

Daily Bread

Words for Life The Bible Guide for Every Day

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Daily Bread is published under licence from
Scripture Union England and Wales



SCRIPTURE UNION EDITOR

Sue Nash

WRITERS

Esther Bailey Penny Boshoff David Bruce Cath Butler
Sue Clutterham Terry Clutterham Roger Combes
Tanya Ferdinandusz John Grayston Jennie Hart Toby Hole
Tony Horsfall Rachel Hudson Louisa King Dani Knox
Jacob Kunnath David Lawrence Nudrat Malik Liz Pacey
Suzy Pearson Nigel Roberts Gethin Russell-Jones

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the
Holy Bible, New International Version (Anglicised edition).

Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 Biblica
(formerly International Bible Society).

Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton,
an Hachette UK Company. All rights reserved.

COVER PHOTOGRAPH and DESIGN

Shane Dennis

<http://www.esdefinitions.com>

DESIGN EDITOR

Davey Smith

EDITORIAL

Michelle Tomlinson

Daily Bread

Words for Life The Bible Guide for Every Day

Contents	Page
Acknowledgements	1
Editor's note	3
Tribute to Dahlia Fraser (former Daily Bread editor)	4
How to use Daily Bread	5
Mark 1 – 2 This changes everything!	6
Genesis 20 – 28 A man of faith	18
Romans 1 – 5 All!	33
Spotlight on...The Bible and me – a writer's experience of the Bible	48
1 Samuel 19 – 31 David on the run	50
Acts 12:25 – 16:10 God's plan	65
Isaiah 14 – 35 Coming back to fellowship	80
Mark 14 – 16 True story	95
Mark 3 – 5 Why follow Jesus?	110
Proverbs 5 – 9 Wisdom for life	120
Exodus 17 – 24 Journey of discoveries	127
Hebrews 1 – 6 Ladders and branches	142
Spotlight on...The Bible and me – an SU Council member's experience of the Bible	156
Joel; Acts 2:1-21 Beyond disastrous	158
Isaiah 40 – 45 This is our God	166
Romans 6 – 11 Grace trumps rules	181
2 Samuel 1 – 7 Sequels	196
Mark 6 – 8 Who does he think he is?	205
Isaiah 46:1 – 51:16 Hold on tight!	219
Romans 12 – 16 Love practically	227
Genesis 28 – 35 Presence and promise	242
Spotlight on... The Bible and me – a ministry trainer's experience of the Bible	257
Acts 16:11 – 20:38 Turned upside down	259
Hosea Love is the greatest	274
Mark 8:27 – 10:52 The journey of discipleship	282
2 Samuel 8 – 20 Life-changing true stories	297
1-3 John The most important thing	307
2 Samuel 22 – 24 God of all faithfulness	320
Hebrews 7 – 10 Better by far	328
Exodus 31 – 40 A pilgrim people	343
Spotlight on... The Bible and me – an SU Council member's experience of the Bible	358
Mark 11 – 13 These 'in between' times	360
Habakkuk and Obadiah Encouragement from the past	375
Isaiah 52 – 66 A whole new world	384
Matthew 1 – 4 Who on earth are you?	399
Index to reflections from the Psalms	410

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Word of God is alive and active!

Every Sunday in my local fellowship, just before the sermon, the congregation stands and reads together Hebrews 4: 12 as preparation for receiving the word of God – ***“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”***

James 1:21 shows us how this active word can be effective in our lives. The second half of the verse says “...humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.” This speaks to the attitude we should have as we read, as we hear the word of God. Where it challenges or confronts wrong beliefs and attitudes that we have, we should be willing to change.

The **2026 Daily Bread** provides the opportunity for transformation through daily Bible reading, and writings that encourage reflection on the word of God and its implications for our lives. In four **Spotlight On...**articles, writers and Scripture Union Council members share their experience of the Bible and its transforming power. The Bible in a Year feature will help you to read through the **Bible in one year**. You will go **Way In** to books from the Old and New Testaments for an average of two weeks for each book. Old Testament books – Genesis, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, Isaiah, Proverbs, Exodus, Joel, Hosea, Habakkuk and Obadiah. New Testament books – Mark, Romans, Acts, Hebrews, 1-3 John and Matthew. There are also reflections on the Psalms most Sundays.

We thank God for the faithful men and women who have dug into the scriptures to prepare the daily readings that are included in the **2026 Daily Bread**. We thank God for our sister Dahlia Fraser, who edited previous editions of the **Daily Bread**. May their labour of love bear fruit in you as your lives are transformed by the living and active word of God.

Michelle Tomlinson
Editor



TRIBUTE TO DAHLIA FRASER



Our sister Dahlia Fraser, who previously edited the Daily Bread, went to be with the Lord on April 23, 2025. Below is an edited version of the tribute from SCFSU given by Chairman Mr. Leighton Pusey at her thanksgiving service.

Dahlia was a lover of books as a child and literature became her life's passion.

After graduating from The University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona Campus, in 1979 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature, History and Economics, she was recruited by the Inter School/Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship Movement (now called SCFSU Jamaica) to serve as a Literature Staff Worker and Editor for Scripture Union Bible Reading Guides.

She served on staff for five years (1983-1988) and made an outstanding contribution to the development of local Bible reading materials for adults and children and Christian literature in Jamaica. She transformed the British Bible Reading material (Daily Bread) that was produced in England and sent to Jamaica for printing, making it more adaptable with local content and images.

She edited and produced two books by local author, Mrs. Faith Linton: one for students struggling with issues of family life, despair, hopelessness, suicide, and sex; the other was the Gene Denham Story, which recounts the life of this outstanding woman and pioneer staff worker in the Interschool Christian Movement. Despite having moved on from being on staff, Dahlia still volunteered and played a key role in the copy editing and production of the important work "Like A Sea Set Free", which relates the early beginnings, development, and impact of the Inter School/Inter-Varsity Christian Movement in Jamaica and highlights its contribution to nation-building, co-edited by Dr. Alfred Sangster and Dr. Barry Wade.

After leaving the SCFSU, Dahlia continued to pursue her interest in editing and publishing books. She went to work for the Institute of Jamaica, and later with Ian Randle Publishers as Production Manager for five years (1997-2002).

Later she felt the Lord was calling her to pursue studies in the field of theology. She studied at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto, Canada (2003-2006), and graduated with a Master's degree in Theological Studies (MTS). She joined the staff at the Seminary where she served for seven years as Administrator/Spiritual Director (2006-2014).

When she returned to Jamaica, she continued to work from home as a copy editor with the UK-based Langham Publishing. She also found time to return to editing the Daily Bread publication for SCFSU. In her last year, while ill, she still guided the production of Daily Bread. We thank God for giving Dahlia this special gift which allowed her to express her creativity and love for people as they grow in the Lord through reading good Christian literature. We are very blessed for having been her friend, co-worker, and colleague in ministry.

I end with a note from Las Newman who was General Secretary when Dahlia worked on staff at SCFSU.

“Dahlia was a very close and personal friend. That is why my wife Margaret, and I invited her to be godparent to our son Johnathan which she gladly consented to do. We are missing her so much. On behalf of Tyndale Seminary, Langham Partnership, and my family, I pray the Lord will grant her eternal rest and may His light continue to shine upon her.”

HOW TO USE DAILY BREAD

Way in

This page introduces both the notes and the writer. It sets the scene and tells you what you `need to know to get into each series.

A Day's note

The notes for each day include five key elements: Prepare, Read (the Bible passage for the day), Explore, Respond and Bible in a year. These are intended to provide a helpful way of meeting God in his Word.

Prepare

yourself to meet with God and pray that the Holy Spirit will help you to understand and respond to what you read.

Read

the Bible passage, taking time to absorb and simply enjoy it. A verse or two from the Bible text is usually included on each page, but it's important to read the whole passage.

Explore

the meaning of the passage, listening for what God may be saying to you. Before you read the comment, ask yourself: what's the main point of this passage? What is God showing me about himself or about my life? Is there a promise or a command, a warning or example to take special notice of?

Respond

to what God has shown you in the passage in worship and pray for yourself and others. Decide how to share your discoveries with others.

Bible in a Year

If your aim is to know God and his Word more deeply, why not follow this plan to read the whole Bible in one year?

This changes everything!

Blaise Pascal is credited with starting an important letter with this: 'I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have time.' He was confessing to the truth that being concise and to the point takes time and effort. It is easy to ramble on. It takes determination and discipline to get straight to the point and then stay focused.

That is exactly what happens in Mark's Gospel. No mucking around. No genealogy. No Christmas. No angels. It starts with the punch line: 'Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God' (v 1). Fasten your seatbelts! Pay attention!

Mark's perspective is from altitude to begin with, then straight to ground level, then he zooms out again. We will ride this roller-coaster adventure with Jesus and his first disciples. (Tradition has it that Peter was Mark's primary source.) We will hear from God himself. We will encounter both the Holy Spirit and Satan. We will walk through dusty villages. We will encounter a range of individuals and see and hear how they respond to the amazing news that the Word has become flesh and dwells among us (John 1:14). We will see astounding, life-changing miracles and hear from Jesus himself about what the world is really like and how God wants us to connect with him and each other.

This is no 'executive summary' version of the gospel. It is a bright, unrelenting spotlight on Jesus himself: the Messiah, the Son of God. Listen up!

About the writer
Peter Stone



Peter lives in Sydney, Australia and is part of the team of SU NSW. He's a graduate of Regent College in Vancouver. He works as a consultant in business strategy and leadership development.

Clear the decks

PREPARE

Have you ever seen a demolition site? Not pretty. What might God want to clear away in your life so that he can get to work this New Year?

READ

Mark 1:1-8

EXPLORE

Mark gets straight to the point: God is up to something big. He's been planning this since before the dawn of creation. He is not sending a message, but a messenger. He is not waiting for humankind to be ready; he is going to make us ready. He is taking the initiative and that is good news!

The world is about to come under new management. The transition will not be smooth or peaceful. The old regime will not quietly surrender and the new supreme leader will not meet normal expectations. There will be demolition before there is a new building. This will not be easy.

So Mark introduces us to John the Baptist, the demolition specialist whose role is to clear the site for the works to come. John is obviously a charismatic personality who can draw crowds out of the cities and towns into the wilderness

with a very disturbing warning about the human condition. Alerting people about sin and its consequences gains John his notoriety, but it will also cost him his life. In so many ways John makes a straight path for Jesus.

‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’

Mark 1:3

RESPOND

Like John, we are called to point others towards Jesus in awkward or costly ways. Is there a path Jesus is asking you to straighten? It may be to a person, a community or in response to injustice. Ask for strength to do this.

Friday 2 January

Mark 1:9–20

Time's up!

PREPARE

Consider what is making it difficult to follow Jesus into the year ahead. Is anything cluttering your life and cramping your movement? Are you seeing yourself rightfully, as God sees you?

READ

Mark 1:9–20

EXPLORE

Jesus has a moment of revelation (vs 10,11). It changes his whole life in an instant. His world and ours will never be the same again.

His response is retreat into a hostile environment (vs 12,13). Typically, Mark leaves us breathless as 40 days are compressed into a few mysterious phrases that will show Jesus strengthened and equipped for the rest of his ministry. 'The time has come' (v 15).

Jesus will rarely be alone again (except for his early morning prayer times and a desperate night in Gethsemane). His first priority is to build the team that will change the whole world, so he goes to the centre of power and chooses the brightest and best – NOT. His strength will be made perfect in our weakness. The dream team starts with humble fishermen on the edge of a rural lake.

Their qualification is obedience, not cleverness or strength. It is the same for us today.

At once they left their nets and followed him.

Mark 1:18

RESPOND

Like those first disciples, how is Jesus calling you to follow him today? In a moment of silence and honesty, talk to your Father about where he's placed you, who you are connected to and how you can reflect his love into your world.

With authority!

PREPARE

Whose voice would you recognise anytime, anywhere? Is that from love or fear? How do you recognise the voice of Jesus? You may be surprised by who first fully recognises Jesus in today's passage.

READ

Mark 1:21–34

EXPLORE

All this action happens in one day. It feels like a documentary film crew are following Jesus, scrambling to keep up with the pace at which he moves and acts. This man is both purposeful and responsive. His teaching is electrifying, especially when compared with the bland diet presented by the teachers of the Law (v 22). But it is not just the human audience who responds! The unclean spirits are the first to proclaim Jesus as Messiah. They know the genuine article when they see it (v 24). They are not, however, who he came to save and serve.

Demons and disease are dispensed with, lovingly. This good news has very practical implications and consequences. Mark is laying down a rhythm here that will pulse through his Gospel. Jesus is a teacher, with authority. He is a healer, with

compassion. He drives out what is evil and unclean, with determination. He is on a mission! He is different from other teachers and his reputation quickly grows and spreads.

The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.

Mark 1:22

RESPOND

The same authority that silences the demons sends us out into the world to proclaim this good news. They had no choice but to obey Jesus. We do. Make the right choice today! Where might you proclaim good news?

Sunday 4 January

Psalm 20

A matter of perspective

PREPARE

How are you feeling about this New Year? What worries you most? Where are you finding or seeking joy?

READ

Psalm 20

EXPLORE

This psalm of David refers to the life and circumstances of the king. Clearly his world is a troubling, even scary place. There are powerful, dark forces everywhere lined up to crush and kill. There is so much to be afraid of, and with good reason.

This is the same David who squared off against the giant Goliath (1 Samuel 17). This is the same David who was relentlessly pursued by Saul (1 Samuel 23). He has lived experience of God's faithfulness and power and that changes everything.

The punchline is in verses 6 and 7. There is only one place where it is safe to put your trust. There is only One in whom it is safe to build your hope. He has a name: the Lord our God. Moreover, we have the astonishing privilege of calling him Father.

God is not remote from our circumstances. He is not indifferent to

our troubles. He is not hard of hearing. He is eternally on our side, not because of us but because of his loving kindness and inexhaustible grace towards us. He will answer when we call!

**Some trust in chariots and
some in horses, but we trust in
the name of the LORD our God.**

Psalm 20:7

RESPOND

This psalm sounds assured and triumphant. Yet our lives are not always like that. The big picture might be clear, but waters around us are muddy. Ask God to give you his perspective on the year ahead and step forward with your confidence firmly placed in him.

A solitary place

PREPARE

Where does prayer fit into your daily life and routine? What do you talk with God about? Is it a conversation or a monologue? How are you feeling about all this?

READ

Mark 1:35–39

EXPLORE

Why would Jesus need to pray? Surely his identity as God's Son would mean real-time access to his Father's heart and mind? Yet we see often how Jesus sought solitude and quiet to converse with his Father. It is also obvious that the disciples knew this was happening. What is going on here?

We find a rhythm in Mark's Gospel of intense action (often with crowds of people) followed by moments of intimacy. Jesus invades the whole space to teach and heal. Then he withdraws to coach his disciples and pray. One seems to drain his energy; the other recharges it. One is about proclamation; the other about relationship. Both are integral to his mission.

Jesus is a very conscious role model. This rhythm is part of what it means to love and serve him today. We are called to be salt and light in a fallen

world. That demands purposeful action and will often be tough. We are also called to prioritise our relationship with the Father and our brothers and sisters in Christ. That will also require determination and will often be tough. But both are meant to be a source of real joy and strength.

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

Mark 1:35

RESPOND

God yearns to meet with you. He loves the sound of your voice. Do you need to do anything to grasp hold of that truth?

Tuesday 6 January

Mark 1:40–45

Ready, willing and able

PREPARE

What big thing would you like God to do? Have you asked him about it? How has he responded?

.....

READ

Mark 1:40–45

EXPLORE

Yesterday we saw Jesus' determination to preach to whole villages. Mark staples this incident of one-on-one healing as the very next episode. No accident!

This man does not approach Jesus with a question, but a statement. He is quite sure that Jesus can heal him. The issue is not about power or capability. It is all about engagement. He is exploring a relationship through the portal of a health challenge. Jesus both speaks to this man and touches him in order to bring healing. It is probable that no one had touched him for years. His whole life is changed in an instant.

Jesus and his disciples now have a problem of crowd control! This man's exuberant disobedience (v 45) is the catalyst to draw many people to him. Can you imagine the energy that must have taken? He was so keen to tell

everyone how Jesus had changed his life that he started an avalanche of interest in what Jesus had to say. Jesus' mission is not derailed. It is amplified.

'If you are willing, you can make me clean.'

Mark 1:40b

RESPOND

Who knows about how Jesus has changed your life? Who would benefit from knowing? In the end, that good news is not really about you, but about him. Apparently mustard seeds can grow into very large trees. Don't be deceived by the size of the seed!

Never seen anything like this

PREPARE

Have you ever been absolutely desperate? It narrows your focus and concentrates your mind. Were you able to address the issue?

READ

Mark 2:1-12

EXPLORE

Crowd control becomes an issue again. This is one of the most genuinely ridiculous scenes in the Bible! We stand in awe at the determination of the friends of this paralysed man. Houses were mostly made of mud bricks and had flat roofs which often had external stair access. Imagine being in that room as the roof cracked and crumbled, the sunlight broke through and a man on a stretcher was lowered into the crowd. They certainly made room for him. Even Jesus was amazed, not by their inventiveness but by their faith (v 5).

Notice how Jesus conducts these exchanges. He goes to the core of the man's need: forgiveness of sin. He also goes straight to the heart of the need of the teachers of the Law: blindness. The light that has broken through shines on the fact that this Jesus is the Son of God. Not just a teacher, not just a healer and miracle-worker, he has the authority to forgive sins and bring new life.

There has never been anything or anyone like this before!

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralysed man, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'

Mark 2:5

RESPOND

What is the most pressing need you are aware of today? It might be personal, church-related, a justice issue... God knows about it already. Ask him to work at the heart of the need and be prepared to smash through any obstacles he makes you aware of.

Thursday 8 January

Mark 2:13–17

The nature of need

PREPARE

What need are you conscious of today? How significant is it? What would it mean to you if it were met completely? How have you seen God meet your needs?

READ

Mark 2:13–17

EXPLORE

Two kinds of need are in play in this passage. In the first, those in need are very aware of their circumstances. In the second, those in need are either blind to their need or in denial about its existence. Jesus will directly address both.

Mark condenses a very complex transaction into a few words (v 14). Tax collectors were despised. Active collaborators with the hated Romans, no respectable Jew would engage with them socially. Yet we find Jesus at a party with this motley crew, seemingly at ease in their company (v 15). The Pharisees are right to raise their eyebrows in alarm. What is Jesus doing?

This is another miracle of healing. This time it is not a sick body being repaired but a sick soul. All that is required is acknowledgement of the disease. The ‘sinners’ rejoice at their healing. The Pharisees seek no treatment because

they are aware of no illness. How wrong they are! Jesus’ response to their question is dripping with sarcasm (v 17).

Jesus said to them, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’

Mark 2:17

RESPOND

Jesus is endlessly patient with all, except hypocrites. Take a moment to reflect on which camp you would have been part of in this incident. Is there a soul-need in your life that only Jesus can address? Bring that need to Jesus.

Stretch or tear?

PREPARE

Stretching a muscle gets us ready for movement. Tearing a muscle brings us to a halt. Are you being spiritually stretched or torn right now?

READ

Mark 2:18-22

EXPLORE

Fasting was a key ingredient in Jewish life. It was a sign of taking God seriously. It showed repentance and obedience to the Law. With John in jail and the Romans in charge, it was an appropriate way to focus on prayer to seek God's intervention (v 18).

Yet Jesus rejects the practice, for the time being. The wedding reception is in full swing. Now is the time for celebration and rejoicing. The lame walk, the blind see and sins are forgiven. God is with us! He is intervening, just not in the way everyone was expecting. Something new is happening.

Jesus hints at what is ahead (v 20). This new way will require sacrifice and sadness as well. It will bring division as well as salvation, sorrow as well as joy.

The two images Jesus uses would have been very familiar to his hearers. Both draw on lived experience of what

happens when there is a mismatch between the means and the end. Fasting will not bring salvation, like old wine skins cannot contain fermenting wine. This must have been very hard for everyone to hear. What are the new rules?

