

**Mark 12–16**

In the earlier chapters of Mark's gospel, we read about Jesus' authority as God's Son and Messiah. Now, Mark will present him as both the Suffering Servant and Divine King. Coming to Jerusalem, Jesus' course is set to accomplish that for which he came. He continues to teach, calling believers to faithfulness and perseverance with selfless love and sincerity—regardless of tribulation—confident in his return. We will witness both cowardness and supreme sacrifice, betrayal and devotion, sorrow and joy—and we will be given reason for great hope because of Jesus' resurrection.

**Acts 17–21**

There is much to glean from the chapters in Acts we will be reading this quarter. As we follow Paul in his travels to spread the gospel and build the church, we will see the ways he relates to different cultures and traditions, both Jewish and gentile. We will see the importance of the interconnection of churches and the value of community. Paul's steadfast examples of loving generosity, courage, and trust in the Word of God, offer us inspiration in the ministries to which God calls each of us.

**1 Chronicles 10–29**

Our readings begin as Saul suffers devastating consequences for continued disobedience to God's Word. David will become king, and we will see a man of faith, of humility and gratitude, but flawed, nevertheless. He, too, will suffer consequences for his sin, but as he repents, he finds God's mercy. Here, we look at these two men and see God's response to sin, and we look at God and see his grace offered to those who come to him.

**Galatians**

Paul writes his letter to the churches in Galatia, made up of both Jewish and gentile converts, to come against a threatening theological crisis concerning works and grace. Believers were being encouraged to work at keeping the Old Testament law to win God's acceptance, but justification comes only by grace through faith in Christ. We are saved by faith and we also live by faith. The gospel of grace leads us to salvation and the freedom to live godly lives.

**John 1–6**

Differing in many ways from the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John's purpose is to declare Jesus as God's Son, the Messiah. In these early chapters, we will see the giver of life in creation offer new life to those who believe in him. Through his personal encounters, he will be both teacher and miracle worker, calling those who witness his divine power to a life of faith, to receive living water and the bread of life.

**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.

## MARK 12–16

### 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, in part, on the experience of Peter, there's a firsthand 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, with the departure from Galilee, the direction of the action turns south toward Jerusalem. 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.

## ACTS 17-21

### NO MATTER WHAT IT COSTS

The book of Acts can be roughly divided into four parts. The first comprises chapters 1–7, covering the start of the Christian church in Jerusalem, where ‘the Way’<sup>1</sup> was a sect of Judaism. The second part, chapters 8–15, documents the Christians who were leaving Jerusalem during the persecution after the martyrdom of Stephen, taking the gospel to Samaria and Antioch. This was followed by Paul and Barnabas’ first missionary journey and the Jerusalem Council. The third part is chapters 16–20, covering Paul’s second and third missionary journeys, in which the gospel spread to Europe and Greece. The fourth is chapters 21–28, with Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem and his journey to Rome for trial before the Roman Emperor. All this follows the key verse of Acts 1:8, ‘But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ The portion we are studying in this set of notes, chapters 17–21, comes in the third and fourth sections of Acts.

We must not forget that although Luke ends the book of Acts in Rome, that was not the end of Paul’s ministry. He was later released and went on to Spain. Also, Acts is mainly about Peter and Paul’s ministry and does not relate the acts of the other apostles in other parts of the world—such as, according to tradition, Thomas’ ministry in remotest India.

We will be looking at Paul’s ministry to Greece and how he sets his face to doing God’s will, irrespective of what it will cost. A good lesson for all of us.  
Peter S C Pothan

FOR FURTHER READING John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST Series, second revised edition (IVP, 1991)

William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, revised edition (Westminster John Knox Press, 1975)

Craig S Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, second edition (IVP USA, 2014)

## A SERMON FOR OUR TIME

### 1 CHRONICLES 10–29

These readings present a challenge for today's reader. Not only do they include some nasty stuff, but we might rightly claim that our world is different from theirs. However, as Wilcock points out, that's exactly what makes us today the kind of audience the chronicler meant to address.<sup>1</sup> The two books of Chronicles were originally one volume, which was probably written in the fourth century BC. We don't know who wrote it. Its first readers were subjects of the Persian Empire, descendants of those who had been restored to their homeland in Judah after the exile of the sixth century BC. For them, nearly everything in the book was part of an age gone by, so they could well have found it a dead book. They might have found it dry bones to read, but in their own context they needed a fresh breath of life, and the chronicler knew that a message from the past could bring that. It could, of course, simply be seen as an alternative reading, a retelling of the stories of Samuel and Kings, but with a lot left out and quite a bit added by a writer who seems to have had some bees in his bonnet and a tendency to exaggerate.<sup>2</sup> However, it's a lot more than that. It's a sermon—and very relevant to our own time.

