

INTRODUCTION

I was born in and have lived just outside of Philadelphia most of my life. Writing for *Discovery* just before the Super Bowl, I am hopeful about which team will take home the trophy and which players will earn the coveted ring. I am optimistic about the Eagles' ability to win; they are a skilled team that has worked hard to earn their place in the game. I hope they can do it...but I'm not sure. Chiefs fans can only hope for victory, too, regardless of their team's reputation or history of wins.

In our readings this quarter, there is much about hope—hope found in God's promises, an anchor for our souls, firm and secure (Hebrews 6:10), hope that is already fulfilled, the prize secured.

1 Samuel begins with a child born in answer to a mother's prayer and vow. He will be the last of the judges who led Israel for 350 years, a prophet, and the priest who will anoint Israel's first king.

In the book of **Judges**, a cycle of Israel's sin and God's deliverance is told through the stories of judges raised by God to deliver his people.

Micah's message mixes warnings of impending judgment for the social injustices and spiritual corruption of Israel and Judah with hope in their restoration because of their covenant God's mercy and faithfulness. He prophesies of a ruler who will be born in Bethlehem to bring peace and justice.

A contemporary of Micah, **Isaiah** preaches to the southern kingdom, Judah, about their holy God's upcoming judgment but also his compassion for his people. More than any other Old Testament book, Isaiah prophesies about the Messiah—God's promise of mercy and redemption.

The book of **Ruth** is a story of multifaceted love and devotion. It is a story that does not end with the redemption of two women but with a genealogy that leads to Jesus, the world's Redeemer.

In **1 Corinthians**, Paul continues to address issues in a diverse Christian community in a city filled with different ethnicities and religions. Many challenges that the early church struggled with exist in the church today, and the answer for them remains the same—Christ. In him is hope for unity and victory.

The fulfillment of the Great Commission goes on in **Acts**. In this quarter's readings, opposition to the gospel mounts while the church continues to grow, including Samaritans and Proselytes.

As Jesus approaches his crucifixion, he enters Jerusalem as a king. Then, we see prophecy fulfilled as **John** recounts moments of profound love, divine glory, great humility, and heartbreaking betrayal. Jesus' words and actions urge believers to live in obedience and confidence in God's promises.

While in prison, Paul writes to the **Philippian** church. The letter is filled with thanksgiving, joy, and unshakable faith. It encourages believers to live as citizens of heaven, expressing the mind of Christ in all relationships and circumstances, dependent on and confident in God's provisions.

SHARON SACKS, lead editor for *Discovery*, has long been involved in ministry, mentoring children and those young in faith, leading Bible studies, and writing for both children and adults. She has also worked in missions to serve 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.

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 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.

OTHERS BEFORE SELF

Every four years we watch the modern Olympic Games. Corinth, in New Testament times, hosted the Isthmian Games every two years. For centuries the Greeks, and later Romans too, competed there for sport, music, and poetry crowns. Corinth was a busy commercial center and port city. Ideas flourished there, as did the practices of the pagan religions of Aphrodite, Isis, and others.

The church in Corinth was a wonderful mix of people. They were very gifted, their worship was never dull, and they loved the working of the Holy Spirit in their midst. Men and women, slave and free, Greek, Roman, and Jew, all came together in the fellowship of Christ. The church was full of enthusiasm, but, like any other church, it was still vulnerable. The church's witness to Christ was in danger of being seriously compromised, and there was a lack of consideration for others which was leading to friction and divisions between Christians.

Paul wrote his 1 Corinthians letter to the church there probably just three years after founding the church. In the six chapters we will be looking at, Paul patiently urges a practical love that puts others before self—a love that goes out of its way to respect and strengthen everyone in the church. Our readings finish with Paul's famous passage on love: 'Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels ...'

ROGER COMBES has ministered in London, Cambridge, and East and West Sussex. He and his wife live in Crawley, near Gatwick airport and glorious countryside. They have two daughters and one entertaining grandson.

BETWEEN PENTECOST AND PAUL

This section of Acts is sometimes overlooked: the period between Pentecost and Paul. Yet it is a foundational time for the church. We see patterns established of daily gatherings, of sharing possessions, and of preaching accompanied by miracles. We also see the beginnings of organization and structure as deacons are appointed. In addition, this is the period of the first persecutions.

This series starts and ends with the first deaths within the early church. But what a contrast between them! Ananias and Sapphira forfeit their lives because they think they can lie to God. Stephen, on the other hand, is killed because he refuses to deny God. Together these deaths teach us that following Jesus is not to be taken lightly. We may face opposition for our faith, but that is surely better than facing the wrath of the Almighty God.