'No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse.'

Mark 2:21

RESPOND

Thank God for what Jesus has done, for the freedom he brings and the joy of our salvation. Ask for the wisdom to see where he is at work around you, doing new things and breaking down barriers.

Saturday 10 January

Mark 2:23–28

No limits

PREPARE

Are there aspects of your life or our world where you think God has no role or interest? Name them now and ask him to speak into those spaces.

READ

Mark 2:23–28

EXPLORE

Yesterday, Jesus seemed dismissive of fasting. Today, he seems to attack Sabbath observance. What is this guy on about? Is there no aspect of Jewish life and faith that he respects?

The Pharisees were hyper-vigilant about keeping every tiny aspect of the Law. They saw their relationship with God almost entirely through the lens of strict observance. This included creating new rules and constraints to supplement and expand what scripture required. They wanted to eliminate the risk of disobeying God. Yet this attention to detail blinded them to the real issue at stake: we cannot earn God's favour.

God loves us. He longs for us to love him. He always wants what is best for us. He is full of mercy and grace. Just look at Jesus to see his heart in action. The Sabbath was a gift, not a straitjacket. It was meant to bring rest and joy, not

judgement and guilt. It provided time and headspace to worship, pray and enjoy the love of family and community. It was given for us!

Then he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.’

Mark 2:27

RESPOND

Are there areas of your life where you are trying to win God's favour? He loves you as you are and has sent his Spirit to enable you to become more like Jesus as you journey through life. Take this as a liberating gift.

The unfailing love of God

PREPARE

It is often easier to turn to God when we have big problems than when everything is going beautifully. What is going well in your life that you haven't adequately thanked God for?

READ

Psalm 21

EXPLORE

David is on a well-justified high. Everywhere he looks there is evidence of God's favour, mercy and power. He is overwhelmed by the blessings rained upon him. He is especially grateful that this is not a passing shower, but an enduring reality (vs 4,6). This is not just a moment in time. It is for ever.

He talks directly to God like a child to a parent or as friend to loving friend. There is intimacy here, not just respect and gratitude. A vibrant relationship is at the heart of all this praise and thanksgiving. He is completely confident in the character of this God who saves. That is the difference between thankfulness and triumphalism. This isn't about David and Israel.

God's faithfulness is without limit. There is no use-by date attached to his love for those who place their trust in him.

That is why David is so confident in how history will play out. Verses 8–12 are all in the future. Justice will prevail. We know how the story ends.

Surely you have granted him unending blessings and made him glad with the joy of your presence.

Psalm 21:6

RESPOND

'When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,/ when you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,/ count your many blessings, name them one by one,/ and it will surprise you what the Lord has done. Reflect on this good advice!*

*Johnson Oatman Jr, 'Count Your Blessings', 1897

A man of faith

About the writer **Sue Clutterham**

A former Local Mission Partner with Scripture Union, Sue enjoys writing and editing material that helps people of all ages to explore the Bible in creative ways. Free time includes walking, reading and watching crime thrillers, as well as outings with friends and family to local tea shops. Her favourite place in the world is a deserted beach.



For the next two weeks we'll be studying part of the life of Abraham and his family. There's lots to challenge us about trusting God in all circumstances, as well as navigating the ups and downs of extended family life!

Far from perfect, Abraham becomes – against all odds – the father of the Israelite nation, through which the world would be blessed. His adventure begins at the grand age of 75! An amazing journey into the unknown starts with a choice – a choice to follow God and leave behind everything known and familiar. Little did he know that the consequences of his obedience to God's calling would set in motion God's plan for the whole world, fulfilled in Jesus.

An example of someone saved by faith, Abraham is mentioned several times in the New Testament. Stephen refers to him in his speech to the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:2-8). In his letter to the Romans, Paul quotes the Scriptures: 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness' (Romans 4:3). Amazingly, those of us who have faith also share Abraham's blessing (Galatians 3:7-9). We're reminded in Hebrews 11 that Abraham and his descendants' trust in God has much to teach us today, living as we do in an instant, have-it-now culture, where risk assessment prevails. This great man of faith shows us how we can always rely on God, no matter what. Because Abraham said yes to him, we can too!

Consequences

PREPARE

Ask God to challenge you as you read how Abraham succumbed to temptation and was deceitful.

READ

Genesis 20:1-18

EXPLORE

I'm ashamed to say that, as a child, I cut my hair and claimed a schoolfriend had done it. My mother told the headteacher, who spoke to the girl, who denied it. My mother's response was, 'My daughter doesn't tell lies!' I was mortified, feeling very ashamed as I realised the consequences of what I had done.

Leaving Sodom and Gomorrah, where he had witnessed God's judgement and awesome power (Genesis 19:28), it's surprising that Abraham felt he had to mislead Abimelek about his wife. In his human frailty he hatched a contingency plan to ensure his and Sarah's safety. Having tried this same trick in Egypt (Genesis 12:11-13), it seems he hadn't learned his lesson. Why could he not trust God? Inevitably, his faithless scheme backfired. God intervened (vs 3-7) and responded to Abraham's prayer, showing mercy to Abimelek and his family (v 17).

Of course, we can be just as weak and vulnerable – perhaps, like Abraham, we are guilty of deception sometimes. Are we economical with the truth so that what we say is interpreted in a particular way? Ask God to help you speak with integrity and honesty at all times. It's not always easy, but it's hugely important.

Through all this, God's faithfulness and sovereignty are paramount. We can take God at his word and let his will be done!

Abraham said of his wife Sarah, 'She is my sister.'

Genesis 20:2

RESPOND

Be thankful for God's mercy when you fail to trust him and go your own way.

Tuesday 13 January

Genesis 21:1-21

At last!

PREPARE

How easy do you find it to trust God when the answer to your prayers seems to be 'Wait' or 'Not yet'? Pray for peace and patience if you're in that situation. Ask God to help you trust him.

READ

Genesis 21:1-21

EXPLORE

It was 20 years earlier that God had made a seemingly impossible promise to a man with no children (Genesis 15:1-6). Subsequently, God reaffirmed this promise when he met 99-year-old Abram, whose name he changed to Abraham, meaning 'Father of many'. Finally, when Abraham was 100 years old, his wife Sarah gave birth to a son and – despite his great age – Abraham would live to raise Isaac to adulthood. However, although she had originally requested that Abraham have a child with Hagar, Sarah let her jealousy of her maidservant overshadow her joy. This, in turn, upset Abraham, who sent Hagar and her son Ishmael into exile at Sarah's request. Arabs and Jews are descendants of Ishmael and Isaac. Sadly, the animosity between them continues.

Are we in danger of trying to solve difficult situations our own way, as Sarah did (v 10)? God was at work in this tricky situation and intervened miraculously in Hagar and Ishmael's fate to weave it into his great plan (v 18). God's grace, care and faithfulness are constant.

Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

Genesis 21:5

RESPOND

'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose' (Romans 8:28). Thank God for this amazing truth. Praise him that he is at work in our lives, despite us!

Conflict avoided

PREPARE

Read Psalm 119:18. As you read today's verses, pray that God will open your eyes to understand his Word in a new way.

READ

Genesis 21:22–34

EXPLORE

After a shaky start (Genesis 20:9), Abraham built a good relationship with Abimelek. Because of the trust between them, and the oath he swore to Abimelek (vs 23,24), Abraham was able to voice his concern about a well of water that Abimelek's servants had seized, and the matter was resolved amicably and peacefully.

Sometimes, disputes between individuals or in groups and committees can be magnified out of all proportion and lead to conflict, which is both divisive and hurtful. It's so easy to focus on our own agenda at the expense of others. When this happens, we are playing right into the devil's hands. He leaves us to get on with it and thus set a bad example to non-believers.

We would be wise to follow Abraham's example when we need to speak honestly with others. This should be done

sensitively, carefully and courteously – a huge challenge for which we need God's wisdom and insight.

What a testimony to Abraham that Abimelek said to him, 'God is with you in everything you do' (v 22). Do we live in such a way that people will say that of us? Ask God to help you be that person.

... Abimelek ... said to Abraham, 'God is with you in everything you do.'

Genesis 21:22

RESPOND

Encouraged by Abraham's example, consider issues which you or someone you know are dealing with at the moment that require wisdom, tact and the ability to see the situation from both sides.

Thursday 15 January

Genesis 22:1-19

The ultimate test

PREPARE

‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord (Isaiah 55:8). Reflect on these words and be thankful for God’s sovereignty.

READ

Genesis 22:1-19

EXPLORE

Perhaps Abraham thought that he had misunderstood God. Surely he couldn’t be asking him to sacrifice his long-promised son? If so, why? What about God’s covenant promise (Genesis 17:4)? Yet Abraham was obedient to God’s command (v 3). What a test! What faith!

Abraham’s journey to Mount Moriah (thought to be outside what is now Jerusalem) showed unrelenting trust in God and his provision. Notice he told his servants, ‘We will come back to you’ (v 5). It seems he believed that God could restore Isaac to life (Hebrews 11:19). His answer to Isaac confirmed that he had placed his only son in God’s hands (v 8). How ready are we to let go of something we love, for God’s sake? Do we *really* trust Jehovah Jireh, which means ‘The Lord will provide’? Remember, he provided a sacrificial lamb – twice (v 13; John 1:29)!

This well-known story is an incredibly powerful visual aid of what God himself did. He gave up his only, much-loved Son as a sacrifice for our sake. For evermore we benefit from the provision made at huge cost by a loving Father – for us! Do we respond to what God asks of us in faith and obedience, as Abraham did?

‘Some time later God tested Abraham.’

Genesis 22:1

RESPOND

Thank God for what he did for us, through Jesus, and what it cost. Ask him to strengthen your faith.

A life honoured

PREPARE

Christian funerals are an opportunity to mourn, but they also focus on the hope of eternal life. Read Hebrews 11:1. Pray for those you know who do not yet have this certainty.

READ

Genesis 23:1-20

EXPLORE

When the late Queen Elizabeth II died, aged 96, she was mourned worldwide. These words were sung at her funeral: 'Changed from glory into glory, / 'til in heaven we take our place, / 'til we cast our crowns before thee, / lost in wonder, love, and praise.* Poignant words, bearing in mind Elizabeth's royal status, and a great testimony to her deep faith in God!

Sarah also died at a grand age (v 1). There was no pomp and ceremony, but instead, a special resting place was needed. The way Abraham could honour his wife was to ensure she had a proper burial, in line with customs of the day. It was the end of an era, and important that Sarah's grave should be revered. Abraham negotiated with the Hittites, who recognised his status, even though he wasn't a local (v 4) and honoured him and his late wife with 'the choicest of our

tombs' (v 6). Abraham insisted on paying for the site and, because of his integrity and the respect with which he was regarded, Sarah was given the grave she deserved. God provided – again! Sarah was remembered as one of the 'holy women of the past who put their hope in God' (1 Peter 3:5,6).

Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and weep over her.

Genesis 23:2

RESPOND

Ask God to help you put your hope in him – as Sarah did – so that you can have a similar epitaph!

*Charles Wesley, 'Love Divine, All Loves Excelling', 1747

Saturday 17 January

Genesis 24:1-28

Promise-keeping God

PREPARE

As you look back over your life, thank God for his provision and his faithfulness.

READ

Genesis 24:1-28

EXPLORE

Abraham wants his son to marry within the family – common practice at the time, ensuring liaisons with pagan neighbours were avoided. The faithful servant who responds to Abraham's request reaches his destination and locates the well at evening – a place and time where he is likely to find local young women fetching water. We are told that God sent an angel before him to prepare the way (v 7). The servant also asks God for success (just as Nehemiah would do in Nehemiah 1:11).

Notice how God honours the very specific requests in the servant's prayer (vs 14-20) and provides for Abraham's family yet again. It transpires that Rebekah is the daughter of Isaac's cousin – no coincidence there! What a generous and loving God we serve (Matthew 7:11; Ephesians 3:20,21)!

As we seek God's guidance for our lives, we can learn from this story. Bearing in mind God's covenant promise, Abraham worked out a plan for his son's marriage (vs 3,4). His shrewd servant was specific in his prayer (v 14) and considered the outcome carefully before proceeding (v 21). When we take steps of faith, we can ask God to give us success. We need to use our judgement and act (Isaiah 30:21). God won't let us down. Trust him.

Abraham was now very old, and the LORD had blessed him in every way.

Genesis 24:1

RESPOND

Ask God for wisdom, good judgement and his guidance for decisions which you, or others known to you, need to make.

Prophetic words

PREPARE

This psalm covers a range of emotions. Thank God for times of joy, but also be thankful for his presence with you during dark moments and times of suffering (Isaiah 43:2).

READ

Psalm 22

EXPLORE

Verses 1 to 21 are prophetic words from David, which would be fulfilled through Jesus' extreme anguish on the cross hundreds of years later. Clearly David himself is suffering but, like his descendant, the promised Messiah, he ultimately gains victory. Despite feeling desolate and rejected (v 1), David holds on to the hope he has in God (vs 3-5,9,10) and the low points in this psalm are followed by affirmation of God's faithfulness. In his despair, David isn't afraid to be completely honest with God, and doesn't spare his words. Don't be afraid to do the same when you are struggling. God can take it! He knows how we feel and cares deeply.

The turning point in this psalm is verse 22 when David acknowledges God's power and authority. He praises God because he is sovereign in all circumstances – an example to follow during suffering.

Returning to verse 1, what an impact Jesus' words from the cross must have had on his loving Father! At what great cost was the sacrifice of his only Son for our salvation.

But you, LORD, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me.

Psalm 22:19

RESPOND

Reflect on these words and be thankful for all that Jesus suffered for your sake: 'Oh, the love that drew salvation's plan!/ Oh, the grace that brought it down to man!/ Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span/ At Calvary!'^{*}

^{*}William R Newell, 'At Calvary', 1895

Monday 19 January

Genesis 24:29–51

What a find!

PREPARE

Ask God to use you for his glory or purposes in some way today (even if you are not sure how that might happen!).

READ

Genesis 24:29–51

EXPLORE

Enjoying typical Middle Eastern hospitality from Rebekah's family, Abraham's servant recounts what happened when his master asked him to find a wife for his much-loved son, Isaac. As he sits with his master's relatives, his testimony to God's faithfulness and his loyalty to Abraham are paramount (vs 40–42). His loyal service and uncompromising obedience pay off and his question in verse 49 is met by acknowledgement that God is fulfilling his purposes. The details of the story – in particular the way in which Rebekah spontaneously offered to give the camels a drink (hard work in itself!) – show that God has led him to just the right wife for Isaac, and her father and uncle obviously agree (v 51). They too acknowledge God's direction.

What do these verses tell us about Rebekah? Apart from the fact that she ticked the relatives' box (v 40), she

was clearly thoughtful and kind, as demonstrated by her actions at the well (v 46). She would have to leave her home and marry a man she had never met (v 51) and that would require great courage. But hugely significantly (and without realising it), Rebekah was a young woman through whom God's promise to Abraham would continue to be fulfilled.

Laban and Bethuel answered, 'This is from the LORD.'

Genesis 24:50

RESPOND

Ask God to help you trust him and be obedient.

Answered prayer – big time!

PREPARE

Read Psalms 18:30a and 118:23. Thank God for the ways he answers prayer.

READ

Genesis 24:52–67

EXPLORE

Yesterday, we were reminded that Laban and Bethuel acknowledged, ‘This is from the LORD’ (v 50). As if the unfolding story we have been reading isn’t proof enough of God confirming to Abraham’s servant that he was on the right track, in today’s verses we have more evidence of God’s sovereignty in all the circumstances.

Despite the tempting idea of a few final days with her family (v 55), as far as Rebekah is concerned, it is never in question that she should accompany her future father-in-law’s servant back to meet her future husband. Her simple, positive response to a huge request is, ‘I will’ (v 58). It would be echoed by Mary, in her words to the angel in Luke 1:38.

It’s often with hindsight that we can see God at work. Here, for all concerned, God’s purposes were staring them in the face. The fact that Isaac loved Rebekah

and was comforted after his mother’s death is yet another example of all that God was doing then and would do in the future for, and through, this family.

‘... the LORD has granted success to my journey.’

Genesis 24:56

RESPOND

Grains of sand are still on the seashore, stars in the sky still shine! Praise God for his amazing promise to Abraham in Genesis 22:17, reiterated after his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Now Isaac is married, Abraham’s descendants will multiply. God is faithful!

Wednesday 21 January

Genesis 25:1-18

A life well lived

PREPARE

Think of men and women of God who have died. Give thanks for lives well lived, centred on their strong Christian faith. How could their example influence you for good?

READ

Genesis 25:1-18

EXPLORE

After a long and remarkable life lived by faith, Abraham was, at last, '... away from the body and at home with the Lord' (2 Corinthians 5:8). Isaac (Sarah's son) and Ishmael (Hagar's son) cooperate to make sure their father is buried (v 9). They use the burial site Abraham himself had purchased for Sarah, nearly 40 years before.

Sadly, the reunion between the brothers is short-lived (v 17). Abraham's other children are mentioned, but do not play a particularly significant part in God's plan for his chosen people. However, in verse 11, we read that God blesses Isaac. Isaac, Sarah and Abraham's much longed-for only son and the principal heir, inherits everything from Abraham, including God's promise to make his descendants into a great nation. And so, the fulfilment of God's covenant promise can continue. The traditional campfire

song 'Father Abraham Had Many Sons' concludes with the words, 'I am one of them, and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord!'* Praise him, indeed!

Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age.

Genesis 25:8

RESPOND

'So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it' (2 Corinthians 5:9). Ask God to help you follow Abraham's example of faithful service.

*Pierre Kartner, 1971

Double trouble

PREPARE

Pray for wisdom to negotiate the challenges of ongoing relationships, whether with family members or friends.

READ

Genesis 25:19–34

EXPLORE

As we read about the tension between Isaac's twin sons, today's verses may highlight shortcomings in families known to us. The two brothers developed contrasting characters as adults, each favoured by a different parent (vs 27,28). Esau is reckless and Jacob greedy (v 31). Esau trades the huge benefits of his birthright for short-lived gratification, while Jacob trades too, but on his brother's weakness – not exactly a recipe for harmonious family life!

A birthright, given to the firstborn son, was a significant honour which included a double portion of the family inheritance. In a moment, Esau, in his impetuous way, despises all that it means (vs 32,34). Shrewdly, Jacob gains material goods and a position of leadership which will have far-reaching consequences, especially for the outworking of the covenant promise God gave to his grandfather, Abraham.

Significantly, God allows these events in order to accomplish his overall purposes. God's plan for the future of the nation will work out. Esau has to live with the consequences (Hebrews 12:14–17) as the prophetic words to Rebekah are fulfilled: '... the elder will serve the younger' (v 23).

'Look, I am about to die,'
Esau said. 'What good is the birthright to me?'

Genesis 25:32

RESPOND

Esau's rash actions were due to hunger (v 29). Often, trivial or inconsequential issues can cause conflict. If there are specific issues that need to be dealt with in your immediate or wider family, ask God to give you humility and grace to resolve them.

Friday 23 January

Genesis 26:34 – 27:29

Deceitfulness rules

PREPARE

Thank God for his grace and mercy towards us, even when we choose to go our own way.

READ

Genesis 26:34 – 27:29

EXPLORE

Sadly, the trust between Isaac, Rebekah and their children has broken down completely. Lies dominate the relationships among family members. Already a source of grief to his parents because of his choice of pagan wives (vs 34,35), Esau now becomes the unwitting target of an elaborate plot to deceive him and his father.

Isaac is either unaware of, or chooses to ignore, Esau's renunciation of his birthright (Genesis 25:32). Eager to bless his oldest son before he dies, he is not blameless. What amounted to a 'last will and testament' should not take place in secret, as it requires witnesses to make it legally binding.

Meanwhile, having eavesdropped on the conversation between her husband and older son (v 5), Rebekah hatches a plan with her younger, favoured son, Jacob, to trick both Esau and Isaac

in his old age. Jacob agrees to the deception, involving many lies in his conversation with his father (vs 19,20,24).