All good sermons have an aim in mind: the aim here was to foster a right relationship between God and his people, to show how failure and judgement could lead to grace and restoration. God's inflexible justice is always present, but so are his divine grace, his mercy, and his steadfast love. As we read the book, particularly as we think about David's life and reign, we will see examples of this and how those for whom David is long gone can learn some important truths. Principles derived from the past presented a mirror to the first readers and they do to us too. So stay with it, and let God teach you!

<sup>1</sup> Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Chronicles* (IVP, 1987), 16 <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14

## GALATIANS

### FREEDOM IN CHRIST

Over the next two weeks we will be digging into Paul's letter to the fledgling church in Galatia, which is one of the earliest pieces of Christian writing. We will encounter Paul's deep concern for the Galatian churches he had founded on his first missionary journey. After he left them, false teachers had infiltrated the community of gentile converts and were promoting a distorted version of the gospel. These teachers, known as Judaizers, claimed that gentile believers must first become Jewish by following the Jewish law so that they would be saved. Be prepared for the strong language used by Paul as he expresses his frustration with the Galatians who had succumbed to this pressure and were conforming to Jewish legalism.

Central to Paul's thread throughout the letter is the declaration that our standing with God is not based on anything we might do, but purely on what Christ has done. He consistently points to the hope that we have in Christ and the futility of looking for our hope anywhere else. As we weave our way through this letter, we'll encounter moments when Paul's frustration hits some lofty peaks. He refers to those whom he clearly held in great affection as 'foolish,' questioning who has 'bewitched' them (3:1). His holy indignation is more fiercely targeted at the bewitchers as he uses shocking images to demonstrate the seriousness of the situation.

Despite the strong language used, this letter is ultimately a message of hope. Each day when we consider Paul's words, ask God to remind you of the power of the gospel and the freedom we have in Christ. Our context will be different from that of Galatia (in what is now Turkey) in around 50 AD, but the compulsion to conform to the world's standards remains. May God grant each of us the wisdom and courage to allow these ancient words to be applied to our lives as disciples and also to the churches and communities in which we live.

## INFORMED CHOICE

### JOHN 1–6

Healthcare professionals provide patients with information about diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment options, so that patients can make informed choices. John gives his readers the information they need to make an informed choice about Jesus: ‘these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah.’<sup>1</sup>

These early chapters of John diagnose the human condition and offer a prognosis and treatment plan! The diagnosis is grim: we stand ‘condemned’ because we have chosen ‘darkness’ and ‘evil’ (3:18–20). The prognosis, however, is promising because of Jesus, the giver of both ‘light’ and ‘eternal life’ (1:4, 5, 9; 3:15,16). He alone is the remedy for our sin sickness. John’s gospel announces the availability of this treatment and emphasizes the necessity of availing ourselves of it. As repeated emphasis on the verb ‘believe’ suggests (e.g., 1:12; 2:11; 3:16, 36), informed consent is expressed by affirming our trust in Jesus.

John’s prologue spells out the fundamental choice that sets sin sick people on the road to recovering life: ‘to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God’ (1:12). Varying images present this basic choice: ‘come and see’ invitations, which must be accepted or rejected (1:35–51); welcoming the one to whom the signs point, as opposed to remaining stuck at the signpost (2:11, 23); being born from above or clinging to familiar things below (3:5–12); being satisfied with temporary thirst quenchers versus drinking the ‘living water’ Jesus offers (4:10–15); settling for physical healing as opposed to pursuing wholeness (5:14); craving bread that fills the stomach or feeding on the living bread that satisfies the soul (6:26–58). All these choices have eternal implications: ‘while we are free to choose our actions, we are not free to choose the consequences of those actions.’<sup>2</sup> Jesus and John urge us to make not just life-giving but eternal life-giving choices.

<sup>1</sup> John 20:31 <sup>2</sup> Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Simon & Schuster, 2004), 90