In these chapters, we will meet ordinary Christians, some named but many not. Not many of us will be superstars of the faith like Peter, John or Paul, but in these early chapters of Acts, we meet believers to whom we can all relate, from those who shared their wealth (4:34), to the unnamed voices bringing the widows to the apostles' attention (6:1), to those who buried Stephen (8:2), and those arrested by Saul (8:3). As we explore these texts, let's ask God to show us our own place in the story of the church.

ALISON ALLEN returned to the UK in 2014 after 14 years of being involved in mission in and from Romania. She now lives in Suffolk with her husband, two children, and three cats. Alison is currently in the final stages of a PhD in the Sociology of Religion, looking at British millennials in international missions.

THE NEXT GENERATION

My grandfather moved to London from Liverpool in 1920 to work as a taxman. The first Sunday he went to church where he espied an attractive young woman in the choir. They fell in love, got married, and brought up their children to know and love God. Their daughter (my mum) brought up her daughters to put their trust in God. They, in turn, nurtured the Christian faith of their children who now teach their children the wonders of God.

Each generation within individual families, or society's label for a span of 20 years, is shaped by shared life events and shifting cultural or social values. Each generation encounters God for themselves, choosing what to believe and value. Hearing stories of family or societal folklore is never enough. God's invitation to be in relationship with him remains unchanged.

During the period of the Judges (around 1300-1050 BC), Israel only remained faithful to God for brief periods. They compromised, choosing to reject him by worshipping the false gods of their neighbors. It spelled disaster! One reason for this was the failure to pass the knowledge of God's covenant love down the generations. The responsibility of each generation is expressed in Psalm 78:4, 6, 7: 'We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done ... so that the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born ... Then they would put their trust in God ...'

RO WILLOUGHBY was an editor with Scripture Union for many years. She is now lay minister at St. Chad's Woodseats, Sheffield. She enjoys the many benefits of life in Sheffield, including the company of family, friends, neighbors, and fellow pilgrims.

MESSY BUT MIRACULOUS

Working with the church in Corinth was no cakewalk. But is any church entirely devoid of petty jealousies, competing views, and conflicting personalities?

Paul followed Augustine's dictum when he spoke about Christians who wilted under persecution: 'We must never despair about anyone at all.*' Paul seeks patiently to heal divides and correct wrong thinking within his overriding vision of a unified church, with love at its core.

He tackles potential disruption in worship by treading a careful path between a full expression of the gifts of the Spirit and maintaining an order that enables the church to be strengthened. He wants people to be free to use their gifts but always in a context where these gifts nurture faith and unity, reflecting the God of order. He understands how gifts can be abused, drawing attention to ourselves and dominating others.

Then he has some muddled thinking about resurrection to straighten out. You might think they would have grasped this already. However, the detail in which Paul speaks shows that their experience of the Spirit was way ahead of their understanding of the truth. And we, too, benefit from understanding the resurrection as much more than an adjunct to the cross. It is core to Christian truth and right living.

He draws to a close by encouraging generosity of spirit both financially and in hospitality. About a week ago we reflected on Psalm 150, a perfect example of the corporate, unified worship that would have gladdened Paul's heart.

**The Apostles' Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism, Ben Myers (Lexham Press), 2018, 115.*

ANDY BATHGATE retired from his role as CEO of SU Scotland in 2020 after 19 years in the role. In retirement, he filled his time volunteering with Edinburgh City Mission and leadership in his local church. Shortly after writing these notes, Andy went to be with his Savior in heaven.

THE GOLDEN THREAD

It was Old Testament Israel's unique calling to be God's own nation, fleshing out God's character in their everyday lives. As they did so, the onlooking nations could understand the beauty of God, translated into the workings of Israel's culture. The trouble is that Israel, time and again, failed to fulfill this calling. God's response was to send prophets to remind them of their God-given identity and warn them of the consequences of ignoring their vocation.

Micah was one such prophet: an ordinary man (possibly a farmer) charged with the passion and words of God. His ministry was exercised in the eighth century BC, during a time of dramatic international upheaval. Israel itself was enjoying a time of prosperity but at a high social cost. The prosperous were gaining wealth at the expense of the poor (6:10-12). An increasingly secular culture (albeit with a veneer of religious respectability, 3:11) was replacing a God-honoring society in which the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner should have been duly cared for (Deuteronomy 14:28, 29).