By taking matters into her own hands, Rebekah ensures – knowingly or unknowingly – that what God had ordained comes to pass, so that Jacob would take priority over Esau (Genesis 25:23 and Romans 9:10-13).

Jacob said to his father, 'I am Esau your firstborn.'

Genesis 27:19

RESPOND

Family life takes hard work and Christian families are vulnerable to spiritual attack. How could you offer parents support as they bring their children up to follow God's ways, not the ways of the world? Pray now for a family you know.

God's purposes prevail

PREPARE

Be thankful that God is at work in spite of us and our many failings. Be thankful too that he graciously chooses to use us to fulfil his purposes.

READ

Genesis 27:30 – 28:9

EXPLORE

Esau's grudge against Jacob (very understandable in the circumstances, but not commendable) leads to yet more deception from Rebekah. Once again, she focuses on Jacob's welfare and organises an escape route for him (vs 43,44). Subsequently she lies to Isaac about the reason for Jacob's departure (v 46). But – as always – God is in control of the situation and turns it around for good. Although Rebekah would never see her younger son again, Jacob eventually marries Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah! Between them, they present Jacob with 12 sons – the founders of the nation of Israel. That story is for another time!

How can we learn from these events? Had Rebekah, Esau and Jacob (and Isaac too) chosen to do things in God's time and God's way, they would have avoided the breakdown of their family and the subsequent anguish. Looking back over Abraham's story, what stands

out more than anything else? For me, it's God's faithfulness, his graciousness and his mercy. Abraham and his family were far from perfect, but God worked through their shortcomings to fulfil his plan for his chosen people and, ultimately, the whole world.

Esau said ... 'Bless me too, my father!'

Genesis 27:38

RESPOND

As we reflect on the faith of Abraham and his descendants, ask God to increase your faith as you seek to follow his way too. Pray for courage and resilience when you face trials and tests.

Sunday 25 January

Psalm 23

Our faithful God

PREPARE

Ask the Holy Spirit to show you something new from these well-known verses to encourage you.

READ

Psalm 23

EXPLORE

Yet to be written in Abraham's day, this psalm happens to reflect his life and legacy. It is all about God's provision for, and God's protection of, him and his descendants, concluding with the many blessings that God gives so generously and graciously (vs 5,6).

In Hebrew, David's opening words refer to the Lord as his shepherd. He uses the covenant name of God to express the intimacy of the relationship between the shepherd and his sheep. Jesus emphasises this, talking about knowing his sheep (John 10:27).

In verse 4 we are reminded that, whatever happens, the Good Shepherd (John 10:14) will protect us, using his rod – a symbol of his authority and the Word of God. His staff (or crook) demonstrates his compassion, guidance and care, which are emblematic of the role of the Holy Spirit. Following God's way is not

an easy option – it's knowing that the Shepherd who gave his life for us is with us whatever happens and will never abandon us.

When a Christian friend of ours was dying, his daughter sat by his hospital bed and read Psalm 23 to him. As she finished, he passed into the presence of the Lord. How amazing that the last words he heard on earth were, 'I will dwell in the house of the **Lord** for ever' (v 6)!

The **Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.**

Psalm 23:1

RESPOND

Read this psalm again, in a different version. Thank God that his provision and protection start in this life and continue into eternity!

All!

Paul's letter to the church in Rome can be described as the Himalayas of the New Testament. It is full of towering peaks of theological insight (chs 1–11) and practical wisdom (chs 12–15). Yet, despite its profound revelation of Christian truth, we must not forget that this is a pastoral letter, addressed to ordinary people, including many slaves and some wealthy benefactors.

About the writer **David Lawrence**

David is currently the Teaching Pastor at Thornbury Baptist Church, near Bristol. In the past he has worked with Scripture Union, ForMission (Springdale College), the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity.



Paul had never visited Rome, but he knew lots of people there (see ch 16) and had heard reports that troubled him from the church. Christians from both Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds were struggling to reconcile their different views of what it meant to follow Jesus. The tension caused by these differing views was making life difficult in the many small house churches that made up the church in Rome.

Paul seeks to bring the different sides together by stressing what unites them. No one can boast about being superior to others because '*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and *all* are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus' (3:23,24, my emphasis). Standing on that common ground the Romans should stop falling out over unessential matters: rather they should offer one another the same grace that they had all freely received (chs 14,15)!

So put your climbing boots on as we scale the heights of this great letter and encounter again God's powerful good news (1:16)!

Monday 26 January

Romans 1:1–7

All loved: all learners

PREPARE

‘This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us...’ (1 John 4:10). How easy do you find it to believe that God loves you? Talk to him about it.

READ

Romans 1:1–7

EXPLORE

Romans will have a lot to say about ‘the gospel of God’ (v 1). This gospel, or good news, always starts with what God has done, and then – and only then – embraces how we can respond.

First, what God has done. He loved us (v 7), and the extent of his love is spelled out in verses 2–4. His ancient plan (v 2) has swung into action, centring on Jesus, his Son (vs 3,4). His death and resurrection (v 4) have now opened a doorway for everyone – of whatever ethnicity (v 5) – to join his family and learn how to live under his direction (v 7).

Secondly, our response to the good news is ‘to be his holy people’ (v 7), or to learn ‘the obedience that comes from faith’ (v 5). God’s love, when fully grasped and appreciated, leads to distinctive and radical lifestyle choices as we learn what it means to allow God to shape all our life decisions.

So, we are God’s loved learners. As we move on through Romans we’ll read much more about God’s love, and about our response.

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 1:7

RESPOND

As one of God’s ‘loved learners’, which do you feel needs more attention at this moment in your life: a fuller realisation of God’s love, or a fuller commitment to obedience? Turn your thoughts into prayer.

All in debt

PREPARE

Think through your plans for the next 24 hours. Ask God to speak to you about them as you spend time with him now.

READ

Romans 1:8–17

EXPLORE

Have you ever had the unfortunate experience of being in debt? The feeling of owing someone else what is rightfully theirs can trigger very negative emotions, but positively it can push us to do all that we can to make sure we pay back what is owed.

In today's passage, we read that Paul thought of himself as a debtor (v 14). It wasn't financial debt, but gospel debt: he had the good news that rightly belonged to others. For sure God was the giver of the good news (1:2–4), and Paul himself had received it, but its rightful 'owners' – the people to whom it was addressed (v 14) – were not yet in possession of it.

Paul's ministry had demonstrated that when people hear the story of God's love, as shown in Jesus, it could have powerful and life-changing effects. So he's not ashamed to talk about Jesus.

Quite the reverse: he can't wait to get to Rome to pay off some more debt (vs 10–13)!

What is your church doing to pay back the debt of the gospel to the world? Where else do you see this happening?

I am a debtor both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish.

Romans 1:14

RESPOND

Do you have friends, colleagues or family to whom you owe the debt of God's good news? How might you go about sharing Jesus with them? Pray for the courage to trust the gospel's inbuilt power and for the opportunity to pay the debt soon.

Wednesday 28 January

Romans 1:18–32

All in a mess

PREPARE

‘Give thanks to the **LORD**, for he is good; his love endures for ever’ (Psalm 107:1). Think of ten things to thank God for, and then do it!

READ

Romans 1:18–32

EXPLORE

It seems that we human beings, apart from God, are ill-equipped to run our own lives.

Despite all the evidence (v 20) we choose to ditch God and follow our own desires (v 21). That ruinous decision works out in misplaced worship (vs 23,25), sexual deviance (vs 26,27) and relational and, ultimately, societal breakdown (vs 29–31). Giving in to our desires gives no guarantee of holiness or happiness: quite the reverse.

Three times we are told that God’s displeasure (his ‘wrath’, v 18) with this situation is expressed by allowing humans to make their own decisions and reap the consequences (vs 24,26,28). Like the loving father in the Prodigal Son story, God allows his wilful children to wander off and do their own thing.

Thankfully, his decision to allow people to go their own way is not his last word.

His last word is the sending of his Son to deal with this human mess (1:1–17). The good news is that the grieving father longs to receive lost children home – and has done everything necessary to make their return possible.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Romans 1:21

RESPOND

Who do you know who has ‘wandered off’? Pray for those prodigals to return home and consider sending them a message to let them know you’re thinking of them.

All on common ground

PREPARE

Which three words describe how you feel about today? Turn those words into prayer. What words might God be speaking back to you?

READ

Romans 2:1-16

EXPLORE

It's been said that every time we point a finger at someone else, there are three fingers pointing back at us (try it!).

Clearly in Rome there was a group (maybe the Jewish Christians) who were taking the higher moral ground. They felt that they were in a position to point the finger at others (maybe the Gentile Christians). But they were wrong: accusers and accused were all on common ground.

The accusers had developed an enormous blind spot and failed to see that even as they criticised the behaviour of others, they were in fact just as guilty (v 1). Just knowing the law (as the Jews did) is not enough: living it is what counts (v 13). Jews knew the law, and Gentiles 'sensed' the law in their consciences (vs 14,15) but all had failed to live lives shaped by God's truth (vs 12-16).

How attentive are you being to God's call to a holy life? God's kindness leaves

space for us to turn back to him (v 4), so rather than pointing the finger at others, it is better to respond to the fingers pointing back at us.

But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.

Romans 2:5

RESPOND

'Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature' (Colossians 3:5). Ask the Holy Spirit to gently point his finger at anything you need to 'put to death'.

Friday 30 January

Romans 2:17–29

All joined up

PREPARE

What weather condition would you use to describe your life today? Stormy? Settled? Sunny? Icy? Or something else? Talk to God about it.

READ

Romans 2:17–29

EXPLORE

Throughout Romans, Paul is concerned not just for the life of the church in Rome but, as a missionary, he is also deeply concerned about the way that the church is showing the good news to the watching world.

Today's passage addresses the issue of integrity: of behaviour and belief joining up. Specifically, for a moment, Paul addresses his fellow Jewish disciples in Rome. They had such enormous historic and spiritual advantages, and it seems that as a consequence they assumed some kind of moral superiority over the other believers.

Sadly, however, it seems that they did not 'walk their talk'. The result was that they were whipping the evangelistic rug from under their own feet. God was being ridiculed among the very people that the church should have been introducing to Jesus (v 24).

Having the outward signs of faith (v 28) and knowing the truth (v 18) are not enough. Mission will only happen effectively when the watching world sees the good news 'fleshed out' in the lives of people living joined-up lives from a Spirit-transformed heart (v 29).

As it is written: 'God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'

Romans 2:24

RESPOND

Use this prayer from Psalm 139 (vs 23,24) and allow God to speak to you about any 'un-joined-up' areas in your life: 'Search me, God, and know my heart ... See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.'

All thought through

PREPARE

‘Your enjoyment of the world is never right till every morning you awake in heaven, [and] see yourself in your Father’s palace...’* Where are you seeing yourself today?

READ

Romans 3:1-8

EXPLORE

‘Yes, but...’ ‘What if...?’ ‘So you mean...’ The minute you start really ‘getting’ the good news, a hundred questions spring to mind!

‘If I carry on sinning, will God stop being faithful?’ (v 3).

‘If my sin makes God’s grace look even better, isn’t it unfair that he is against me sinning?’ (v 5).

‘Why not keep sinning so that more people see God’s greatness in forgiving me?’ (v 7).

Paul’s answers (vs 4,6,8) range from ‘Not at all’ to, effectively, ‘Now you’re just being silly!’ (v 8). But his responses do show that he has clearly anticipated these objections and questions. His faith was a thought-through faith. He didn’t duck the questions; he wrestled with them until he had found answers that were consistent with God’s good character (v 4) and God’s good news.

It’s helpful to have thought through people’s questions before they ask them! That way you may ‘be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have’ (1 Peter 3:15).

Someone might argue, ‘If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?’

Romans 3:7

RESPOND

What questions do you imagine people you know have about your faith? How might you offer helpful answers? Next time you meet socially with a Christian friend, discuss this with them and learn from one another.

*Thomas Traherne

Sunday 1 February

Psalm 24

God of all

PREPARE

‘Oh, what a mystery – Meekness and majesty; Bow down and worship, For this is your God!* On this Lord’s day, take time now to worship King Jesus.

READ

Psalm 24

EXPLORE

After the comforting, personal language of Psalm 23 (the Lord is my Shepherd), Psalm 24 starts with the camera zooming out as far as it can. *Everything* and everyone are in view as God’s rightful possession.

These two poles (the ‘intimacy’ of Psalm 23 and the ‘majesty’ of Psalm 24) must be held together in our walk with God. Neither must dominate. Too intimate a view could rob us of a sense of God’s all-encompassing power; too much focus on ‘out-there’ majesty could deny us a sense of God’s personal concern and care.

But today, majesty on a sheer grandiose scale is in view. God is all in all, the rightful owner of everything. ‘Our’ bodies, ‘our’ families, ‘our’ countries, ‘our’ workplaces, ‘our’ possessions are not ‘ours’ at all, but all are rightfully his.

There is, however, a twist in the tale. The victorious King of everything is not yet at home everywhere. Amazingly God’s procession to inhabit all that he owns awaits our decision to open the doors (vs 7,9) and welcome him (see Revelation 3:20). That’s quite a responsibility!

**Lift up your heads, you gates;
be lifted up, you ancient
doors, that the King of glory
may come in.**

Psalm 24:7

RESPOND

Think through this list: your body; your home; your neighbours; your workplace; and your nation. How welcome is God in each? What might you be able to do to open a door for God in one or more of these areas?

*Graham Kendrick, ‘Meekness and Majesty’, 1986

All fall down

PREPARE

Quietly repeat these words from Psalm 16:5 and let their truth seep into your soul.
'LORD, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure.'

READ

Romans 3:9-20

EXPLORE

I remember listening to a radio programme in which a rather well-spoken woman was asked for her reaction to an evangelistic talk that she had just heard. In a scandalised tone she complained: 'It was awful. He called me a hopeless sinner!'

'Sin' is not a popular word in today's world. Today's reading, however, allows no escape route. No one has lived a perfect life (v 12) and consequently no one has right standing before God (v 10). There are undoubtedly many and various ways to fall short of the life God desires for us (vs 13-18), but in one way or another everyone has fallen down.

Is it because people are bad? No. It's because they are gripped by something bad: sin (v 9). In the grip of this relentless malicious power, ultimately all people fall down.

So, are we stuck? No! Spoiler alert: sin has been defeated. 'For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin' (Romans 6:6).

Sinner? Definitely. Hopeless? Definitely not!

As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one.'

Romans 3:10

RESPOND

Ask for God's Spirit to empower you, making these hymn words your own prayer today:

'I want the Spirit's power within/
Of love, and of a healthy mind/
Of power to conquer inbred sin/
Of Love for Thee and all mankind...*'

*Charles Wesley (1707-1788), 'The Indwelling God'

Tuesday 3 February

Romans 3:21–31

All who believe

PREPARE

Think of those who have helped you in understanding and living out your faith. Thank God for them.

READ

Romans 3:21–31

EXPLORE

At the heart of today's reading is something that Jesus has done, which has the potential to change life for everyone. Jesus, we are told, was 'presented as a sacrifice of atonement' (v 25).

The Greek word used by Paul recalls the Day of Atonement, when the sacrificial blood was sprinkled on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant ('mercy seat' in ESV) to secure forgiveness, cleansing and renewal for Israel. Now, however, it is not the death of an animal, but Jesus' own death that has those effects. He is now 'the place of mercy' where all broken and fallen people can receive God's favour.

The English word 'atonement' was put together out of two simple words: 'at one'. Jesus' death was enough to put us 'at one' with God. No more barriers, no judgement, no guilt, no fear. Just 'at one' with God.

To enjoy this 'at one' life with God, we have just one thing to do. We have to believe this good news, trusting in Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice (vs 26,28,30).

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith.

Romans 3:25

RESPOND

Prayerfully reflect on these words:
'The price is paid,/ Come let us enter in/ To all that Jesus died/
To make our own/ For every sin/
More than enough He gave/ And bought our freedom/ From each guilty stain.*'

*Graham Kendrick, 'The Price Is Paid', 1983

All is gift

PREPARE

‘This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us...’ (1 John 4:10). Spend a few minutes basking in the truth that before you loved God he loved you.

READ

Romans 4:1-12

EXPLORE

Sometimes we may come across an advert that promises us a free gift. The offer may sound too good to be true – because usually it is. It turns out that to receive the ‘free’ gift, we must do something. When we read the small print, we find we have to buy something or sign up to a mailing list, and only then will we receive the gift. What is offered as a free gift turns out to be more like a wage (v 4)!

There is no small print in God’s offer of forgiveness and friendship (vs 7,8). We do not have to work at being good, giving away our money, saying our prayers, turning up at church or witnessing to our friends to earn God’s favour. No. These things all have their place, but like Abraham’s circumcision (v 10) they are a response to being saved, not a reason for it.

Salvation is not a wage earned by serious devotion, it’s a free gift. We truly are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8).

However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

Romans 4:5

RESPOND

‘Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more... And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less.* How easy do you find it to believe that? Talk to God about it.

*Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, Zondervan, 1997, p70

Thursday 5 February

Romans 4:13–25

All God has promised

PREPARE

Reflect on this prayer by Lancelot Andrewes (1555–1626): ‘Lord, be thou within me, to strengthen me ... beneath me to uphold me; before me to direct me; behind me to keep me from straying; round about me to defend me. Amen.’

READ

Romans 4:13–25

EXPLORE

Abraham had been chosen by God to be the founder of a great nation. The trouble was that the father of many nations (v 17) was past parenting (vs 18–20). The first lesson of faith: the poverty of our own resources is no handicap for God.

For Abraham and Sarah, faith was not about getting God to do what they wanted, but rather believing that God could do what he wanted in them. The plan to start a world-blessing nation was God’s promise, not Abraham’s presumption (v 18). The second faith-lesson: faith is taking God at his word, not bending God to ours.

So, if Abraham and Sarah’s poverty was to be drawn into God’s promise, what was the resource for their faith? Faith-lesson three: despite everything that seems set against him, God has the power do what he has promised (v 21).

God’s power has done everything necessary (v 25) to fulfil his promise of making us right with him (v 24). Our own inability to bring that about leaves us where Abraham and Sarah were: needing to have faith despite our poverty!

Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God.

Romans 4:20

RESPOND

Find a small seed and hold it in your open hand. Reflect on Jesus’ words: ‘if you have faith as small as a mustard seed ... Nothing will be impossible for you’ (Matthew 17:20). Keep the seed in your purse or pocket as a reminder.

All right in the end

PREPARE

Quietly repeat these words from Psalm 63:1 as you prepare to encounter God in the Bible: 'You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you.'

READ

Romans 5:1-11

EXPLORE

Peace with God (v 1). Now everything is all right: right? Well, yes and no.

Standing in the free flow of God's grace (v 2), we are not immune to the suffering inherent in human existence (v 3).

Yet, as grace works through suffering, our struggles can become a tool for God's work in our lives (vs 3,4). Ultimately suffering itself is transformed by future hope (vs 5,9,10).

Two things sustain hope through the challenges of life. One is internal and subjective: the experience of God's love in our hearts (v 5). The other is historical and objective: the death of Christ which has achieved our 'at-one-ness' with God for all time (vs 9,10). The experience of God's love may take a hit when suffering comes, but the fact of God's love in his Son can never change (v 8).

Suffering is real, but it does not have the last word in our lives. The last word is

God's eternal welcome, achieved for us by Jesus and made real by the Spirit.

And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Romans 5:5

RESPOND

Ask God to fill you again with the Spirit of his love: 'O Breath of love, come breathe within me, renewing thought and will and heart; come, Love of Christ, afresh to win me, revive my life in ev'ry part' (Bessie Porter Smith, 1920, adapted).

Saturday 7 February

Romans 5:12–21

All the more

PREPARE

Think back over this week as it ends today. What have you seen of God's goodness? What has challenged your faith? Talk to God about your reflection.

READ

Romans 5:12–21

EXPLORE

Have you ever researched your family tree? Did you find any surprises, or even shocks at what your ancestors got up to? Today's reading offers two possible family trees for any and every human being. One has Adam at the head, and the other has Jesus at the head.

