

John 6

In this single chapter, we will see Jesus' miraculous power displayed and the responses of those who witnessed it. He will teach about himself, the Bread of Life, offering eternal life to those who believe in him. Many will seek him, but not all will understand, not all will believe. Yet those God enables will recognize Jesus as the ultimate source of nourishment for their souls and come to him.

Ezekiel 1–25, 30

God commissioned the priest Ezekiel to bring messages of warning and judgment to his fellow exiles in Babylon and those remaining in Judah. In the passages for this quarter, Ezekiel will prophesy concerning the ruin of Jerusalem and the doom of surrounding nations that deride the God of Israel. His warnings were for his time, but they are relevant for those who have wandered from God today.

John 7–11

Continuing in John's gospel, Jesus will show us more about his divine nature and mission. Now, facing adversity, he encourages us to embrace the light he offers and displays his transformational power. He will define himself as our Good Shepherd. He calls us to follow him as he speaks of his sacrificial love and divine authority.

Deuteronomy 15–34

We will continue with the commands and laws God gives to the new generation of Israelites, along with his promises of blessing for those who obey and cursing to those who don't. In this book, the importance of God's Word and submission to what it says is altogether relevant for us today. While we are no longer under the Old Testament law, the promise of blessing is ours when we honor God's will in our lives.

Jude

This short book is important for Christians today. Just as in the early church, he warns, we must be on our guard against false doctrine in the church and zealously stand firm in the truth of God's Word.

Acts 21–24

We already have followed Paul on his missionary journeys; now we will witness his trials in Jerusalem and Caesarea and his journey to Rome. We will see the power of the gospel displayed. Despite adversity, Paul will continue to zealously proclaim Christ, and the church will continue to grow. In these last chapters in Acts, may our vision grow for the incredible things Jesus can do in and through the life of each Christian and in the expansion of his church throughout 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.

JOHN 6

INFORMED CHOICE

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’.¹

The 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 the 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, 24); being born from above or clinging to familiar things below (3:5–12); being satisfied with temporary thirst quenchers versus drinking the ‘living water’ (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’.² Jesus and John urge us to make not just life-giving but eternal-life-giving choices.

¹ John 20:31 ² Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Simon & Schuster, 2004), 90.

EZEKIEL 1–30

A DRAMATIC PROPHET

In 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem, taking King Jehoiachin and most of the people into exile in Babylonia. Ezekiel, born into a priestly family, probably in 622 BC, was one of those taken to Babylon. There is no evidence that he ever returned to live in Jerusalem. In 587 BC, the Babylonians returned, destroyed the temple, executed King Zedekiah, and exiled the remainder of the people. When Ezekiel was 30, the age at which he would have expected to start his priestly career in the temple in Jerusalem, he was in exile in Babylonia. Suddenly and unexpectedly, God called him to be a prophet. He was married, but his wife died (ch. 24). His ministry was to the exiles, a shattered and shell-shocked people suffering dislocation, loss, and trauma, with all the attendant emotional and spiritual reactions.

That the book is written almost entirely as an autobiography strongly suggests that Ezekiel played a major part in the collection of prophetic words that bear his name. The book is unique among prophetic books of the Bible by being arranged in almost perfect chronological order, covering 593–571 BC. It is a book full of visions and repetition. Ezekiel's motto seemed to be 'Why say it once, if you can say it several times?' His prophecies are given in words and also expressed in mime and drama. The text is difficult, with some words and verses that have baffled translators.

He proclaims the holiness of God and the certainty of future judgment and disaster, begging his hearers to turn back to God from their sinful ways. Alongside this preaching of judgment, he is hard to equal among Old Testament prophets in declaring the amazing grace of God. While his actions and message may seem strange to the modern reader, there is much of his message that is relevant to us as we follow Jesus in 2025.

FOR FURTHER READING

Christopher Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel* (IVP, 2001)

JOHN 7–11

SEE AND KNOW

In these next weeks, we will be accompanying Jesus closely. John's purpose is that we should see who Jesus is and have life in his name. John loves the word 'know': the whole-bodied sort of 'know', involving head and heart and will. Whether you have traveled with Jesus for a lifetime, are taking your first tentative steps, or are still making up your mind, this is dynamite. Tread slowly.

We walk with a varied cast of companions: Jesus' brothers, pilgrims, onlookers, religious leaders, a shamed woman, a blind man, and his parents, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. John lets us eavesdrop on heated arguments, as confrontations regarding Jesus' identity and credentials escalate. We hear murmurings of puzzled crowds seeking to make sense of Jesus' astonishing claims: 'I am the light of the world', 'Come to me and drink', 'Before Abraham was born, I am', 'I am the good shepherd', 'My father and I are one', 'I am the resurrection and the life.' We have ringside seats as Jesus draws close to the overlooked and the heartbroken. We witness unfolding movements in misunderstanding and mistrust, blindness and belief.

We are given vivid eyewitness details of times and places. The feasts of Tabernacles and Dedication in Jerusalem largely frame the interactions. These festivals remind participants of their continuing history as the people of God. The opposition, which dominates much of the narrative, grows because he declares that he has come to fulfill these celebrations and institutions. He is the long-awaited Messiah. The establishment stakeholders are shocked and outraged. We feel an ugly atmosphere of foreboding as repeatedly, arrest and stoning are threatened. Poignantly, we also see Jesus responding in love and obedience to the Father and his timetable, his 'hour.' Amid troubling times and competing claims, then and now, we are invited to draw close to Jesus. Come with him, as he reveals his heart and purpose.

