God, and perseverance.

You may be finding that life is not working out as you expected. You may be living with unanswered prayers, dashed hopes and faith so stretched that they are starting to fray. Equally, you may be sprinting forward at the start of your journey with God and need to be prepared for the marathon that lies ahead.

Whatever your situation, I pray that this very human story of Abraham and Sarah will encourage you and help you to know that you are not alone. God is faithful, and we can be too.

TANYA FERDINANDUSZ is both a freelance writer and editor and has been writing Bible reading notes, articles, and devotionals for about 25 years. She is a Bible study leader and the author of *Marriage Matters*, a book for Christian couples. (Genesis 11)

STEVE SILVESTER is Rector of St Nic's Nottingham, a thriving international city-center church. With his wife, Jane, he is also a foster carer. In 2015 he founded Nottingham City Prayer, uniting churches across the city. Steve is a keen road cyclist and walker. (Genesis 12-19)

THE RISE OF A KINGDOM

The emergence of a new leader for a nation, organization, or church brings mixed emotions: hope and optimism, yet concern and anxiety. What will they be like? What changes will they bring?

1 Samuel 1-12 is the story of the rise of Israel's first king. The nation was emerging from the volatile period of the Judges, a time when 'everyone did as they saw fit' (Judges 21:25). God's chosen people had lost their way and had fallen into wickedness and apostasy. Even the priests called to lead the worship of God were evil and corrupt.

Here we will read of a woman of faith whose childlessness mirrors the barrenness of Israel. We will discover how the child she eventually bears is used to call the nation back to God. The child, Samuel, looms large in these chapters, and serves as a bridge between Judges and Kings. When Israel demands a king 'as all the other nations have' (1 Samuel 8:5), it is Samuel who warns them to be careful what they wish for. Yet at God's command he eventually anoints Saul as king.

As we begin to ponder these chapters, we will find not just history but lessons for today: challenges about holy living, the importance of leadership, and how God draws near in darkest times. Ultimately, we will be reminded of God's faithfulness and provision, and his promise of a King to come who would be far greater than Samuel or Israel could ever imagine.

GLENDA TRIST lives with her husband in Melbourne, Australia, near their adult children. Her pastoral work in a city hospital, and providing professional pastoral supervision to ministry workers, keeps her faith grounded, stretched, and blessed. She enjoys writing for *Discovery* because it provides opportunity for her to dig deep into God's Word, discovering more about him.