Adam's inheritance, passed on to everyone, is experienced as sin, judgement, condemnation and death (vs 12,16,18,19). That's quite the legacy! By stark contrast, the inheritance in Jesus' family tree is forgiveness, right-standing with God and a transformed life (vs 16,17).

As things got worse in the Adam-life, God kept turning up the levels of grace 'all the more' (v 20) so that anyone, no matter what level of Adam they'd sunk to, could experience life in the Jesus tree.

We can't change our own family trees, but we can do something about our spiritual ancestry. Born in Adam, there is

a way to change our inheritance. How? By receiving 'God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness' (v 17). Faith in Jesus rewrites our spiritual history. Simple as that.

But where sin increased,
grace increased all the more,
so that, just as sin reigned in
death, so also grace might
reign through righteousness
to bring eternal life through
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 5:20b,21

RESPOND

Draw a family tree, with your name at the bottom and Jesus at the top. How does that look to you? Keep it as a reminder of where your spiritual inheritance now lies.

Praise and pain

PREPARE

Sunday, the first day of the week, is 'resurrection day'. Thank God for your experiences of new life in Jesus in this past week.

READ

Psalm 25

EXPLORE

The psalms are the Bible's primer in prayer. They scale the heights of praise and plumb the depths of human experience, often without pausing for breath. Psalm 25 is a prime example.

Apart from the brief mention of 'enemies' in verse 2, the first part of the psalm is taken up with a thirst to know God better (vs 4,5), and with strong affirmations of his goodness and love. He is the Saviour (v 5), merciful and loving (v 6), good and upright (v 8), the giver of prosperity (v 13) and revelation (v 14).

And then the twist.

This high praise of God's goodness comes from someone who is in a very painful and vulnerable place. He is lonely (v 16), in anguish and inner turmoil (v 17) and facing enemies who are putting his very life at risk (vs 19,20).

Very often prayer happens at the interface of pain and praise. With eyes fixed on the goodness of God (v 15), we lay our despair before him, because only if we still believe he is worthy of our praise can we cry out, 'I trust in you ... my hope, LORD, is in you' (vs 2,21).

In you, LORD my God, I put my trust.

Psalm 25:1

RESPOND

Do you know anyone who is 'alone' or even 'in deep distress' (v 16)? Pray for them and ask God to show you how you could be an encouragement to them this week.



The Bible and me – a writer's experience of the Bible

In these Spotlight articles we ask *Daily Bread* writers to tell us a little about what the Bible means to them. For this issue we talked with **Phil Knox**, an evangelist and missiologist at the Evangelical Alliance. Passionate about making Jesus known and the power of friendship, he also loves learning and has degrees in law, and mission and evangelism. Phil is married to Dani and they have two sons. An avid runner and enthusiastic waterskier, he is also an award-winning performance poet and author of *Story Bearer* and *The Best of Friends*.

What was your early experience of the Bible?

I grew up in a home devoted to Jesus and rooted in God's Word. I would descend the stairs as a bleary-eyed child to find Mum and Dad sitting with their dog-eared, leatherbound Bibles at the start of the day. I was encouraged from an early age to have a daily quiet time, with Bible reading notes replenished with regularity. And these formative rhythms were bolstered by the art of memorising verses.

On the car journey to school, I just wanted to talk about football with my dad. But before we were allowed to do so, we had to recite our verses. Over the course of five years, we memorised a verse from every book in the Bible. Apart from being a quirky party trick, there have been times in my life when these verses have saved me from pits of depression and painful mistakes. I will be forever grateful for the biblical foundations my parents helped me lay underneath the building blocks of my life.

How did your appreciation of the Bible grow as you got older?

A friend of mine refers to the 'simplexity' of the Bible. It is simple enough that my 5-year-old can understand the love of God through the narratives, and yet has a depth that I will spend all my days plumbing as I get to know its author better. This has been my experience as I have grown up. Like the best of lifelong friendships, there develop both a familiarity and greater appreciation as the years go by.

Head and heart

I've had to get my head around the absolute divine inspiration and authority of scripture alongside the human perspective and authorship. I've developed an appreciation of the types of literature, the beauty of the richness of the language and its authority that I must respect and submit to, even if it doesn't align with my worldview.

At the same time, its words deeply move my heart. It is not uncommon for tears to roll down my cheeks as the ancient words speak to the core of my being. I am constantly reminded of God's sheer majesty, grace, power, love and truth and my own fragility and need of him. I find myself in its stories, my heart strengthened by its encouragements and convinced by its wisdom.

For better, for worse

Life for most of us is a roller coaster of battles and blessings. In the highs and heartaches, for me, the Bible has been an ever-present companion. As I contemplated the decision to get married, Proverbs 31 encouraged me that Dani was the girl for me! I have read Psalm 19 while gazing at sunsets of excruciating beauty. I enjoy reading Psalm 139:9 on long-haul flights as the sun comes up: 'If I rise on the wings of the dawn...'

And yet in the soul-searching moments of grief, the Bible has also comforted my wounded soul with its words of life. The night my dad died in 2004, my mum read Psalm 68:5, 'A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God...' That promise has been proved true for our family. At my lowest moments of discouragement, crushing disappointment and bereavement, Lamentations 3:22 has wrapped itself around my anguish: 'his compassions never fail'.

Rhythms of life

The Bible for me is a discipline and a delight. I don't always feel like reading it. I've tried many ways of engaging daily, and I haven't always got it right, but I now almost never start a day without the quiet moments that my parents modelled for me so well. Reading in community is also important to me, exploring themes and stories in a regular home-group setting with Christian friends. It's also foundational to my work as an author and communicator – though I must be careful not to professionalise my relationship with Jesus. We also read Bible stories to our two boys, and I've just started learning Bible verses with my eldest... before we are allowed to talk about the football!

Phil Knox

WAY IN

1 Samuel 19–31

David on the run

About the writer **Tony Horsfall**

Tony is an author, retreat leader and mentor based in Bournemouth. He is married to Jilly, and attends GodFirst Church in Christchurch.



It is easy to look back on life and see how certain periods, although difficult, shaped and formed us and were used by God to draw us closer to himself. The chapters we cover over the next two weeks describe such a moment in David's life when he was in constant danger and on the run from King Saul.

Although David had been anointed to be king by Samuel (1 Samuel 16:13), Saul was still on the throne, and David would have to wait many years before his time came. Saul, for his part, saw David as a threat and, struggling with deep insecurity, allowed his fears to gain control of his mind and develop into paranoia. He wanted David dead.

David had no choice but to go on the run, hiding in the desert, not knowing who to trust. Time and again David had to find his strength in God, supported by his friendship with Saul's son Jonathan and a few other loyal souls. Throughout this stressful period David had to learn how to trust God with his future and to believe that God would keep him safe.

Saul's story reminds us how easy it is to lose our way and become disconnected from God. David's story teaches us how to live with danger, uncertainty, injustice and fear. You may find it helpful to read some of David's early psalms (for example, Psalms 30–40), which express his thoughts and feelings at this time.

Enemies and friends

PREPARE

Ask that God will speak to you as we begin these readings about the life of David, especially that you will learn valuable lessons through the stories we cover.

READ

1 Samuel 19:1-24

EXPLORE

Saul's paranoia as he perceives the threat posed to his kingship by David is increasing. The expression 'an evil spirit from the LORD' (v 9) does not mean God had sent a demon to torment Saul. Rather it means that, following his disobedience and the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit (16:14), Saul was now at the mercy of strong, destructive psychological and spiritual forces working within him.

This is a precarious time for the young man David. From being a favourite at court, he is now a fugitive, fearing for his safety and wondering who to trust. Fortunately, he has found a loyal ally in Jonathan, Saul's son, who seems to have recognised God's hand upon David and helps him navigate this tricky situation (18:1-4). Likewise, his wife Michal helps him evade capture, and Samuel provides him a place of refuge.

The next few years will be highly formative in David's spiritual development and maturity as he learns to trust God in many dangerous situations. He will be tried and tested but discover that God is utterly faithful and able to bring about his purposes no matter what the opposition.

Saul told his son Jonathan and all the attendants to kill David. But Jonathan had taken a great liking to David and warned him, 'My father Saul is looking for a chance to kill you.'

1 Samuel 19:1,2

RESPOND

When we are hard-pressed, we discover our true friends. Who has stood by you in challenging times? Who might you encourage who is passing through deep waters?

Tuesday 10 February

1 Samuel 20:1-17

Kindness

PREPARE

Think about your closest friends and ask for God's blessing upon their lives. Why do you appreciate them? Give thanks to God for the precious gift of friendship.

READ

1 Samuel 20:1-17

EXPLORE

The relationship between Jonathan and David provides an example of true friendship, but here it comes under strain. Both men need reassurance that their friendship can withstand the stress placed upon it by Saul's hostility towards David. Will Jonathan remain true to David when pressurised by his father? Will David remember Jonathan's loyalty when he comes to power?

Their friendship is based on covenant, a spoken agreement to be true to each other (18:1-4; 20:16,17). We seldom make our commitment to friends so explicit, but the bond is demonstrated through our consistent kindness and thoughtfulness. The assurance of such continuing care is what both men seek at this perilous time (vs 8,14).

Kindness is underrated, but it is a fruit of the Spirit and a key ingredient in lasting relationships. It means to act considerately, to care practically and to

seek the welfare and well-being of the other even at personal cost. It is love expressed in actions and words.

When we are kind to others, we feel better in ourselves. Kindness is one of the most beautiful and powerful forces in life, a reflection of the nature of God.

'As for you, show kindness to your servant, for you have brought him into a covenant with you before the LORD.'

1 Samuel 20:8

RESPOND

Is there a friendship you value that is currently under strain? How can you express kindness and loyalty in this situation? Ask God for his help to act kindly to all you meet.

Friends for life

PREPARE

Think about someone you are missing right now. Bring that person before God, asking for his presence to be with them and for his help during your separation.

READ

1 Samuel 20:18–42

EXPLORE

Jonathan handles the dilemma of how to warn David about Saul's intentions with wisdom and courage. David's absence from the king's table has irked the unstable ruler, creating another flare-up of anger and murderous intentions. Jonathan weathers the storm of wrath directed at him but is grieved over his father's unjust treatment of his friend.

The pre-arranged signal during target practice reveals to David that it is unsafe to return to the court, so he must hide, but first say goodbye to Jonathan. It is an emotional moment; neither knows what the future holds and, as David said earlier, 'there is only a step between me and death' (20:3).

That both men express deep affection and weep openly at their parting (v 41) is in line with Middle Eastern culture: some nationalities may be more reserved. Yet it is healthier to show love and affection and to express grief than to stifle

emotions. Separation from those we love is a painful experience and a form of bereavement. We should not minimise the pain involved, and not be afraid to mourn the loss of treasured relationships.

... 'Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the LORD, saying, "The LORD is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants for ever." ...

1 Samuel 20:42

RESPOND

Does the display of emotion, especially affection or sadness, unsettle you? Why might that be? Ask God to show you how to be more expressive of love and loss.

Thursday 12 February

1 Samuel 23:7-29

Finding strength in God

PREPARE

Remind yourself today that God is with you. No matter how hard your situation might be, he has promised never to leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). Give thanks for his abiding presence.

READ

1 Samuel 23:7-29

EXPLORE

Saul's hatred for David is intensifying and David is on the run, moving from place to place. Despite intelligence reports about David's movements, and the many men searching for the fugitive, Saul cannot capture his rival. The reason is clear. Although Saul searched diligently day by day, 'God did not give David into his hands' (v 14).

Notice prior to this section how David consistently 'enquired of the LORD' (vs 2,4). It would have been so easy to run in panic, but he takes time to seek guidance from God and to allow God to guide his steps. Here is a big lesson in the shaping of his soul. Presumptive decisions and knee-jerk reactions often lead to disaster, whereas considered responses formed before God in submission to his will tend to give the best results.

David needs human encouragement now, and this is given by Jonathan's arrival. The presence of his dear friend itself would have been a boost to David, but his reminder that David will one day be king would also have helped him place his feet again on the unshakeable promise of God (v 17).

And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him to find strength in God.

1 Samuel 23:16

RESPOND

Who might you encourage today, perhaps by a text, phone call, email or invitation to chat over coffee? Listen for the prompting of God's Spirit and don't be afraid to act.

Forbearance

PREPARE

In order to recognise God's voice, we need to have 'ears to hear' – an openness to receive what God is saying and grace to respond in obedience. Ask God to open your ears as you read today.

READ

1 Samuel 24:1-22

EXPLORE

David's time of testing in the wilderness is a proving ground for his character, an opportunity for him to become a godly person who would rule well. He learns to exercise forbearance, a quality characteristic of God, one he seeks to form within those called to lead (Romans 2:4; Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:13).

Forbearance is patient self-control, the ability to manage one's response in provocative situations without acting impulsively. God delivers Saul into David's hand in the cave, and it would be easy for him to regard Saul as his enemy, and, because his own life is in jeopardy, to kill his pursuer. Others urge him to do this, but David resists the impulse to take revenge, sparing Saul's life.

David's forbearance does not mean leaders should never be held accountable for abusive or coercive behaviour. They

must be, but in this context David recognises that Saul is still the anointed king and that his position has to be respected. God will bring about change in his own time and way, and David must wait patiently for that day to come.

'... the LORD gave you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, "I will not lay my hand on my lord, because he is the LORD's anointed."

1 Samuel 24:10

RESPOND

Are you facing any situations where you feel exasperated? Ask God for wisdom, to know whether to speak up or to keep quiet.

Saturday 14 February

1 Samuel 25:1-22

Chosen, but imperfect

PREPARE

Thank God today that he is your Provider. Everything we have comes from him. We have good reason to be grateful and we can trust him for the future.

READ

1 Samuel 25:1-22

EXPLORE

David was a godly man but not without his faults. The forbearance he showed to Saul is absent in his response to Nabal. Here he impulsively plans revenge. If he carries it through, it will be a major mistake, wrong before God and losing him respect with ordinary people.

Instead of appreciating the protection that David gave his servants, and lacking a generous heart, Nabal refuses to help the 'outlaw' band. It would be customary at a time of festivity like sheep-shearing for the rich to share with the poor, but Nabal is cold-hearted. David's kindness towards the shepherds deserves a better response but Nabal is foolish and arrogant.

David for his part, wearied by living hand-to-mouth in the wilderness, is stressed by the constant threat to his life. Maybe the responsibility of feeding his men is getting to him. Moments of intense pressure can cause tempers to

fray and judgement to become cloudy. Even good people have a breaking point.

The day is saved by Abigail's gentle spiritual wisdom. She diffuses the situation by kindly giving David's men the supplies they need.

'Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered ... and give it to men coming from who knows where?'

1 Samuel 25:11

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord, help me to be more self-aware, to recognise when I am being foolish or over-reacting because I am stressed. Make me more generous and kinder in my response towards others, and in the way I steward my resources. Amen.'

On level ground

PREPARE

This seems an appropriate psalm to read as we think about joining with others in worship today. Pray for all involved in leading services or teaching children, and for responsive congregations.

READ

Psalm 26

EXPLORE

If someone has their feet on the ground it usually means that they are realistic, steady and secure within themselves.

David writes as one who is standing secure in God.

As he remembers the past (vs 1–3) it is with the joy of knowing he is loved by God, and living in reliance on a God who is faithful in every way. He has sought to live a blameless life and to trust God, so he welcomes God's scrutiny. This doesn't mean he is faultless, but simply sincere.

Then he considers the present (vs 4–7) and his choice not to mingle with those who would lead him astray or undermine his faith. Rather, his greatest joy is to be with those who worship God, to sing praises and to hear testimony of the goodness of God.

Finally, he anticipates the future (vs 8–11), knowing that evil men are out to get him

and to bring him down. His cry is that God will deliver him so he may again take his place among the worshipping congregation. That is where he loves to be.

**My feet stand on level ground;
in the great congregation I
will praise the LORD.**

Psalm 26:12

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord, today I choose to plant my feet on the firm foundation of your Word and who I am in Christ – loved, accepted, forgiven, cleansed and righteous in your sight. May my praise flow freely today in worship of you. Amen.'

Monday 16 February

1 Samuel 25:23–44

Beautiful wisdom

PREPARE

Who might you meet today? Pray that you will bring God's presence into every interaction you have, planned and unplanned, and that your words and actions will be a blessing to those you encounter.

READ

1 Samuel 25:23–44

EXPLORE

Abigail is described as being 'intelligent and beautiful' (v 3), and her wisdom and spiritual insight shine through in sharp contrast to both her husband Nabal and the would-be king, David.

It seems her meeting with David and his men is orchestrated by God, as David recognises (v 32). Her humble approach and admission of her husband's folly in rejecting David's men, plus the generous gift of supplies, tempers David's anger and wins his attention.

Encouragingly, she shares with prophetic insight words of great encouragement. She sees that David will be established as king (v 28) and that he will be saved from his enemies because God is with him (v 29). Further, every promise God has made to David will be fulfilled (v 30), and his conscience will be clear because he didn't shed needless blood in taking vengeance on Nabal (v 31). All she asks

is that when God gives David success he will remember her.

David could never have expected such affirmation from such an unlikely source. No wonder he recognises this as a God-moment and responds with a blessing on Abigail for her good judgement.

'The LORD your God will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my lord, because you fight the LORD's battles, and no wrongdoing will be found in you as long as you live.'

1 Samuel 25:28

RESPOND

Ask God to give you wisdom, insight and words of encouragement. Then share what he gives you.

A second escape for Saul

PREPARE

Pray today that you may be able to see God at work in the circumstances of your life. Things may not be going the way you expect, but God is still in control.

READ

1 Samuel 26:1-25

EXPLORE

This story is similar to that recorded in 1 Samuel 24, yet the differences suggest it is a separate incident, another wake-up call for the beleaguered King Saul. Even with 3,000 of his best troops, he cannot capture David. He is embarrassed to discover that David again had the opportunity to kill him, yet chose to spare his life.

For a brief moment, Saul is contrite and admits his foolishness, but as before his sorrow is shallow and means nothing (v 21). David, on the other hand, is now tiring of the game of cat-and-mouse and is ready to move outside the borders of Israel in search of peace (27:1, as we will see tomorrow).

Throughout all this David maintains his innocence and integrity (v 18). He has not been treacherous and is not seeking to undermine the king, but the malicious lies of others are very wearing. He knows he must bide God's time, and that one

day God's purpose will come to pass. Meanwhile, life on the run is exhausting and he is desperate for respite, even if that means leaving his homeland. It is a lesson in patience and perseverance, never easy in a world demanding instant gratification.

'The LORD rewards everyone for their righteousness and faithfulness. The LORD gave you into my hands today, but I would not lay a hand on the LORD's anointed.'

1 Samuel 26:23

RESPOND

Why do we find it so hard to wait for God's timing? Are there promises still unfulfilled in your life? Ask for grace to keep trusting in God's good plan for you.

Wednesday 18 February

1 Samuel 27:1 – 28:2

David in exile

PREPARE

Pray today for those who live in exile, cut off from their own culture, language and family. How might it feel to be a refugee or asylum seeker? Pray for cross-cultural workers making Jesus known in other lands.

READ

1 Samuel 27:1 – 28:2

EXPLORE

After being constantly on the run, living in fear for his life, David chooses now to live in exile, across the border with the Philistines. It means Saul no longer searches for him, but also that he has to adjust to living in another culture with its foreign gods, and being outside the land he loves. This is no easy matter for David, his men and their families.

David had been with Achish once before (1 Samuel 21:10–15) and that had not worked out well. Now, as an established leader with his own army and as someone at odds with King Saul, he is welcomed on a different basis. He and his men are treated like mercenaries and given Ziklag as their base, no doubt on the understanding that they will work against Israel.

Is this God's will for David? Perhaps not. It causes him to behave deceitfully

again, pretending to raid Israel when in fact he is fighting with Amalekites and others. Yet God is still with him, for God can weave even our mistakes and wrong turns into his overall plan for our lives.

David lived in Philistine territory for a year and four months.