The threat of the invading Assyrians was not just a symptom of global power shifts: it was a direct result of Israel turning away from God (1:5). Yet, even as Micah delivers God's confrontative and warning messages to Israel, judgment is never his last word. Micah's 'sermons' are shot through with hope, rooted in the eternal purposes of a faithful and unchanging God.

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A ROLLER COASTER MESSAGE

Isaiah lived and prophesied about 700 years before Jesus was born. He prophesied during the reigns of kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, being a contemporary of Hosea and Micah. (Elijah, Elisha, probably Obadiah, also Joel, Jonah, and Amos had already come and gone; Jeremiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel were yet to come.) This period of Judah's history is told in 2 Kings 15–21 and 2 Chronicles 26–33.

On the world stage at this time, there were several superpowers vying for world domination—the Egyptians, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians were all competing for supremacy, and Israel and Judah were little countries caught in the middle. However, size and strength were not really the issues—what mattered was who or what they trusted and venerated. The history of Israel is a long list of kings who ‘did evil in the sight of the Lord,’ and so, in 722 BC, God allowed the Assyrians to destroy Israel and carry the people off into captivity.

By contrast, three of the four Judean kings mentioned above did ‘what was right in the eyes of the Lord’ (e.g., 2 Chronicles 26:4), although two came with the caveat that they allowed the people to continue to offer sacrifices and burn incense to idols and false gods.

Into this situation, Isaiah proclaimed his message, which is a roller coaster of judgment and hope—God is going to punish the nation for their rejection of him, but he is also going to restore them and bring about restored relationships and peace (1:26, 27).

ESTHER BAILEY lives with her husband, John, in northeast England. She is working with URC churches to engage with children and families that are not previously a part of the church. Esther and John love exploring new areas in their old camper van.

ORDINARY FAMILY, EXTRAORDINARY FUTURE

I love learning from the giants of Scripture—for example, Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, and Peter, John, and Paul— but their lives can sometimes seem out of reach and out of touch with ours. This story of Ruth is about an ordinary family, living in a traumatic time of injustice and violence, where Israel has once again turned away from God. It is a beautiful story of the faith and friendship of two women and God’s faithful provision for them.

As I write this, refugees seeking asylum are in the news again, fleeing from famine, war, and injustice. We can almost hear the story of Naomi and Elimelek in our media today. Tragedy ensues, and Naomi’s raw experience of loss and bereavement will resonate with many of us. Despite the traumatic beginning, as the story unfolds we get caught up in the narrative of God’s redemptive purposes for this family.

The story also looks ahead as we witness God’s covenantal promise to Abraham, ‘all peoples on earth will be blessed through you’ (Genesis 12:3), take root in the marriage between Boaz and Ruth, a Moabite woman, both refugee and gentile, who, as our story concludes, gives birth to a son who begins the lineage through King David to the King of all kings, our Sovereign Lord Jesus.

Here is an extraordinary story about God’s loving kindness to an ordinary family.

ERICA ROBERTS is married with three adult children. She enjoys walking, cold-water swimming, and reading. Erica loves her role as City Chaplain for Older People in Southampton, and learning from the wisdom of those God has called her to serve.

JOY AMID OPPOSITION

Philippi was a mixed place. It was a Roman colony, which meant that Roman law ruled in the city. A sprinkling of Roman army veterans had plots of land among a majority of native Greeks. Perhaps a quarter of the population were Roman citizens. The city had many temples, including for the worship of the emperor, which presented a challenge to people who worshipped Jesus as Lord (Philippians 2:9-11).

Paul, Timothy, and Silas planted the church there after a vision (Acts 16:9). After initial success in Lydia's conversion (Acts 16:13-15), Paul clashed with the owners of a fortune-telling slave girl after he delivered her from a spirit (Acts 16:16-21). Paul and Silas were freed from prison after a series of incidents and left a small group of believers based in Lydia's home (Acts 16:40).

The Philippian believers had sent financial support to Paul more than once, most recently through Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25-30; 4:18), and this letter is in part expressing Paul's thanks (4:10,14-19). It is also one of Paul's warmest letters, full of the theme of joy (1:4,18, 25; 2:2,17, 18, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10)—this despite the evidence that the believers faced opposition from both Jews and gentiles (1:27-30; 3:2, 18, 19).

Why not read the letter through at a sitting to get an overall impression before you dive into the details? It should take 15-20 minutes.

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