

INTRODUCTION

Scripture Union-USA has active Bible Guide members in all fifty states. Both *Discovery* and *Encounter with God* are available in large print and audio. More than 1000 *Discovery* guides are printed for distribution in prisons each quarter.

It is SU's privilege to help people engage with God daily in Scripture and prayer! We seek and trust God to meet with our readers as they read, enabling them to know him better and encouraging them in their faith walk. In this final quarter of 2025, we pray that you will sense his presence in new and deeper ways and respond with greater confidence and zeal to serve him.

As the Israelites experience the first Passover, are liberated from Egypt, and journey toward the Promised Land, we will find much to apply to our present-day faith journeys in our **Exodus** passages and reflections.

Continuing **1 Samuel**, we will read about Saul's failure as Israel's king, contrasted with his son, Jonathan's trust in God. Following God's direction, Samuel will anoint the boy David king. As David faces trials, we are reminded that those God chooses are not exempt from difficulty, but they will always find him faithful.

Song of Solomon is a love story of a bride and bridegroom becoming one as husband and wife. Although he is never mentioned, we also see a picture of the deep and faithful love God has for his people.

Our reading in **Isaiah** will begin with a love song quite different from Solomon's. It will tell of God's people's faithlessness and his righteous judgment. However, through the prophet, we will see not only God's justice, but also the foretelling of salvation, not just for Jerusalem and Judah, but for us today. God remains faithful to his people forever!

In **Philippians**, Paul's letter will continue encouraging the young church to follow Christ's example in their relationships and purpose, live steadfastly as heaven's citizens, and trust God in every circumstance and for all things. These words still serve believers well in today's world.

Jesus' course is set for Jerusalem and the cross in this quarter's readings in **John**. He will enter the city hailed as a king, prepare his disciples for what he knows will come, and show his profound love and care in his high priestly prayer, not just for his disciples, but for all those who believe in him.

Paul had led Jews and gentiles to faith in Thessalonica, but circumstances had not given him time to establish the community of very new believers in their faith. He wrote to the **Thessalonians** in two epistles to encourage and instruct them, especially regarding Christ's return.

We will see God's transformative power as we read of Paul's remarkable conversion and Peter's vision for sharing the gospel enlarged to go beyond cultural and ethnic boundaries. The stories of both men in **Acts** remind us that God's love and salvation are offered to all.

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.

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 most 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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BOUND FOR FREEDOM

In my years of running Scripture Union children's holidays, I twice used the story of Moses and the Exodus as the main theme. For me, the passage we begin these readings with was always central: the Passover. On one occasion, we made a doorframe and used red paint to mark it, then moved the posts together and the lintel down to represent the cross. I remember the children being moved and 'getting it.' Several of our readings cover events of the Old Testament prefiguring the New.

Both times, we ended with the crossing of the Red Sea and the triumph over the Egyptians. Up to that point, the readings are full of God's plan and God's power: his plan to redeem his people and his power over the enemy. So far, so victorious.

What we didn't do was take the story any further into the desert. What stands out clearly in the final few readings is how fickle God's people were, how quickly they complained, how quickly they forgot what the Lord had done, and how ready they were to abandon his plan. In addition, the graciousness and patience of God as they moaned and grumbled are evident.

As we reconnect with these Old Testament events and see how their impact still has relevance for us, I pray that this series will encourage you in God as he frees and provides for his people, then and now.

GILL ROBERTSON is a 60-something, recently retired vicar's wife, step-mother, and fairly new grandmother. She is a Lay Reader (LLM), musician, composer, crafter, and cook. Time spent on these activities is inversely proportional to that spent on housework!

THE EDGE OF GLORY

Having just been hailed as king by a passionate crowd on the busy streets of Jerusalem, Jesus is now preparing his confused disciples for his death. Chapters 13–16 of John are often known as the ‘Book of Glory’: Jesus’ dense, intricate monologues are only occasionally interspersed with the disciples’ questions or symbolic narrative. Sometimes the language feels like a whirlpool, pulling us around repeated rich and deep theological themes: glory, love, and witness.

Tradition holds that the author is John the disciple. Irenaeus claims this in 180 AD, but whether the ‘beloved disciple’ (see 21:20, 24) is an eyewitness as well as a literary device is debated. The text gives testimony to Jesus in line with, but stylistically distinct from, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is certainly produced by an evangelist who is aware of the readers’ spiritual needs.

Some sections may remain hard to fathom: try reading these out loud, or you could write down questions as you go. By the end of the next two weeks of Bible reading, I pray that you will feel more confident in understanding Jesus’ relationship with the Father, why he came to earth, and what it means to ‘believe in Jesus’ today. Keep the text’s overall purpose in mind. The writer is presenting us with these words so that ‘by believing you may have life in his name’ (20:31).

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FLAWED LEADERS AND A REDEPTIVE GOD

The stories in 1 and 2 Samuel take place just over 1,000 years before Jesus' birth. They straddle the time between the exodus of the people out of Egypt under Moses' leadership (1200 BC) and the anointing of the first kings in Israel, Saul and David.

These were times of great spiritual confusion—the book of Judges records that 'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit' (21:25). The pressure to identify and anoint kings was great, and so it came to be, even if this was understood to be God's second best.

In the chapters in this series, Saul is identified as the first king. Despite starting well, however, he quickly loses the plot and is set aside for a new kingly line in David, the youngest son of Jesse. The themes emerging are about leadership, character, and the kingly rule of God. We will see examples of dreadful foolishness in leadership and stories of faith-filled boldness. God takes all things and uses them to his glory. This includes the flawed leaders we will see in these pages.