1 Samuel 27:7

RESPOND

Have there been times when you have made poor choices or gone astray? Remember, even our mistakes cannot negate God's purpose for our lives. Ask God to be with you, wherever you find yourself today.

Providence

PREPARE

Pray today that God will guide your steps, whether you are conscious of it or not. Ask that you may be in the centre of his will in all you do.

READ

1 Samuel 29:1-11

EXPLORE

Providence is the belief that God is guiding our lives, whether we are aware of it or not, weaving whatever happens to us into his overall good purpose for us. This truth has given comfort to God's people throughout the generations, and here we see providence at work in the life of David.

As the Philistines prepare to do battle with Israel once again, David faces a dilemma. Can he fight against his own people? If he does not join Achish's men his cover will be blown and he may well perish, yet he cannot betray his own people. What should he do?

Happily for David, God's hand is upon his life. When the Philistine commanders see David and his men are with them, they fear the Hebrews will turn against them in the battle and so refuse to let them join their army. Achish is convinced of David's loyalty, but reluctantly agrees to

send them back to their base in Ziklag. Thus, the dilemma is solved for David by God's intervention. He will not have to fight against his own people. What a relief that must have been.

So David and his men got up early in the morning to go back to the land of the Philistines, and the Philistines went up to Jezreel.

1 Samuel 29:11

RESPOND

Providence is best seen with hindsight. As you look back over your life, can you see examples of how God orchestrated events for your good? Let this remind you that you can trust him in your present challenges too.

Friday 20 February

1 Samuel 30:1-25

Finding strength in grief

PREPARE

Pray today for those grieving the loss of a loved one – it is a pain like no other and can easily overwhelm us. Ask God to comfort with his presence those who mourn.

READ

1 Samuel 30:1-25

EXPLORE

The destruction of Ziklag and the capture of their loved ones by the Amalekites understandably hits David and his men very hard. Waves of grief at such a tragic loss overwhelm them. Battle-hardened warriors are reduced to tears and exhausted by their weeping, David included.

Grief often involves anger and the need for someone to blame. David becomes the focus of the men's rage and they blame him for the disaster. He has his own grief to deal with, yet he manages to find strength from God to lead them through this tragedy.

As a priority, David seeks the counsel of the priest Abiathar and discerns that he should plan a rescue mission. Providentially they capture an Egyptian slave who leads them to the Amalekite camp where they release the hostages and recover their stolen property.

Notice the magnanimity of David towards the Egyptian (vs 11,12), those too weak to join them in the fight (vs 21-25), and those who had supported him in his wilderness years (vs 26-31). His success he attributes to God, for this is really the Lord's victory. Gratitude and generosity belong together.

David was greatly distressed because the men were thinking of stoning him ... But David found strength in the LORD his God.

1 Samuel 30:6

RESPOND

How has grief affected your life? If you are grieving now, where can you find the support you need? Who might you talk to? Remember, grief is better expressed than repressed.

Israel defeated

PREPARE

Be still and quiet before God. Settle your heart in his presence. Use the words of Samuel as your prayer: 'Speak, for your servant is listening' (1 Samuel 3:10).

READ

1 Samuel 31:1-13

EXPLORE

Defeat is never easy to take, and the battle of Gilboa is a dark day in the history of Israel. Not only are Saul and his sons dead but the Philistines have occupied cities abandoned by the Israelites. At the end of Saul's life, Israel is weaker and more vulnerable than before.

We might conclude that the monarchy has been a failure, and certainly there is an important lesson for Israel to learn: the monarchy would never by itself save Israel. The essential thing is to have the right king, who fears God and will himself be subject to God, the true King of Israel. The way is opened up for David to be that person, but it will still be some years before he is recognised as king over all Israel.

Saul's life ends tragically, and his story is a sad one, beginning well yet ending in humiliating defeat. That does not mean his reign has been completely bad, and

he is clearly still honoured by those who knew him in his early days, like the men of Jabesh Gilead who risk their own lives to give him a decent burial.

When the Israelites along the valley and those across the Jordan saw that the Israelite army had fled and that Saul and his sons had died, they abandoned their towns and fled. And the Philistines came and occupied them.

1 Samuel 31:7

RESPOND

What lessons can we learn from Saul's life? How can we ensure we not only start well, but finish well?

Sunday 22 February

Psalm 27

A contemplative's psalm

PREPARE

Hopefully you can join others today for worship or connect online. Make David's prayer your own as you come before God to delight yourself in him. Give him your full attention.

READ

Psalm 27

EXPLORE

We don't normally think of David as a contemplative, yet this warrior had a poet's heart, as we see in this psalm, and was a great lover of God. It seems to come from a more settled period in his life, yet the memory of being besieged and under threat is still with him (vs 2,3).

Contemplation has been described as the act of loving attention, the gaze of the soul upon God. Essentially it is about knowing we are loved by God and loving him in return. The spiritual hunger in David's soul is expressed in this longing for intimacy with God, to know him more deeply and to be fully known in return.

The busy and noisy world in which we live is a constant threat to a deeper life in God, but we must establish this place of quiet rest if we are to be fruitful and effective in our service. It is as we abide in the vine that we can bear much

fruit (John 15:5). We must find ways to incorporate times of stillness and silence into our lives so we can grow closer to God.

One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.

Psalm 27:4

RESPOND

Meditate on verse 8: 'My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek.' Ask God to give you a hunger for him, and then to satisfy it.

God's plan

About the writer **Cath Butler**



Cath enjoys working as a peripatetic music tutor, overseeing worship at her local church, and offering spiritual direction. 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.

It happened just as Jesus had said it would: from their beginnings in Jerusalem, the apostles and their associates soon found themselves birthing churches 'in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). By the end of chapter 12, where we join the story, Luke has brought his account to a significant mid-point. He has told how Jewish leaders at every level rejected Jesus, refused to recognise him as God's chosen saviour and tried to crush the fledgling church. But far from being squashed, the church stepped into the next stage of its growth with the first of Paul's missionary journeys (chs 13,14).

More like a highlights reel than a detailed report, Luke's narrative depicts key events in this expansion: examples of their ministry approach, the opposition they met and the messages they gave, not to mention some of the complex issues that arose. Through it all, the heartbeat of God's promise throbs loud and clear: the Gentiles were always meant to be included in his kingdom. His blessing, coming through his chosen people, was always intended for every nation (Genesis 12). That's the strong and certain pulse of these chapters: God's ages-old plan that we're called to partner with in the present, the unimaginably wide unfolding of his grace that is as much for us as for others, and the bigger picture that our – sometimes puzzling – piece is part of.

Monday 23 February

Acts 12:25 – 13:12

Calling and confrontation

PREPARE

Pray: 'Thank you, God, for how your Spirit is at work in me and in those around me to accomplish your purposes.'

READ

Acts 12:25 – 13:12

EXPLORE

Perhaps it started out like any of their gatherings – a group of Antiochian church leaders, accustomed to listening to God, engaging in their regular rhythms of worship and fasting. What did they expect to hear? What do you expect to happen when you worship God? Bubbling up from this place of prayer came the call (13:2): Barnabas and Saul, recently returned from a famine relief journey to Jerusalem (12:25; 11:27–30), were to be sent out again. As valued members of a multicultural team (13:1), they would be missed, yet the Spirit had spoken, so the church united itself with God's purpose prayerfully and without delay.

In Cyprus, the two missionaries' impact brought them to the attention of the Roman governor, and through his summons they find themselves facing opposition (13:8). Humanly speaking, Bar-Jesus was likely afraid of losing his profitable position. Spiritually, both Luke's record and Paul's response underline the

darker enemy activity influencing him. How comfortable are we with the thought of our calling (generic and specific) leading us into spiritual confrontation? In this overt clash between magic and mission, divine judgement substantiates the gospel and belief follows. Whatever opposition we face, we can be confident of the Spirit's work within both us and those God is bringing to himself.

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'

Acts 13:2

RESPOND

Make time for a conversation with a friend about your calling and theirs, praying for each other.

Bible in a year: Leviticus 21,22; Acts 11

The 'long' in 'longing'

PREPARE

Bring to mind something you are waiting on God for. Offer him your feelings about it.

READ

Acts 13:13-25

EXPLORE

One man down by the time they reach Pisidian Antioch (v 13), Paul and Barnabas continue their pattern of starting their ministry in the Jewish synagogue (v 14). The custom of inviting a visiting rabbi to speak gives a natural opportunity, and Paul's message is an example of their approach among Jews and Jewish proselytes (v 16).

Speaking into a centuries-old longing for God to send his promised saviour and enable his chosen people to fulfil their purpose, Paul surveys and summarises Israel's history. His focus is on God's powerful, patient and progressive provision of land and then leaders for his people, culminating in an obedient king 'after my own heart' (v 22) – one who can show more clearly what they are waiting for. Against this familiar backdrop, Paul introduces Jesus: fulfilment of their treasured hope, the coming one whom everything else (including John the

Baptist) prepared for and pointed to. What they have longed for is here.

Why did – why does – God wait so long to fulfil his promises? When the seeming slowness of his work disappoints our desires, it can leave us wrestling with his timing. But even when we don't see or understand it, God is moving, always at work to realise his long-patient purposes (see 2 Peter 3:9).

'From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Saviour Jesus, as he promised.'

Acts 13:23

RESPOND

Think of a friend who doesn't yet know Jesus. What is their deepest longing? How might God be preparing them for its fulfilment? What pointers might they recognise? Pray for them.

Wednesday 25 February

Acts 13:26–43

Don't miss it!

PREPARE

Journal about or reflect on a time you felt you could never make amends for a mistake you made.

READ

Acts 13:26–43

EXPLORE

Now Paul dives into the meat of his message, showing how the death and resurrection of Jesus started the surprising new chapter of the story his Jewish audience would know inside out. His rabbinic training surfaces in the skilful weaving-in of scriptures that guide our line of sight from David to the resurrection. The divine sonship of God's Messiah (v 33), whose body would not decay (vs 35–37), and the availability of his enduring, faithfully covenanted love (v 34) are fulfilled in Jesus. Significant undertones resonate from each citation: the opposing of God's anointed by earthly rulers, the encompassing of all nations in the Messiah's glorious reign and the urgency of recognising his sovereignty and responding to his mercy – a theme Paul drives home in his final reference (v 41).

But the focal point is the new freedom available to us in God's forgiveness

(vs 38,39). No longer need we strive to fulfil the requirements of rules never intended to make or keep us right with him. No farther need we carry sin's burden of guilt and shame. No more futile self-justification; no more flinching at accusation. Instead, belief is the byway into the promised new work God is doing for his chosen people, and through them for the nations. No wonder Paul doesn't want anyone to miss it!

'Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin.'

Acts 13:39

RESPOND

Pray: 'Thank you, Jesus, for the freedom of forgiveness your death and resurrection welcome me into. Please help me to enter it fully. Amen.'

Pivot point

PREPARE

Use a breath prayer (such as the Jesus Prayer: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner’) to quiet yourself in God’s presence.

READ

Acts 13:44–52

EXPLORE

As crowds from the predominantly Gentile city gather at the synagogue the following week, a righteous zeal for God and his Law flares from the Jewish leaders. They turn against the two apostles, precipitating a bold redirection of their ministry. It’s a pattern we see repeated in Acts: the gospel largely rejected by Jewish communities yet embraced by Gentiles.

In expressing their decision to turn from ministry among God’s people to those deemed pagans, Paul and Barnabas embody the answer to a prayer of the fledgling church (4:29). What is it that enables them to pivot so boldly in the face of rejection? First, there’s the scriptural support of Isaiah 49, indicating that God’s anointed won’t just restore the tribes of Israel but will reach the ends of the earth with salvation (v 47). Then there’s the way Paul and Barnabas appropriate these verses, the Messiah’s ministry, for

themselves. Do we think of ourselves as fulfilling the work that Jesus started? Not least, there’s the undeniable evidence of God’s hand in it all: he is at work in those who are his (v 48) and his Word is at work in the world (v 49). Trusting in these truths we, like the disciples, can tread onwards with Spirit-filled joy.

Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: ‘We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it ... we now turn to the Gentiles.’

Acts 13:46

RESPOND

Write a letter to God about your ‘ministry’. Ask for the boldness to see it as he does, and the joy-giving grace of seeing his hand even in setbacks.

Friday 27 February

Acts 14:1-7

Modus operandi

PREPARE

Pray: 'Jesus, I'm amazed that I get to play a part in your work in the world. Please show me more of what that means.'

READ

Acts 14:1-7

EXPLORE

These verses present us with one of Luke's characteristic summaries. As the work in Iconium unfolds in much the same way it has in previous locations, there is no need to recount it in detail. One difference is a serious threat arising from leaders on all sides (v 5), so Paul and Barnabas move on to minister in another area (vs 6,7). Given a few sentences, I wonder how we would describe the everyday events of our own ministry, whatever we understand it to be.

Much more than a narrative device, this overview offers insights we can live from. We see the value of a strategy for sharing Jesus (and develop one), we recognise the reality of opposition (and cultivate resilience), and we are encouraged to continue, wherever events carry us. Closed doors may be nudges into a new area. Above all, we are reminded that this is for God, and that the centrepiece is the story of his grace, which he delights to prove

in marvellous ways. Doesn't that stir something in you? We may not be pioneering first-century missionaries, but there are new frontiers in every neighbourhood, opportunities for boldness in every office and countless wonderful ways God wants to reveal more of his person and power to or through us each day.

So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders.

Acts 14:3

RESPOND

Use the lyrics of Charles Wesley's hymn 'Forth in Thy Name, O Lord, I Go'* as a starting point for prayer.

*1749

A ‘myth-understanding’

PREPARE

Take a few moments to freely receive and rest in the knowledge of God’s pleasure in you.

READ

Acts 14:8-20

EXPLORE

In the seaside city where I live, there’s a myth about some sixth-century monks catching a mermaid in their fishing nets. To folk here this is no more than fable. But in Lystra, a first-century pagan city, local legend affected how the activities of Paul and Barnabas were interpreted. A story told of two Greek gods, Zeus and Hermes, visiting the area in human form. Unrecognised and unwelcome, they meted out disaster. With this lingering in their collective consciousness, and eager to avoid a repeat reprimand, the Lystrans’ response to the lame man’s healing is understandable (v 11).

Once the language barrier has been broken and the two men realise the misunderstanding, their response is clear, strong and compassionate. Starting with the present situation, and using appropriate reference points, Paul turns their worship towards one true and living God. This God, far from needing to be placated like other deities, has satisfied

their needs for sustenance and pleasure, revealing himself through this provision. What a relief, for anyone enslaved to the dictates of an idol, to know that the only God there is actively desires our good. Although stepping out of existing systems can be hard (v 18), there is such hope in believing that God continues to free us from the chains of false narratives today!

‘Friends, why are you doing this? ... We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God ...’

Acts 14:15

RESPOND

What frameworks do your friends try to fit Jesus into? Ask him for compassion and clarity as you interact with them.

Sunday 1 March

Psalm 28

A heart after God's

PREPARE

Spend a few minutes looking at a picture, aware of God's presence with you. Pay attention to the feelings surfacing and offer them to him.

READ

Psalm 28

EXPLORE

Just as a picture's frame and mount guide our gaze, aiding our appreciation, so the opening and closing sections of this psalm help us understand its passionate cry. Despite his desperate situation, David focuses on God: Rock and responder (v 1), strength, protection, salvation and shepherd (vs 8,9). He brings his requests to one who is faithful, engaged and able, one who keeps and carries those in his care. In prayer we entrust our needs and desires to God, whose character can safely hold and handle the humanness of our hearts – what a comfort! David's plea for mercy sets the tone of the psalm (vs 2,6); his primary motivation is help and justice personally (v 3), rather than harm for his adversaries.

Knowing that this prayer is bounded by God's character and born of hope in his mercy, we come to the painting in the centre. Here, David leaves his appeal for justice in God's hands, recognising that

human will and work set against God's will and work cannot stand (vs 4,5). Full of the complex colours of strong emotions, Psalm 28 is a picture of how, as those 'after [God's] own heart' (Acts 13:22), we can embody justice as well as mercy, whatever we face.

Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them for ever.

Psalm 28:9

RESPOND

Which aspects of God's heart do you find it easy to emulate? Which are uncomfortable? Notice how you respond in different situations this week and ask God to shape your heart after his.

‘Come on in...’

PREPARE

Pray: ‘God, help me to recognise how you are inviting me and others into more of your kingdom today, even in unexpected ways. Amen.’

READ

Acts 14:21-28

EXPLORE

‘... The water’s lovely!’ So say my outdoor swimming friends. Apparently it really is good for you, but I am yet to be tempted out of my warm winter jacket. As Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch via the recently planted churches, their encouragement doesn’t ignore the cold reality of the hardships these new Christians could expect. In choosing the long route home, through cities that had hindered them, they demonstrate the value of ongoing relationship (even in itinerant ministry) and local leadership, and embody their exhortations. How might it change our approach if we saw problems as a pathway towards God?

‘... The door’s open!’ Back among their sending community, Paul and Barnabas share stories of God’s work, and this is the heart of what they celebrate together. God, in his grace, has thrown wide his heavenly gates to welcome people of every nation into his family, just as was

promised. Those considered outsiders but always on the invite list can come in, freely. God has taken his messengers into new territory. He has opened a door for the Gentiles – and they have entered. Divine initiative in partnership with human response has launched the early church into the final phase of her outward-rippling, Spirit-empowered role (Acts 1:8).

... they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

Acts 14:27

RESPOND

Journal about a hardship you are facing or a friend who doesn’t yet know Jesus. What doors of faith might God be opening for you?

Tuesday 3 March

Acts 15:1–11

The mirror of grace

PREPARE

Listen to your favourite version of the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’.

.....

READ

Acts 15:1–11

EXPLORE

Expansion brings complexity; change carries tension; new developments raise new questions. For the early church, the inclusion of the Gentiles in the family of faith means all of this. It’s hard for us to imagine just how seismic a shift this passage documents. Circumcision had been the mark of membership of God’s people from the beginning (Genesis 17) – why stop now? It is a matter that needs to be discussed and decided at the highest levels, so, missing no opportunity to encourage church communities en route, Paul and Barnabas are on the road again.

At the Council in Jerusalem (around AD 48–49), Peter’s experience with the family of Cornelius (Acts 10,11) comes into focus. It was then that God took the initiative in bringing Gentiles to saving faith, confirming his work in their hearts by pouring out his Spirit. If God requires no more than that, why should we?

Let’s not miss the mirror Peter holds up too: this saving grace is for us, as well as them, as he reminds the hardliners (v 11). When grace offends us, perhaps it is reflecting our own return to religious rules, to wearying self-effort, and inviting us into the sweetness of its freely given rest all over again.

‘No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.’

Acts 15:11

RESPOND

Ask the Holy Spirit to show you what you are tempted to add to grace, for yourself or others. Allow yourself to feel the weight of those things, then imagine Jesus lifting them off you, leaving only his light and easy yoke (Matthew 11:30).

Part of a bigger picture

PREPARE

Hold up to God a decision you are facing and ask for his perspective.

READ

Acts 15:12–21

EXPLORE

Here comes the crunch point: stories showcasing God's work among the Gentiles have been shared with the rapt gathering, and now James gets up to speak. Brother of Jesus and a senior leader in the young church at Jerusalem, the decision seems to fall to him. His suggestion is bookended by two panoramic perspectives: the prophetic voice of scripture (vs 15–18) and the priority of mission (v 21). In reminding his listeners that the promise has always been meant to widen out to include the Gentiles, he is persuading them that they are part of a bigger picture.

From that standpoint, twin principles emerge: first, that no unnecessary burdens be added to the belief of Gentile converts (eg circumcision); and secondly, that no unnecessary barriers to faith be erected for Jews (eg Gentile converts continuing with offensive pagan practices). So James

recommends a 'third way' for Gentile engagement with Mosaic Law – one that is neither all nor nothing, and one guided by a vision just as relevant today. No unnecessary burdens for believers because all are welcomed into God's family by grace; no unnecessary barriers to belief because there are many still to receive his grace. Salvation's brushstrokes, encompassing every people group, paint a big, big picture. May we learn to live as part of it.