DEUTERONOMY 15:19–16:17

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, which 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 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 set out the basic framework of the covenant, including the first passage that 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 three weeks. The book has a sermonic quality and all the biggest 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, fearing. Moses the prophet, teacher, intercessor, mediator, man of sorrows. And chilling words—destroy, wipe out, no pity, 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, 2017)

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

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/deuteronomy/>

¹ E.g. Exod 3:8; Deut 27:3

DEUTERONOMY 16:18–34:12

LAWS FOR LIFE

‘This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live’ (30:19). This verse summarizes what Deuteronomy is all about. It is a kind of sermon, delivered to the Israelites as they prepared to enter Canaan just before Moses’ death. They should have possessed the land 38 years earlier, shortly after escaping from slavery in Egypt. Tragically, sinful rebellion against the Lord had earned them a life of wandering in the wilderness until that generation of rebels had died out. So Moses reminds them of their desert meanderings, concerned that they should not repeat the same mistakes but this time live in obedience to God.

Moses, because of his own disobedience to God, will not go with them (32:50–52). His successor, Joshua, whom some commentators credit with completing Deuteronomy after Moses’ death, will lead them now. They know God’s law already. Poised to take possession of the Promised Land, they receive from Moses a recapitulation of it, with the Ten Commandments at its heart (5:1–22), which Moses develops in chapters 12–26. The book’s name in English is taken from its title in the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint—a combination of two Greek words: *deutero*—(second, meaning here a copy or repetition) and *nomos* (law).

Throughout Deuteronomy, we see Moses’ passion for God’s glory and his huge pastoral heart for God’s people. It is such an important book that it is referenced extensively in the New Testament, notably by Jesus himself. Significantly, our Lord quotes it to refute the devil during his temptation in the desert.¹ In the same environment where the Israelites failed, he succeeds! Our examination of Deuteronomy 16–34 will be interspersed with a look at three psalms, two of which were penned by another man who, like Moses and Jesus, was a shepherd, King David.

¹ Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13

JUDE

A SHEPHERD'S WARNING

Jude is rather off-putting, to put it mildly! His language seems extremely negative. Jude's obscure references to Moses, the Archangel Michael, and Balaam are a huge stumbling block for many. We can just about understand his point about Sodom and Gomorrah, but where does the Old Testament talk about the body of Moses?! Jude refers to other Jewish texts that are unfamiliar to us: 1 Enoch—which is not even included in the Apocrypha—develops the story about the fallen angels in Genesis 6 ('sons of God', Genesis 6:2);¹ Enoch also has a 'Book of Dreams' that Jude and the apostates may both have read. A Jewish text called the Testament of Moses—much of which is lost to church history—could have been Jude's source for his argument about the body of Moses (v. 9).¹ A study Bible or a good commentary will help to explain some of the more obscure references, or you can read 1 Enoch yourself to get a better understanding of the apocalyptic texts that the early church was familiar with.

It's clear from the New Testament that the believers wrestled with these texts and were sometimes pulled away from the apostles' teaching by interpretations of texts like 1 Enoch. Jude knows the mystical teaching as well as the false teachers do, but he is not lured away from the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ and the apostles' teaching.

Jude is often found as a companion to 2 Peter in commentaries. There are strong links between Jude and 2 Peter 2 and 3, both in language and message. It is unclear who borrowed from whom: Jude 17 and 18 refer to the apostles' teaching, a seeming reference to 2 Peter 3:3.² Both Peter's and Jude's letters reveal the Shepherd's protective love; both deliver a strong but loving warning to God's holy people about false teaching and falling away. This is still a vital message for us today, as we will see over the next two days.

¹ Richard J Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Word, 1983), 74–76. ² Douglas Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary 2 Peter, Jude* (Zondervan Academic, 1997).

ACTS 21–24

TO LIVE IS CHRIST AND TO DIE IS GAIN

The book of Acts starts in Jerusalem, with Jesus' first disciples and the wonderful story of the church's birth. It ends with Paul in Rome, preparing to face Caesar. There is a sense of satisfaction in knowing that the church is growing daily; it is fulfilling its great commission to make disciples of all nations, but it comes with the constant threat of persecution. The challenge at the end of the book, for us, is: 'Will we carry on these great acts of love and service for God and his kingdom, no matter what the cost?'

In Acts 20, the Ephesian Christians weep their farewell to Paul and his companions as he sets his face like flint toward Rome,¹ just as Jesus steeled himself for his last journey to Jerusalem. We will notice echoes of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and death as we read Paul's interactions with the disciples and the religious and secular leaders. Paul has reconciled himself to death, as Jesus did, and trusts God's plans for him: 'For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.'² His journey, with his companions, reveals the authenticity of this confession. He rejoices in serving Jesus his Lord in the mission and shepherding of the church, but he has his eyes on the ultimate prize—eternal fellowship with God.

Paul has gone from zealous persecutor of the Christians to a deeply cherished brother and father to many new churches. I love reading how they expressed love for one another—I would love to experience more of that in church life! One of the things that struck me in Acts 21–28, as I prepared these notes, was the new insights into the love, fellowship, and family commitment of the early church. Their identity as the people of God united in the mission of God by the Spirit, the love of the Father, and the joy of Christ their Savior—through suffering as well as success—is a wonderful encouragement and challenge to us today.

¹ C.f. Isaiah 50:7 ² Phil 1:21