These chapters also point to the kingdom that Jesus would teach about and establish, where the last shall be first (Matthew 19:30) and the tiny mustard seed will become a generous home for the birds of the air (Luke 13:18, 19).

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HOPE FOR TROUBLED TIMES

Paul wrote these letters to the Thessalonians who had come to faith in Christ through his earlier ministry. From the warm tone of his letter, they clearly meant a lot to him (1 Thessalonians 2:7). He was proud of the way they grasped the gospel (1 Thessalonians 2:19, 20).

However, they were beginning to wobble in their faith. In both letters, we see that they were facing trials, suffering, confusion, and divisions.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul addresses opposition from non-Christians around them (1:6); temptation to sexual impurity (4:3, 4); worry that those who died before Jesus' return would be separated from those still alive (4:13, 18); and preoccupation with identifying the precise time of Jesus' return (5:1, 2).

Paul continues to encourage and build them up in 2 Thessalonians. They continue to face persecution (chapter 1), confusion about what will happen when Jesus returns (chapter 2), and burdens caused by some who refused to work and became gossips (chapter 3).

In both letters, we read Paul's emphasis on strengthening their faith (2 Thessalonians 2:15) and the certainty of Christian hope in encouraging them to keep going and growing (1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24).

The similarities between the Thessalonian society and many societies in the world today are striking in terms of persecution: we see temptations in the world around us and divisions within churches. We can become discouraged just as the Thessalonians did. As we read these letters, may we too know that our faith and hope are being strengthened by the Lord.

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‘ONE FLESH’ FLESHED OUT

The superlative ‘Song of Songs’ (v. 1) conveys the idea of most excellent. Of Solomon’s multiplicity of songs, this song is the undisputed chart-topper that made it to the canon of Scripture!

Controversy and confusion surround this song. It is unashamedly erotic. Its imagery is enigmatic. There’s a single obscure reference to God (8:6). So, we wonder, what’s this book doing in the Bible? ‘All Scripture ... is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness’ (2 Timothy 3:16). This song is no exception. After declaring that everything he created was ‘very good’ (Genesis 1:31) and human aloneness was ‘not good’ (Genesis 2:18), God devised a one-flesh relationship designed for delight (just read Adam’s love song: Genesis 2:23) and intended to reflect his own love-relationship with his people. In the world, sexual freedom is the norm; in the church, tragically, sex is sometimes viewed as being somehow less than spiritual. The song restores a much-needed balance about God’s good design for sex, demonstrating the power and beauty of being naked and not ashamed (see Genesis 2:25), while promoting responsible stewardship of our sexuality.

Through the love story of Solomon and his Shulammite bride—their courtship, wedding, honeymoon, and later years of marriage—the delightful details of what this one-flesh union might look like are fleshed out. ‘Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love’ (Ecclesiastes 9:9). Solomon does just that in the song. And indeed, it is very good!

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GOSPEL GRACE FOR ALL

The book of Acts is the thrilling continuation of all that Jesus ‘began to do and to teach’ (see Acts 1:1). It is thrilling because we see the gospel spreading in the early years of church history. But it is exciting also because Jesus’ work continues through people like us: ordinary followers of Jesus, empowered by the Spirit, facing opposition from society, and seeing Jesus’ plan unfold to reach out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus gave the geographical progression of the gospel witness. It would start in Jerusalem, then spread through Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. At the end of the first seven chapters centered on Jerusalem, persecution scattered the believers throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1). Now we come to the significant transition, moving the focus from Jews to gentiles.

In Acts 9–12, we will find answers to some critical questions. Who will lead the charge in taking the gospel to the gentiles? How will the followers of Jesus, with their Jewish background, be able to reach gentiles with the gospel?

Let’s dive in and see how God converts the church’s chief persecutor, Saul of Tarsus. As Saul/Paul becomes the key figure in reaching the gentiles, how will Peter, the key figure back in Jerusalem, become convinced of this gentile mission? And what about Herod Antipas and his plan to destroy the apostles?

PETER MEAD is one of the pastors at Trinity Chippenham and a mentor with Cor Deo. He teaches at Union School of Theology and at the European Leadership Forum. He has written several books, including *Pleased to Dwell* and *Lost in Wonder* (both with Christian Focus), and he is married to Melanie.

IN GOD'S VINEYARD

From cries of distress (5:1–7) to songs of joy (12:1–6) Isaiah 5–12 is quite a journey. We get an insight into God's character, and the tension between his love for his people and his holiness, which cannot stand their wickedness and rejection of his ways.

Isaiah spoke into a situation of political upheaval. His call begins, 'In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord' (6:1). Uzziah had been king of Judah for decades. A modern parallel might be, 'In the year that Queen Elizabeth II died, I was licensed as vicar.' Isaiah locates his vision and call in a year people would remember: the year stability gave way to uncertainty and the growing threat from Assyria.

Except that Uzziah's long reign had given merely the appearance of peace and stability. Under the surface, things were not as healthy as they seemed. His death lifted the lid on the wickedness and injustice that had long been brewing. Isaiah was one of many prophets commissioned in those times by God to call his people back to faithfulness.

What he had to say makes us uncomfortable—but imagine how Isaiah's hearers must have felt! It's hard to read about God's anger, the reality of our rebellion, and God's justice. Yet Isaiah had good news too: God (and no other) is our salvation (12:2), and he never leaves his people: 'great is the Holy One of Israel among you' (12:6).

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