'For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.'

Acts 15:21

RESPOND

Draw a picture and place yourself within it as a way of reflecting on and responding to today's passage.

Thursday 5 March

Acts 15:22–29

Acting like ambassadors

PREPARE

Pause and bring yourself to God now, allowing him to welcome you just as you are.

READ

Acts 15:22–29

EXPLORE

With the decision made, the next step is to communicate it. A letter is drafted, and trusted messengers chosen to deliver it and vouch for its contents (an important consideration in a context that values spoken testimony more highly than the written word, which can be tampered with). Its greeting is warm, its apology heartfelt, its inspiration and conclusion clear. Every line overflows with love – for the Gentile converts regarded as ‘brothers’, as well as for their ‘dear friends’ Barnabas and Paul. From the outset it is obvious that the new Christians are part of the family.

Building on the foundation of faith-based salvation, the letter can be summarised as saying, ‘You needn’t become Jewish to join God’s people, but you’re no longer typical Gentiles.’ This is the beauty of grace: we come as we are, but we don’t stay as we are. We are changed. The new life we

have entered affects our lifestyle. Our acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord leads to an understanding that we are his ambassadors, and that affects our actions. This is what the letter’s request is all about: living as the royal servants that we are – servants of God, of all his people and of his global promises and purposes.

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements.

Acts 15:28

RESPOND

Ask Jesus to highlight one aspect of your life that honours him, and one he’d like to transform through his grace and power. Be sensitive to his nudges this week.

Mind the gap

PREPARE

Call to mind a conflict – personal, local or global – and pray for God's redemptive mercy to bring good from it.

READ

Acts 15:30–41

EXPLORE

Set against a tranquil backdrop of much glad encouragement comes the storm of a 'sharp disagreement'. It is messy – there's no getting around it, and we can be grateful that Luke doesn't brush this episode in the life of the early church under the carpet. His inclusion of the incident serves as a caution by underlining the seriousness of the sad event. As well, it reminds us that God's redemptive power reaches to the lowest scenes in our stories and lifts new life from them. In this case, the planned single ministry journey turns into two trips and the three travellers become four, all of whom continue with lives of fruitful service.

This painful picture of disagreement between Christian colleagues also points us to the reality of relational gaps and the priority of filling those with trust. What might have happened if Paul and Barnabas had approached the conflict

with well-founded confidence in each other's heart and discernment? They may still have chosen different courses and co-workers, only in a more loving and peaceful manner. Whether the gaps we experience emerge in relationships with Christian family, friends or fellow workers, filling those with wise trust – including in God's redemptive power to bring good – can help us to navigate the squall.

They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.

Acts 15:39

RESPOND

Pray: 'Father, I want to foster relationships that honour you. Please help me to build bridges of trust where I experience a gap. Amen.'

Saturday 7 March

Acts 16:1–10

Obstacle or opportunity?

PREPARE

Journal about the different ways God has guided you in the past.

READ

Acts 16:1–10

EXPLORE

Returning with Paul to Lystra, we find that a recent convert, Timothy, has blossomed into a highly regarded Christ-follower. This young man was to become as precious as a son to Paul for the devoted way he served (Philippians 2:19–24). But at this point there is a problem: the child of a mixed marriage, Timothy is not circumcised. His maternal heritage makes him Jewish, yet the omission (due to his father's ethnicity, known in the region) of this ritual obedience would be an obstacle to his ministry among Jews. So Timothy takes on the custom, not as an obligation required for salvation, but to open opportunities to serve and strengthen the church.

Journeying onwards, the companions' wandering is an encouragement to any of us who have felt like we are stumbling around in the dark, wondering which way to go. We don't know how the Spirit restrained them (vs 6,7), but a 'no' is never

easy to hear, especially when no other option is offered. How do you respond when God says no? For the disciples, these Spirit-given restrictions don't mean a full stop. Instead, they attempt alternatives while awaiting positive guidance and, eventually, the closed doors lead to one startlingly wide open (v 9). Like them, let's keep going, trusting God to weave every apparent dead end into the textured tapestry of his direction.

... Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'

Acts 16:9

RESPOND

When you encounter an obstacle this week, ask God for the grace to see the opportunity it hides.

Loud and clear

PREPARE

Remember how God has spoken to you before – tell him about and thank him for what his voice means to you.

READ

Psalm 29

EXPLORE

From the outset, Psalm 29 catches us up into its inescapable energy with its expansive sounds of angelic praise and the majestic swirling of a mighty thunderstorm. Inspired by experiencing this physical storm, the human writer calls the heavenly creatures to worship, insisting that God's glory, strength, splendour and holiness be declared and rightly responded to. Following the path of the storm across the land, the psalmist's focus is unavoidably on the voice of the Lord. Take a moment to read verses 3–9 again, noticing what they tell us about God's voice. Do you hear the echo of Genesis 1:2 in verse 3? How beautiful, that even in the storm, God's creative power is present.

As the storm moves from north to south, so the psalm shifts from worship in heaven to that of God's people on earth. Awestruck praise arises from those aware that the consuming strength

of the created storm is only a dim reflection of its Creator (v 9). But this Creator also rules over his creation, and that is a source of hope and comfort. Every storm we face is subject to his permissions and servant of his purposes, and the flood (v 10) reminds us that he is faithful to his people and the promises he has given us. This is the solid ground our strength and peace stand on.

The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.

Psalm 29:3

RESPOND

Why not take a walk this week, asking God to reveal more of himself to you through his creation?

Coming back to fellowship

At the time Isaiah was writing, the nation of Israel had divided into two kingdoms. Ten tribes made up the northern kingdom, and are often called Israel or Jacob in scripture. Their capital was Samaria. The remaining two tribes formed the southern kingdom, Judah. Their capital was Jerusalem.

Throughout the book of Isaiah, God sometimes addresses one of these kingdoms and sometimes the other. The earlier chapters have contained many

expressions of God's anger at his people's disobedience and idolatry. God has been warning them of the punishment he will send on them, often at the hands of their enemies. But he has also been assuring both kingdoms of his love, and giving them hope for the future.

These themes continue in the chapters we are looking at. Israel, in particular, was physically far from God, as well as spiritually distant. These ten tribes were more scattered than Judah and, importantly, were separated from Jerusalem and the temple. Their rebellion had removed them from the place associated with God's presence, and the ability to make the temple sacrifices necessary to receive cleansing from their sins.

But all was not lost. One of the key themes of these chapters is God's plan to bring the faithful remnant of his people back into fellowship with himself. And the plan includes us! This plan will finally be fulfilled when we join with the redeemed from all ages to worship God in the new Jerusalem. These promises are for us; this hope is ours.

About the writer **Jennie Hart**



Jennie Hart is a freelance writer, editor and speaker. Her first book, *If Only* (written as Jennie Pollock), looks at how we can find contentment in challenging circumstances. Now married, Jennie is loving her new role and location.

Victory assured

PREPARE

Pray: 'Father, help me to tune out all the distractions around me as I tune in to your Word. Amen.'

READ

Isaiah 14:1-17

EXPLORE

In Isaiah 8:12 God's people were told not to fear what the people around them feared, but to fear God. There was no promise of protection from harm, simply a call to raise their eyes and see the bigger picture. Israel's enemies would conquer them. God's people would be oppressed and experience hardship and suffering. However, that would not be the end of the story.

Today's passage reminds Israel that God's ultimate victory is assured. Even mighty empires like Babylon would not last for ever. God would restore his scattered people to the Promised Land. What's more, he would add to their number, bringing in those who loved him from the other nations. Outsiders would not always be enemies, but would come to love and worship God too.

These prophecies are relevant for us as well as for the people of the time. God's character and nature have not changed.

We can be confident that, whatever we are facing, it is not outside God's control. We will one day see the world from God's perspective, and will have the same reaction Israel has here: 'Is that really what we were so afraid of?'

The LORD will have compassion on Jacob; once again he will choose Israel and will settle them in their own land. Foreigners will join them and unite with the descendants of Jacob.

Isaiah 14:1

RESPOND

Pray: 'Thank you for your Word that reminds us you are in control. Help me to wait faithfully for the day of your final victory. Amen.'

Tuesday 10 March

Isaiah 22:1-14

Seeking strength

PREPARE

Pray: 'Father, help me to hear from you and grow in my understanding of you as I read your Word today. Amen.'

READ

Isaiah 22:1-14

EXPLORE

The last verse of today's reading speaks of a terrible sin the people of Judah have committed. What is this sin?

We begin to see hints of it from verse 8 onwards. Jerusalem has been attacked – perhaps Isaiah is prophetically foreseeing the destruction of the city in King Zedekiah's day (see 2 Kings 25) – and the people are taking steps to defend themselves and to store drinking water in case of a siege. What is wrong with this?

The clue comes in verse 11. They made all their own plans, to protect themselves, but they forgot to look to God. All through their history he had been giving them victory in battle, even against overwhelming odds. Yet they didn't seek him in this crisis, but relied on their own strength and ingenuity.

This breaks God's heart. He longs for his people to look to him in times of need. He has not changed and neither have we. We

still try to live independently of him, only crying out when things are desperate. Let us hear his heart cry, echoing down the ages, and choose to rely on him, even when we think we don't need to.

You built a reservoir between the two walls for the water of the Old Pool, but you did not look to the One who made it, or have regard for the One who planned it long ago.

Isaiah 22:11

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord Jesus, you taught us to ask our Father even for our daily bread. Please help me remember how deeply dependent I am on you for everything, and to seek your help quickly in times of need. Amen.'

A global eco-disaster

PREPARE

Take a look outside your window. Now turn your gaze to the One who made what you saw – rain, sun, moon, stars, birds, trees, building materials... he made them all.

READ

Isaiah 24:1-13

EXPLORE

There is lots of bad news in today's prophecy. And this time it is not a warning to a particular nation, but to the whole world.

We can see much of this devastation unfolding before our eyes as we look around the world – droughts and floods, forest fires and crop failures, natural disasters and man-made deforestation. There is much concern for the environment, and we are urged to do our bit by reducing our consumption of energy and resources, but this passage lifts the curtain to show us the rest of the story.

The destruction of the earth is a consequence of humanity's sin, not just in direct ways like our greed and selfishness, but in general. Verses 5 and 6 make it clear that the earth's defilement is a result of humanity breaking the covenant we have with God. And this curse is brought about by his hand, under his control (v 1).

This doesn't mean that we can treat creation irresponsibly, but our biggest problem will not be solved by recycling more or driving less. Our biggest problem is sin, and passages like this should cause us to recognise that and repent.

The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant.

Isaiah 24:5

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord, I see the effects of the curse of sin all around me. Help me to recognise them for what they are and to respond in the way in which you call me. Amen.'

Thursday 12 March

Isaiah 24:14–23

A glory-worthy God

PREPARE

As you settle your heart and mind to read God's Word, picture his throne room: the gold, jewels and rich fabrics; the angels worshipping. Drink in the glorious sight.

READ

Isaiah 24:14–23

EXPLORE

After yesterday's terrible images of the devastation brought on the earth as a result of our sin, today's passage starts with a sharp change of tone. It is unclear who verse 14 refers to – perhaps to the 'gleanings' of the grape harvest of verse 13. A grapevine is a common image of God's people throughout the Bible, so these 'gleanings' could be the remnant of faithful followers of God mentioned elsewhere in Isaiah.

The point is that, when we understand the earth's condition correctly, we will respond by giving glory to God. Even the greatest destruction and devastation cannot stop him from being worthy of praise. His punishments are just. All his ways are good.

It is hard for us to get our heads around. We naturally assume he will be glorified when everything is going right, not amid suffering and trouble. Yet as Jesus told the Pharisees on Palm Sunday, if his

people do not glorify him, the rocks and stones themselves will sing his praises (Luke 19:37–40).

Yet at the end of time he will rule – with great glory – in the sight of all people. Hallelujah!

**The moon will be dismayed,
the sun ashamed; for the
LORD Almighty will reign on
Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
and before its elders – with
great glory.**

Isaiah 24:23

RESPOND

Whatever your circumstances today, remember that God is still worthy of praise. Praise him for his righteousness, justice, holiness and all his other glorious attributes.

A bountiful banquet

PREPARE

There is good news in today's reading. Are you ready for it? Come to the passage with anticipation to hear what God will do.

READ

Isaiah 25:1-12

EXPLORE

A couple of days ago we were given a glimpse of the world as it is under the curse of sin, and throughout these chapters we have seen how God deals with his enemies. In today's chapter we begin to see the hope offered to those who trust in God.

First, Isaiah reminds us that, amid turmoil, God is a refuge for the poor and needy. He gives them shelter from the storms and shade in the heat. In other words, he offers protection to those who come to him in need. (Think back to chapter 22, where we saw his anger burning against those who tried to be self-sufficient.)

Then we learn that one day God will prepare a great feast for all his people. This will be the most delicious food we have ever eaten – plentiful, nourishing and cooked to perfection. In part, this will be a celebration that sin and death

are no more. However, it will also simply be the Lord lavishing good things upon us because that is his nature. He gives us all these good things because he is good. How easy it will be to praise him on that day.

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines.

Isaiah 25:6

RESPOND

What speaks to you most from this passage? Which part do you most long for? Praise him now in the knowledge that he will do it at just the right time.

Saturday 14 March

Isaiah 26:1-21

Secure and steadfast

PREPARE

We trust so many things without thinking – trusting that a chair will hold our weight, perhaps, or that gravity will keep working. Today we are looking at choosing to trust when it's not so easy.

READ

Isaiah 26:1-21

EXPLORE

Trust is an essential part of life – especially life in community with others. Recent years have shaken our trust in institutions – banks, pension providers, holiday companies and more have collapsed, often taking our money and hopes with them. It can be hard to know who or what we can trust. Isaiah speaks into the anxiety this can create, assuring us that God is utterly trustworthy.

When the cities of the world crumble to dust, God is a strong city (v 1) – a place of refuge, security and peace. More than that, those who were previously poor and oppressed become the victors, trampling those earthly cities underfoot (vs 5,6).

Our key verse today contains a wonderful promise of peace to God's people, but this promise requires an act of our will, too. We have to choose to trust him. We must train our minds to

cling to the truth of his Word and the hope he promises. This is what it means to have a steadfast mind – not to waver when we see troubles in the world, but to trust that God has the victory.

You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.

Isaiah 26:3

RESPOND

Pray: 'Father, my faith is sometimes so weak. I do believe you are in control, even in all of life's chaos. Please help me keep a steadfast mind and choose to trust you when I am tempted to waver. Amen.'

Praising in faith

PREPARE

'This is the day that the **LORD** has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it' (Psalm 118:24, ESV). Thank the Lord for his gift of another day.

READ

Psalm 30

EXPLORE

This week we have heard Isaiah prophesying what the Lord would do in the future. Today we hear David's response to what God has done for him. He recalls times when he was in trouble and distress, and takes time to praise God for his past help.

It can be hard for us, sometimes, when we read such passages. Perhaps we are going through sorrow that has lasted much more than a night. Maybe we can't look back and see times where we have been in distress and God has saved us. Noticing the context of this psalm may help a little.

The section title in many Bibles states that the psalm was written by David, to be sung at the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem. But the Temple was built during the reign of David's son, King Solomon (see 1 Kings 6). David didn't see so much as a foundation stone of it. Yet

he wrote this psalm in faith, believing that it would be built and that God's people would worship there.

This is the attitude we should have reading these passages – a posture of faith, believing that God will turn our mourning to dancing and clothe us with joy. His salvation is assured.

You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.

Psalm 30:11

RESPOND

Use this psalm to help you praise God for times he has helped or will help you.

Monday 16 March

Isaiah 27:1-13

A fruity filling

PREPARE

Part of the fruit of God's Spirit is peace. Allow his peace to settle over you as you come to focus your attention on him today.

READ

Isaiah 27:1-13

EXPLORE

In this passage we see glimpses of what the world will be like 'in that day' (v1), when all is restored to how God intended it to be. From this we can learn what God's desire for his people is. Two things in particular stand out: all idols will be destroyed; and God's people will be fruitful.

Fruitfulness in the Bible often refers to filling the earth with God's people. But in the New Testament we also learn about the characteristics those people will display, as they are filled with God's Spirit. The 'fruit' they will bear is detailed in Galatians 5:22,23 as 'love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control'. So God's desire is that we destroy anything that gets in the way of our worship of him and increasingly display these characteristics.

We don't have to do this in our own strength, though – in fact, we can't! Jesus says he is the vine in this vineyard Isaiah speaks of (John 15:5). Our task is to stay close to him and he will give us all we need to grow in fruitfulness.

In days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit.

Isaiah 27:6

RESPOND

Is there something that is pulling you away from worshipping God wholeheartedly? Or is there an area where your fruit is not growing as it should? Speak to him about that now and ask him to help you draw on his power and goodness.

Astounding wonders

PREPARE

Why do you read your Bible and these notes? Answer yourself honestly: What keeps you going, or makes you restart if you stop?

READ

Isaiah 29:13–24

EXPLORE

Sometimes our worship and prayer can feel as though we are just ‘going through the motions’. Verse 13 of this chapter could make us feel condemned for this. But look at verse 14. Far from casting us aside in those times, God says he will ‘astound [us] with wonder upon wonder’. How incredible! He sees our weaknesses and responds with extravagant generosity.

The wonders he promises include restoring both people and the land to wholeness. Many of these were demonstrated during Jesus’ life on earth. Yet they were not the final fulfilment of this prophecy. The best is yet to come. We are still looking forward to it with eyes of faith and hope. The miracles of Jesus, and those seen by many throughout the world today, are just a kind of ‘first fruits’; we can see what God has done in the past as a ‘down payment’, assuring us that these other wonders will certainly follow.

Praying and reading God’s Word ‘because we should’ is a good discipline, but he longs to give us joy in it, and he takes the responsibility on himself of amazing and delighting us with wonders.

‘Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.’

Isaiah 29:14

RESPOND

If your worship feels dry, read again of some of Jesus’ miracles, and remind yourself to be awed by them. Or think about a sunset or a pine cone or a caterpillar and allow God to astound you with these wonders.

Wednesday 18 March

Isaiah 32:1-20

Avoiding complacency

PREPARE

Pray: 'Heavenly Father, you rule with justice and mercy, bringing peace to the world. Help me to trust in you more and more each day. Amen.'

READ

Isaiah 32:1-20

EXPLORE

God's promises often come with indications of how his people should respond, and this chapter is a good example of that.

First, he promises a time when leaders will rule in a way that brings peace and safety. Truth and wisdom will be restored and will be honoured throughout the world.

However, verses 9–14 tell us that this time will not come quietly and gently – there will be great turmoil before the arrival of peace. God's people are warned not to be complacent. Just because we know it will all come right in the end, doesn't mean we can simply sit back and wait.

Through Isaiah, God speaks to those who are getting their sense of security from earthly things – years of good harvests, perhaps, leading to plenty of money and food. For us, maybe it is a steady job or

our relationships. These things are good, and gifts from God, but if they were all stripped away, would our faith still stand strong or would we be cast into despair? We must ensure that our trust is in the right place: in God alone.

See, a king will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice.

Isaiah 32:1

RESPOND

It can be hard to balance enjoying God's blessings with not seeing them as our source of security and ultimate happiness. One way to avoid complacency is to thank God for his gifts often and ask him to help us hold them lightly. Do so now.

Fearful wisdom

PREPARE

Today we will read more dire warnings and wonderful promises. We will also learn how we can avoid God's punishments and gain access to his treasures. Ask God to give you ears to hear his Word.

READ

Isaiah 33:1-16

EXPLORE

You may have heard it said that 'the fear of the Lord' does not mean being scared of him, but there is much in this passage that seems designed to scare. Verses 1 and 12-14 directly threaten terrible fates for God's enemies. It is right and wise to fear his wrath and his great power. Dismissing it, thinking God couldn't or wouldn't exercise his righteous judgement, is utter folly.

The 'sinners' of verse 14 are right to ask how they can escape being consumed by God's wrath. In his great grace and mercy he tells them – and us – the way out. It isn't easy, though. Look at verse 15: it speaks of living righteously with our feet, our mouths, our hands, our ears and our eyes! No one can live in that kind of sinlessness – no one except Jesus.

When we fear God's judgement, we quickly come to see our need of Jesus.

The wise person accepts his offer of salvation and gains protection from the coming wrath, along with the rich store of wisdom and knowledge promised in verse 6.

He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure.

Isaiah 33:6

RESPOND

Pray: 'Almighty God, you are great and powerful and the wise fear you and your righteousness. Thank you for your great gift of salvation to all those who call on you. Thank you for saving us. Amen.'

Friday 20 March

Isaiah 33:17-24

No petty bureaucrat

PREPARE

Pray: 'My Lord, my judge, my lawgiver and my king, help me remember that I am in your presence today and speak to me through your Word. Amen.'

READ

Isaiah 33:17-24

EXPLORE

In this section, Isaiah picks up on a theme that we saw in chapter 14. When God establishes his kingdom once and for all, his people will think back to the things we feared and say, 'Where are they now?'

The different kinds of officers listed in verse 18 possibly sound more like petty bureaucrats than military leaders. They have a small amount of power and abuse it to make life difficult for others.

It can be hard for us sometimes to understand what God's promises of our future home really mean. Unlike the people of Israel, most of us are not facing the threat of invasion or domination by hostile armies. We don't feel the annual fear of our crops failing. In passages like this, though, we see that God won't deal just with enormous, life-or-death-level threats, but the smaller, day-to-day niggles too.

God will be a righteous judge and king. Living under his rule won't be tedious or frustrating; he won't try to make things difficult at every turn. Life in his kingdom will be characterised by abundance, wholeness and freedom from sin. What a wonderful promise.

For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us.

Isaiah 33:22

RESPOND

Thank the Lord that he cares about every aspect of life. Lift up to him again those things, large and small, which make life feel less than the 'life ... to the full' (John 10:10) that Jesus promised.

A joyful crescendo

PREPARE

What are you looking forward to? What things in life bring you joy? Think about them for a moment before you read today's passage.

READ

Isaiah 35:1-10

EXPLORE

Our readings in this section of Isaiah have been building up in this great crescendo of joyful celebration.

Read the passage again slowly. Which words and phrases stand out? You may want to highlight or write them down.

Which images speak to you the most? The wilderness bursting into bloom, maybe? Think of that word, 'burst' – the suddenness of the flower's glory. Perhaps it's the gushing and bubbling up of water in the desert, or the quietness of the cool pool on the once-burning sand. Or maybe it's the safe path, leading us home. Can you imagine walking along it, singing, surrounded by all God's children?

Perhaps your heart needs the whispered words of strength and courage from verse 4. 'Be strong, do not fear ... he will come to save you' (my emphasis). I've always found the words of healing exciting and inspiring: those who had

been lame leaping for joy; those who had been mute shouting at the tops of their happy voices.

This joy and this everlasting crown are waiting for you, if you know Jesus as your Lord.

They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Isaiah 35:10

RESPOND

Let the images that most speak to you seep into your soul, then turn your contemplation to praise. Ask God to quicken your heart with anticipation of this great eternity. Thank him that the greatest joy of all will be to be with him.

Sunday 22 March

Psalm 31

Seeking abundant blessings

PREPARE

As you read today's psalm, notice how many things the psalmist asks God to do for him. He is clearly deeply suffering and isn't afraid to tell God exactly how he feels and what he needs.

READ

Psalm 31

EXPLORE

Most of us have probably never been the 'utter contempt of [our] neighbours' or an 'object of dread to [our] closest friends' (v 11) or had people conspiring to kill us (though in some parts of the world this is still a reality for those who dare to acknowledge their faith publicly). Though the specifics of the psalm may not be relatable, we do, however, all have things we need from God.

The psalmist asks for God's attentiveness, deliverance, salvation, security, guidance, protection, mercy, blessing and justice. Unlike the 'worthless idols' others turn to (v 6), God can provide those things for his people and does so willingly. He does listen to us. He leads and guides us. He is merciful and just. He can save us from immediate dangers and has given us the means of our eternal salvation.

Therefore, the psalmist rightly turns to praise, glorifying God for all that he is and the things he has done. We can put our hope in the Lord, because he has proved himself worthy, throughout the generations and in our own lives in so many ways.

How abundant are the good things that you have stored up for those who fear you, that you bestow in the sight of all, on those who take refuge in you.

Psalm 31:19

RESPOND

Which of these things do you need God to be or provide for you? Ask him again, and give praise and thanks for all he has done in the past, and for his character.

True story

About the writer
Jo Swinney

Jo Swinney is Director of Communications for A Rocha International and the author of eight books and counting. She has an MA in theology from Regent College, Vancouver, and lives in Bath with her husband and their two daughters.



If Matthew is an evangelist, Luke a storyteller and John a philosopher-theologian, Mark is a journalist. His Gospel clips along at a whistlestop pace, the bare bones of Jesus' public ministry laid out with little commentary and never a wasted word.

As we approach Easter, we have Mark's unerring sense of what to keep and what to leave out and his sharp eye to take us to the cross and beyond. The narrative may be somewhat sparse, but the Jesus it captures is vivid, compelling, credible and therefore entirely believable. Each reading adds another layer of precisely relayed detail – seating plans, meal ingredients, names, places and times. The specificity should increase our trust in the narrator. And it allows us close to the action, able to put ourselves in the picture and see the drama in our own mind's eye.

We live in a time of great scientific advancement. We know, generally speaking, that dead people remain dead, as well as what happens at the cellular level once oxygen is not moving around the circulatory system. That's quite a hurdle to overcome for Christians in today's world. Mark's approach is a gift because believing in the literal, physical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's salvation plan for the whole world, as revealed in scripture.

Let's pray that as we read, the Holy Spirit will give us ears to hear and soft hearts to understand and respond.

Monday 23 March

Mark 14:1–11

The priceless pearl

PREPARE

Many eyes will look on you with judgement today. Take a moment to consciously sit in the gaze of your loving God.

.....

READ

Mark 14:1–11

EXPLORE

This story is like a pure pearl inside a dirty shell, on a dark ocean floor. At the centre is an act Jesus himself deemed beautiful – a woman anointing her saviour with costly perfume, understanding the worth of the man and the moment and doing ‘what she could’ (v 8).

The dirty shell is the self-righteous, judgemental onlookers. They are the next layer of the story, surrounding its pure heart with their harsh rebuke, intended to shame the woman and paint her as callously indifferent to the poor. We aren’t told how she felt in that moment, how sensitive she was to public opinion, but if she was anything like me, those words would have scalded. Could she tune them out and listen only to Jesus’ defence? We don’t know.

The ocean is the forces scheming to kill Jesus. In the same story, he inspires both an extravagant demonstration of love and a murderous hatred.

The precious pearl of a relationship with Christ remains set within a context of hostile incomprehension. We are not going to have crowd approval for our sacrifices of praise. We may in fact be ridiculed, rejected or worse. Whose opinion is going to count?

‘Leave her alone,’ said Jesus.
‘Why are you bothering her?
She has done a beautiful
thing to me.’

Mark 14:6

RESPOND

Pray: ‘Lord God, let me be like the woman who understood who you were and what you required of her in that moment and allowed all else to fall away. Amen.’

Aide-memoire

PREPARE

List the memory devices you use in daily life. Do you have any that help remind you of God's presence?

READ

Mark 14:12-26

EXPLORE

An opinion piece by historian Daniel Bessner from 14 January 2023 in *The New York Times* declared the historical profession to be in 'rapid – maybe even terminal – decline', going on to highlight some of the most frightening implications of this trend.

The lamb feast Jesus directed his disciples to prepare was one that had been eaten at the same time of year for more than 1250 years. Abraham's descendants in Egypt ate it on their last day as slaves, sparing them from God's terrible slaughter of firstborn males by the smear of sacrificial blood on their door frames.

The timing of Jesus' last meal before his execution was no accident. He was stepping into the place of all those sacrificial lambs. His blood, his life, would be 'poured out for many' (v 24). The 'firstborn over all creation' (Colossians 1:15) would not be passed over but would die in place of all others.

Eating flatbread and lamb on an annual basis kept the events of that night in Egypt fresh in the minds of the freed slaves for generation after generation. Sharing the wine and bread of Communion is an act of remembrance for us who have been spared by Jesus' sacrifice. We must remember. Our lives depend on it.

'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,' he said to them.

Mark 14:24

RESPOND

Pray: 'Thank you, Lord, for the symbols and rituals you have given us so we don't forget your great gift of forgiveness. Amen.'

Wednesday 25 March

Mark 14:27–31

Good intentions

PREPARE

Pause and praise the God who has always done what he said he would.

.....

READ

Mark 14:27–31

EXPLORE

As my friend opened the door to me, a puppy streaked past her and the next several minutes were stressful to say the least as we tried to grab her before she was run over or fell into the pond. With the puppy finally safe and contained, my friend told me she'd been up since 4am with the little darling. 'My kids talked me into this. They promised they'd do all the work,' she said, with hollow laughter. In the moment, I'm sure they were entirely sincere. As was I when I decided last new year I would not go on social media in the morning so I could have longer to pray. As was Peter, when he vowed he would never disown Jesus. We are all capable of rock-solid intentions and we are all capable of failing to follow them through.

Psalm 103:14 says, 'he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.' Jesus knew Peter wouldn't withstand the pressure to deny all knowledge of

him (v 30). He knows that none of us could ever attain holiness in our own strength. His great compassion for our weakness took him to the cross.

Peter declared, 'Even if all fall away, I will not.'

Mark 14:29

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord God, I'm sorry that my good intentions are so often empty aspirations. Thank you for your endless mercy and patience. Thank you that you always have kept, and always will keep, your promises. Amen.'

The prayer of desolation

PREPARE

Pray: 'Lord, let my spirit be willing to meet you now. Amen.'

READ

Mark 14:32-42

EXPLORE

Where do you go when the ground underneath you feels like it can't hold your weight, when your feelings are too much and you think your heart may fail from the pressure of keeping your body going? In this hour of torment, when Luke tells us that Jesus' anguish produced sweat like drops of blood (Luke 22:44), CCTV would have shown him alone, at a distance from his sleepy friends. But three times he had taken himself off, not to be alone, but to be with his father.

What stops us doing the same? Why do we find it easier to talk about God than to him? Why do we put so much faith in frail human friends to keep watch with us in our darkest nights, though 'he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep' (Psalm 121:4)?

I suggest three reasons. First, we know he can take the cup away, but may not do so. Secondly, this being the case, we

would rather our will not his be done. Thirdly, God is often ostensibly silent, even in Gethsemane.

Jesus chose to take his dreadful sorrow to God. We don't know what passed between them, only that he was ready to take on the betrayal, humiliation and gruesome pain of the cross when the hour came.

*'Abba, Father,' he said,
'everything is possible for you.
Take this cup from me. Yet not
what I will, but what you will.'*

Mark 14:36

RESPOND

Whether you have prayed through the pain in the past or not, come to your heavenly Abba now and tell him the worst of it. He is with you. He will bear it with you.

Friday 27 March

Mark 14:43–52

Stand firm, then...

PREPARE

Put yourself in the picture as one of those deserting Jesus. Where do you go? What is running through your mind? How do you feel?

.....

READ

Mark 14:43–52

EXPLORE

Now and then I have a vivid dream that stays with me, troubling me far into waking hours. In my dream as I slept, I watched as two girls sunning themselves in the shallows of a muddy river were attacked by a crocodile. Or rather, I shouted a warning and then ran for my own life and left them to their fate. Dream though it was, I'm feeling ashamed and discomfited. Asleep or awake, am I unable to override my instinct for self-preservation? Would I have run off naked rather than stay to do what I could to protect Jesus, or at least prove a faithful friend? Regrettably, probably.

Jesus knew he would be betrayed by Judas and deserted by both followers and friends. His crucifixion was for an ungrateful and rather pitiful bunch like us: 'while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). He knew that down the ages, he would continue to be

rejected and mocked. It is our privilege to face the same treatment. By the power of the Holy Spirit, may we stand strong, and when we don't manage, give thanks for grace and do better next time.

Then everyone deserted him and fled.

Mark 14:50

RESPOND

2 Timothy 3:12 says, '... everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted'. Ask God to strengthen your heart in him so that when you are tested, you are ready.

You will see

PREPARE

Take some deep, slow breaths. Still your mind and your body, and bring your whole self to this time with God.

READ

Mark 14:53–65

EXPLORE

Jesus' trial wasn't worthy to be called a trial. The whole thing was a stitch-up from the start. Powerful forces wanted to put him to death and would have their way, regardless of patently unreliable witnesses and thin reasoning. Look hard enough and you can usually find 'evidence' to justify a course of action you plan to take.

In the end, Jesus was condemned to death for stating that he was the Messiah (v 62). In a dramatic show of outraged piety, the high priest ripped his clothes. If Jesus was not the Son of God, he would have been right that this was blasphemy. If he was wrong, he would have holy blood on his hands.

The moment Jesus was referring to, the day of judgement when he would return to be acknowledged by all of us, has yet to come. Until then, we choose what we see and who we believe when it comes

to Jesus. Although we live in an era where dust is kicked into the air around the very concept of truth, those who have eyes to see will see the way, the truth and the life. Jesus may have been wrongfully executed, but he is alive and those who seek him will find him.

'I am,' said Jesus. 'And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.'

Mark 14:62

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord, open my eyes to see spiritual reality and not what my own mind dreams up. Amen.'

Sunday 29 March

Psalm 32

The joy of being forgiven

PREPARE

Pray these words: 'Maker of the world, King eternal, **have mercy on us.**/ Fount of boundless pity, **have mercy on us.**/ Christ, the Light of the world, giver of life, **have mercy on us.****

READ

Psalm 32

EXPLORE

In 2 Samuel 11 we read about David's adultery with Bathsheba and his effective murder of Uriah, her husband. In the next chapter, he is confronted with the reality of his sin and in Psalm 51 David pours out his regret as he confesses his sin to God. In Psalm 51:13, David promises that if God will forgive him he will teach other sinners God's ways. Many commentators believe that Psalm 32 is part of his fulfilment of that promise.

I wonder if you can identify with David, as he tries to hide his sin but feels the burden of it weighing him down (vs 3,4). This is contrasted with the relief and joy of confessing it all and feeling God's forgiveness (vs 1,2,5). Looking back on such a time in my own life, I do wonder at the futility of trying to hide something from an omniscient God, and the foolishness of not repenting immediately

when he has promised to forgive and wants to 'surround [us] with songs of deliverance' (v 7).

Praise God for his unfailing love.

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Psalm 32:1

RESPOND

'As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the **Lord** has compassion on those who fear him' (Psalm 103:12,13). What does this mean to you today?

*Sarum Kyrie eleison no. 9

Our faithful friend

PREPARE

Come before your Holy Father as you are. There is no need to pretend to be any more or less. You are seen, welcomed and cherished.

READ

Mark 14:66–72

EXPLORE

This story is often used as a kind of cautionary tale: don't be a cowardly, unfaithful friend of Jesus like Peter! But I don't read it that way. In fact, I find it profoundly heartening.

Just a few hours before Peter's denials, Jesus told him what he'd do. By linking it to the cock's first morning crows, he made sure Peter would remember the prediction. Jesus was fully aware of how Peter would handle this situation and would go on to die for him, and he gave him a pivotal role in building the brand-new church.

For all Peter's good intentions and high hopes for himself, he buckled under the pressure. To his credit, he had followed Jesus into what amounted to a den of very hungry lions. But survival instinct kicked in, as it would for most of us, and he was forced to face the fact that he was not the friend to Jesus he thought he was.

Any pride growing unchecked was decisively uprooted. From then on, he'd know God's love was undeserved and grace-filled, and therefore not vulnerable to his failings. For us, this is a story to remind us that, as 2 Timothy 2:13 says, 'if we are faithless, he remains faithful'.

Immediately the cock crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: 'Before the cock crows twice you will disown me three times.' And he broke down and wept.

Mark 14:72

RESPOND

Do you believe you are holding up your end of your relationship with Jesus quite well? Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth of the matter.

Tuesday 31 March

Mark 15:1–15

Power players

PREPARE

We'll be reading about a noisy crowd in a minute. Quiet your mind so you can hear the still, small voice of the Spirit.

.....

READ

Mark 15:1–15

EXPLORE

Who would you say holds the power in the passage we've just read?

Pilate issues the command to release Barabbas and flog and then crucify Jesus, but the decision seems to have been made by the chief priests and the crowd. Is that where the power lies?

In Mark's account, Jesus is a still, silent centre at the eye of the storm. But make no mistake, these events are entirely under his authority. The one sinless human ever to walk the earth is condemned to die a criminal because he willingly chose to lay down his life for all the rest of us humans who are unable to save ourselves. Though he was 'bound', 'led away' and 'handed over' (vs 1,15), seemingly at the whim of a braying mob, the Messiah was about to crush evil and death for ever. He had never been more powerful.

Being a Christian in today's world can be costly, even in so-called

tolerant societies. We don't have the crowd behind us. How can we be like Jesus, standing firm in faith, perhaps vulnerable in certain regards but full of the power of the living God?

Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

Mark 15:15

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord Jesus, you gave yourself up, a lamb to the slaughter, when all the while you were the one who made and sustains the universe. Help me stand strong under the pressures to conform, compromise or crumble. Amen.'

Wednesday 1 April

Mark 15:16–20

A tale of two kingdoms

PREPARE

Pray: 'Jesus, you are the king of the universe and of all time. Help me give you my undivided allegiance.'

READ

Mark 15:16–20

EXPLORE

The Jewish leaders wanted Jesus killed because he undermined their authority and called out their hypocrisy. But for the Romans it was the charge that he had claimed to be a king that signed his death warrant.

The purple robe, the thorny crown, the homage – all these props were designed to demean and humiliate the purported rival to the great Caesar. Roman soldiers were part of a mighty army in an empire which had swept Palestine into its great jaws a century before. This man seemed to them entirely powerless, his kingdom a fantasy, and they wanted to put him properly in his place.

In the spotlight at the centre of the cruel performance was Jesus, quietly enduring the mockery, the physical pain and the abandonment by his closest friends. At any moment he could have called countless angelic armies to his aid, but in faithful love he remained.

The Roman Empire lasted 500 years, under roughly 70 emperors. The kingdom of God however is eternal and has one Lord, one God, one lamb on the throne, whose sacrifice granted forever citizenship to whoever believes in him.

They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him.

Mark 15:17

RESPOND

Pray: 'To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father – to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.' (Revelation 1:5,6)

Thursday 2 April

Mark 15:21–32

As bad as it gets

PREPARE

Pray: ‘Lord, give me courage to look unflinchingly at what your crucifixion was like for you. Amen.’

.....

READ

Mark 15:21–32

EXPLORE

Some church traditions give very little attention to the suffering of Christ’s crucifixion, dwelling instead on the spiritual significance of his death and the glorious resurrection which followed. But the Gospels don’t spare us. Even Mark, with his minimal, speedy narrative style, gives us enough to get a sense of what an utterly brutal execution this was.

From the heights of his throne in the heavenly realms, this was the lowest Jesus could have physically, emotionally and spiritually come. His body was in so much pain he was physically unable to carry his cross. He was killed outside the city wall, in a place known for grisly horror (Golgotha, ‘the place of the skull’, v 22). He was hung up naked alongside criminals and his executioners gambled for his clothes. While demonstrating history-changing power and love beyond measure, at

a cost none of us will ever come close to appreciating, he was sneered at, mocked and abandoned.

It is not comfortable or pleasant to consider these things, but we must, because it helps us value our salvation and understand the gospel story. ‘You were bought at a price’, wrote Paul (1 Corinthians 6:20). This was the price.

And they crucified him.

Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.

Mark 15:24

RESPOND

Pray: ‘Jesus, you allowed yourself to be nailed on that ugly cross by cruel, ignorant people because of your great love for us and all you have made. Thank you. Amen.’

A surprisingly good day

PREPARE

Jesus experienced utter darkness in every sense for those last three hours on the cross. He knows what it is like for us in our darkest times and he is with us. Sit with him and remember you are not alone.

READ

Mark 15:33–41

EXPLORE

As Jesus was born, so he died: in relative obscurity observed by those whose witness held least value – shepherds at his birth and faithful women at his death. Yet the universe itself aligned to lead wise travellers to his cradle and to cover the sun at his death. For God to be born a baby is incomprehensible. For him to take a last breath and die, yet more so. No wonder the disciples were confused and dismayed.

Countless people throughout history have been executed unjustly, martyred for worthy causes or have given their lives for dangerous and compelling visions – only to be entirely forgotten. Here we are in 2026 on a day widely known around the world as ‘Good Friday’ because of this man’s death. As the centurion recognised, he was indeed the Son of God.

This day is rightly named ‘good’. Mark made sure to include the detail about the torn curtain, because it is not about damaged fabric but about brand-new open access to the holy presence of God.

With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

Mark 15:37

RESPOND

Reflect on what the death of Jesus means to us through these words: ‘Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need’ (Hebrews 4:16).

Saturday 4 April

Mark 15:42–47

This actually happened

PREPARE

Pray: ‘Lord Jesus, you died and you were buried. Help me grasp the truth and meaning of those stark facts. Amen.’

.....

READ

Mark 15:42–47

EXPLORE

One of the things that strike me most about this passage is the number of very specific details. We have a day, a time and names. We have some precise information about the sequence of events leading to the body of Jesus being released for burial, including an intriguing mention that Pilate was surprised he had died so fast. We have the fact that the body was in a tomb blocked up with a stone, and that two named women knew its location.

Why all this detail? Many world religions have developed around mystical experiences of their founders, ancient myths, cultural practices, ideas and philosophies. Christianity stands or falls on the historical reality of one man’s death and his subsequent bodily resurrection. Mark is recording every single crumb of solid information he can gather because it is absolutely vital to tell these events as they happened.

We need the Holy Spirit to reveal truth to us, but we don’t need to have our rational minds removed to make space for faith. I am so grateful for the credibility and strength of the historical record and the confidence it gives me that I have made the right decision to give my life to Christ.

So Joseph ... took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb ... he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.

Mark 15:46

RESPOND

To many, Christ crucified is foolishness, but it is, according to 1 Corinthians 1:24: ‘the power of God and wisdom of God.’ Pray for growing certainty that this historical event was the lynchpin of history.

True story

PREPARE

Try to put yourself in the shoes of the women visiting the tomb, expecting to find Jesus' body. What are they hearing and seeing, thinking and feeling?

READ

Mark 16:1-20

EXPLORE

Happy Easter – he is risen! This is surely the most joyous day of the Christian year.

In CS Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, the Christ figure, Aslan the lion, risen from a grisly death on the stone table, romps and roars with the exuberance of new life, allowing two young girls to grasp his mane and stroke his paws. It is a beautiful picture.

Mark's account is rather different from CS Lewis' novel and not just because Jesus is not a giant wildcat killed by a witch and the women are adults not children. The main difference is in the emotions captured. There's no joy in Mark's story. The women are alarmed (v 5), trembling, bewildered and afraid (v 8).

As we celebrate the resurrection today, we do so with deep familiarity around the idea. We will likely gather with others in a public place to declare in spoken word and song that 'he is risen!' and in doing so we won't be risking our lives. These faithful women, coming to anoint a body

and finding it gone, were unsurprisingly thrown. This account rings true.

Mark's Gospel sets out to tell 'the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God' (1:1). In his blunt, unvarnished way, he has brought us to the climax, the closing argument, the lynchpin of the whole thing.

*'Don't be alarmed,' he said.
'You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified.
He has risen! He is not here ...'*

Mark 16:6

RESPOND

Thank God that you have been told about the good news – that Mark's account was kept, copied, translated and survived for you to read it in 2026! Though you may feel some fear, who do you need to tell about the resurrection?

WAY IN

Mark 3–5

Why follow Jesus?

About the writer **Esther Bailey**



Esther lives with her husband John in north-east England, close to the Angel of the North. She is working with URC churches in Gateshead, Chester-le-Street and Stanley to engage with children and families not previously part of the church. Esther and John love exploring new areas in their aged campervan.

Sometimes, reading the Gospels, I find myself glossing over the words because I know them so well. In writing these notes, I have imagined myself as one of the original recipients of Mark's Gospel and thought about the impact these words would have had on the first readers. The 'Explore' section is written in this way.

Mark's was the first written record of Jesus' life, probably about 30 years after Jesus' ascension. At that time, the church had spread across the Roman Empire, but, in a culture where the head of the house would determine the religion of all his family, there were many who had become members of the church without understanding who Jesus was and what it meant to follow him. Mark wanted to clarify that Jesus was the Son of God and that following him meant leaving all other religious practices and allegiances behind.

The Roman Empire was under the rule of Nero, who had instigated a cruel persecution of Christians. As a result, many were wondering whether it was worth continuing to follow Jesus. What was the point when it led to betrayal, imprisonment, torture and probably painful death? Mark is keen to show that Jesus also faced opposition – Mark 3:6 states that two different religio-political parties had joined forces to plot Jesus' death – but that he had power over all the forces arrayed against him and that he offers that power to his followers.

Your choice

PREPARE

Are there any people (individuals or groups) whom you tend to distrust? Are there any you actively distrust? Why?

READ

Mark 3:1–6

EXPLORE

We're only just into chapter 3 and things are already getting dire for Jesus (v 6). What is his great crime or fault that warrants such a strong response? On the surface it seems to be driven by his failure to keep the Law: eating with sinners, claiming to forgive sins, breaking Sabbath work prohibitions. However, something much deeper and darker is going on here.

Jesus is challenging the perceived right of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law to be able to justify themselves to God. They believe they have earned (or will earn) God's favour because of their actions. This lie infiltrates many religions and even crops up sometimes from within the church.

Calvin famously said that 'The human heart is a perpetual idol factory'.^{*} We constantly crave alternatives to the God who loves us. For these learned Jews the Law had become their idol. We

don't often see Jesus angry, but he is here. These folk have taken something liberating and made it into a burden. Their silence in response to Jesus' question (v 4) is the compelling evidence that they cannot tell good from evil. How overwhelmingly sad.

Then Jesus asked them, 'Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?' But they remained silent.

Mark 3:4

RESPOND

What idols does your heart like to produce? Jesus said, 'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Luke 12:34). Take the time to do a reality check on where you have placed your hope, sense of identity and ultimate security. Is there anything you need to change?

^{*}John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1536

Tuesday 7 April

Mark 3:7-19

To be with him

PREPARE

Who would you travel to go and see – the king, a pop star, a famous preacher? How far would you be willing to travel?

READ

Mark 3:7-19

EXPLORE

As my husband read out the next instalment of Mark's story of Jesus' life to our household this evening, I was struck by how far people travelled to be with Jesus – some of them must have had a three- or four-day journey, just to hear his teaching or to bring their loved ones to be healed. What faith (or desperation) they must have had that an encounter with Jesus was worth that effort!

Jesus seems so wise as, to avoid being crushed, he prepares to get into a boat so that all can see him safely, wherever they are in the crowd.

Jesus shows compassion in choosing his inner circle. I don't think I would choose someone if I knew they would betray me! I wonder why Jesus did that? I was amused by the nickname given to James and John. Of course, I've never met James – he was executed years ago, but John has such a reputation for

being calm, loving and wise – not a Son of Thunder these days. Following Jesus has changed him.

He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach.

Mark 3:14

RESPOND

In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul says, 'Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.' How can you follow Jesus' example in showing compassion to those you will encounter this week?

Who are my family?

PREPARE

Galatians 5:1 says, ‘It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.’ What does that freedom mean to you? What has Jesus freed you from?

READ

Mark 3:20–34

EXPLORE

Jesus is such good news, isn’t he? Already, this far into his story, there have been several cases where he has freed someone from an impure spirit, and that is one of the tasks he has given to his inner circle to do. However, in today’s episode, the teachers of the Law suggest that he is the king of all evil and that’s what gives him the power to order these spirits around. Maybe the evil spirits are more astute than the religious leaders – they recognise that Jesus is the Son of God (v 11).

I am surprised by Jesus’ reaction to his family – it seems very harsh when they were trying to help. I used to think that family was the most important thing, but my husband’s brother and his family won’t have anything to do with us now that we have become followers of the Way. I’m really grateful for the closeness we have with other believers. Perhaps Jesus means that we should be more

committed to other followers than to biological family who don’t believe. That will take some commitment, especially if we get arrested and tortured to try to make us name others from the fellowship.

Then he looked at those seated in a circle round him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’

Mark 3:34

RESPOND

How committed do you feel to the family of believers? What could you do to enhance that commitment, or to express it more?

Thursday 9 April

Mark 4:1-20

Keep going and growing

PREPARE

If you are able and have time, have a wander in a garden or park. Try to identify plants that are struggling because their growing medium is too shallow, those that are being choked by weeds and those that are thriving.

READ

Mark 4:1-20

EXPLORE

Our latest instalment of Mark's good news included a story that Jesus told. Mark states that Jesus taught the people many things through stories, so I wondered what was special about this particular one, that Mark should include it.

Thinking about it, I am reminded of the Severi family, who became followers but also continue to worship the emperor and Venus and Jupiter. They struggle to make it to the weekly gatherings because they are committed to so many other things. Perhaps they are a bit like the seed trying to grow among the thorns. And what about Felix and Flavia who used to be active members of our fellowship, but have now stopped? When I saw Flavia at the forum, she said they weren't sure what the point was of following Jesus, when it would just mean that they could be arrested and killed. Perhaps they are like the seed with shallow roots.

This story has challenged me to think about how the seed is growing in my life. I hope that my life is producing a good crop for Jesus.

'Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.'

Mark 4:20

RESPOND

John 15:16 says, 'I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.' What fruit are you asking the Father to produce in your life?

Pay attention

PREPARE

Can you think of a time when you heard God speak to you clearly? What areas of your life do you need to hear him speak about just now?

READ

Mark 4:21–34

EXPLORE

There is much discussion at the meeting today as our reading from Mark's report contains a number of riddles or puzzles that Jesus poses while talking about the kingdom of God. Jesus tells his followers to listen carefully. I wonder if he is telling us that there is more to his kingdom than is obvious at first, and we need to work out the hidden or spiritual depths, not just judge on the physical appearances.

I am encouraged by the story of a lamp. Obviously no one would light a lamp and then hide it. Jesus lit the lamp when he started the church (to which we all belong). Surely he won't allow it now to be hidden by Nero's opposition.

I also like the story of the mustard seed growing into a large plant. Something that starts so small and insignificant grows into something conspicuous and unmissable. As believers, we might feel

very vulnerable and insignificant in the face of the opposition against us. Maybe Jesus is promising that, from this wavering existence, the Way will spread throughout the world, growing in strength and providing hope and comfort to many people.

'If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.'

Mark 4:23

RESPOND

Which of these word pictures or parables speaks to you most today? How will you ensure that you have heard Jesus' meaning and acted on it?

Saturday 11 April

Mark 4:35–41

Teacher, don't you care?

PREPARE

What storms (physical, emotional, relational, political) have you faced in your life? Have you sensed Jesus with you through them?

READ

Mark 4:35–41

EXPLORE

Wow, what a story we read today! I closed my eyes while my husband was reading it out. I could almost hear the wind howling, the waves crashing, the creak of the timbers, the clunk of the oars, as the boatmen tried to direct the boat into the wind. I imagined I heard the splash of water as the others tried to bail the water out, the terrified cries and shouts as they all feared for their lives. How could Jesus have slept through all that turmoil, especially as Mark tells us that he was at the back of the boat where he must have been bouncing up and down?

Desperately, they call Jesus to help with the bailing, but he gets up and does something unexpected. He speaks to the weather and it obeys him! The disciples call him 'Teacher' but his actions show he is far more than that. Controlling the weather is something only God can do.

Jesus asks why his followers are so afraid. I wonder if he is asking us the same as we face storms of opposition and persecution. Do we have faith enough to believe Jesus is in control of everything?

He said to his disciples, 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?'

Mark 4:40

RESPOND

Pray for yourself if you are currently facing a storm, or for someone you know who is in the middle of a storm. Pray for Jesus' comforting presence and divine power to be at work.

Unfailing love

PREPARE

Think of something new you have learned about the Lord recently, or something you have been reminded of. Praise him for it (in song if possible).

READ

Psalm 33

EXPLORE

With all the troubles of the world beamed into our homes and onto screens every day we can easily begin to lose hope and wonder who is in control. This psalm brings a different perspective, reminding us that the earth is in the hands of a powerful, just and loving Creator.

Proverbs chapter 8 sees God's wisdom displayed in creation. Here (as in Genesis 1), God's word is the agent of creation (vs 6–9). Just as Job when overwhelmed by suffering is reminded of God's great power seen in creation (Job 38,39), we are reminded that the one who created everything watches over his creation.

Compared to the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, the strength of earthly rulers, no matter how large their armies or how powerful their weapons, is put in the shade (vs 16,17). God's people in the Old Testament are constantly

threatened, attacked and invaded by their more powerful neighbours.

Although they sometimes look elsewhere for help, the prophets remind them that the only reliable source of help is the Lord himself (eg Isaiah 30:1–5).

In the face of life's uncertainties, God's people can rejoice and be glad in him because we trust in his unfailing love.

May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.

Psalm 33:22

RESPOND

Pray for Christians you know who are facing uncertain times to be sure of God's committed love. How can you help them know that love?

Monday 13 April

Mark 5:1–20

What the Lord has done

PREPARE

‘Hallelujah, praise the one who set me free/ Hallelujah, death has lost its grip on me/ You have broken every chain/ There’s salvation in your name/ Jesus Christ, my living hope.’* Ponder these words.

READ

Mark 5:1–20

EXPLORE

Another dramatic story today! I would have been terrified to be confronted with this man. But Jesus seems calm and confident. He knows his own power, so isn’t disturbed by the ranting and raving of the demons.

The demons also know Jesus’ power. They recognise that he is the Son of the Most High God (v 7), unlike Jesus’ own disciples (4:41). They seem to know that it is inevitable that they will be defeated and humiliated by Jesus. Mark says that Jesus ‘gave them permission’ (v 13) to enter the pigs nearby. The pigs rushed into the sea and were destroyed.

Previously in Mark’s story, Jesus had told people not to tell anyone what he had done (eg 1:44). But this time, even though the man pleads to go with him, Jesus tells him to go and tell people what God had done for him. He

obviously did a good job; although the people had asked Jesus to leave, by the end of the passage Mark says that they were amazed. I am amazed too by all I am learning about who Jesus is and what he can do!

Jesus did not let him, but said,
‘Go home to your own people
and tell them how much the
Lord has done for you, and
how he has had mercy on you.’

Mark 5:19

RESPOND

What has Jesus done for you?
How has he shown mercy to you?
Who could you tell?

*Phil Wickham, ‘Living Hope’, 2018, Fair Trade Services

Great things!

PREPARE

In Luke 1:49, Mary declares, ‘the Mighty One has done great things for me’. What great things has God done for you?

READ

Mark 5:21–43

EXPLORE

As we've been reading through Mark's account, I've noticed that he sometimes puts stories together saying similar things. The storm on the sea and the man with demons are both stories showing Jesus doing things that show his power. He does it again in today's story, comparing a girl who had been alive for 12 years, then died, with a woman who had had an illness for 12 years. Both the girl's father, Jairus, and the woman are desperate, but while Jairus approaches Jesus directly, the woman is embarrassed and tries to sneak up unobtrusively.

Jesus shows that he cares for people whatever their social status. I find it interesting that he calls out the woman who was a social outcast, even though it seems she had already been healed. Maybe he wants to give her status and affirmation as well as healing.

I also note that Jesus said the little girl was only sleeping. Of course she was actually dead and he raised her back to life. Perhaps he was suggesting that death is not the end. I find that very reassuring as we face the possibility of death at any time.

Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, ‘Don’t be afraid; just believe.’

Mark 5:36

RESPOND

Look back at the three chapters of Mark we have read over the past week. What aspects of Jesus' character have stood out for you? What difference does that make to your life today?

WAY IN

Proverbs 5–9

Wisdom for life

About the writer

Phil Winn



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

Most of the book of Proverbs is a collection of pithy sayings that give advice for living a godly life. The first nine chapters, however, serve as an introduction to the rest of the book by underlining the importance of heeding wise teaching.

Wisdom is the ability to make godly choices in life. It is closely allied to knowledge, understanding and prudence, and often appears alongside them in these chapters. Although there are many examples of wisdom given throughout the book, a person does not become wise merely by observing the sayings of proverbs. A godly life comes not from simply learning rules but from a relationship with God himself: ‘The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding’ (Proverbs 9:10).

Proverbs seems to be aimed primarily at young men and reflects the role of men and women in the society in which it was written. We may need to apply some wisdom to see how the underlying principles apply today. With talk of boundary lines, working the land and kings ruling unchallenged, Proverbs obviously comes from times different from our own, but it is possible, with imagination, to see parallels to modern life.

There is always more to learn when we read God’s Word: ‘Instruct the wise and they will be wiser still; teach the righteous and they will add to their learning’ (Proverbs 9:9).

Marriage guidance

PREPARE

Ask the Lord to give you wisdom and keep you from foolishness.

READ

Proverbs 5:1-23

EXPLORE

'I have been married for several years and love my partner but I recently met someone else.' So began a recent letter to a newspaper advice column. If the writer of Proverbs were asked for advice in such a situation, his reply would be to avoid the source of temptation and rekindle your love for your partner.

These chapters of Proverbs are written as advice to a young man and reflect the roles of men and women in the society of the time. In the Good News Bible all the advice is addressed to 'my child' rather than 'my son', but the pressures on men and women are different. What advice on relationships would you give to a young woman living in today's society, or to single people, or to those attracted to members of their own sex?

The 2018 BBC TV drama series *The Split* focused on a family firm of divorce lawyers. Despite seeing the emotional

and financial costs of infidelity for their clients, some of the lawyers failed to be faithful to their own spouses. Viewers saw the resulting effects on reputations, relationships and finances, just as predicted in verses 7-10. Verse 21 reminds us that our actions are seen not by TV viewers but by the Lord himself. What will he think of our actions today?

My son, pay attention to my wisdom, turn your ear to my words of insight.

Proverbs 5:1

RESPOND

Pray for those dealing with the results of broken relationships and for agencies that provide help, support and advice.

Thursday 16 April

Proverbs 6:1-19

Lazy troublemakers

PREPARE

Bring to God any worries you have about things you have said or promises you have made.

.....

READ

Proverbs 6:1-19

EXPLORE

Have you ever made a rash promise that you later came to regret? A promise to cover the debts of someone else could lead to financial ruin. The writer advises anyone who makes such a mistake, as a matter of urgency, to take steps to extricate themselves from the situation.

Proverbs contains both practical wisdom and a godly perspective on life. The industrious ant provides an example to follow: it works hard without constant supervision. Hard work and prudent preparation for the future are good provision for oneself and one's family.

The chapter goes on to give a divine perspective on behaviour. '... six things that the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him' (v 16) indicates the importance of the list and highlights the final item on it. Stirring up trouble in the community (v 19) may sound less serious to us than some of the other faults here, but the Lord takes a dim

view of those who cause trouble within his people.

Laziness and troublemaking came together in the church in Thessalonica. It was idle people with too much time on their hands who caused problems within the fellowship (2 Thessalonians 3:11). What disruptive actions have you seen within the church?

**There are six things the
LORD hates, seven that are
detestable to him.**

Proverbs 6:16

RESPOND

Are there any positive contributions you could make to ease tensions or bring peace in your community? Where might you begin to do this?

Wisdom personified

PREPARE

Imagine yourself in the crowd gathering round expectantly as lady wisdom prepares to deliver her speech. How do you feel?

READ

Proverbs 8:1-21

EXPLORE

Stories abound of individuals paying thousands of pounds to cults or secret societies in a quest to gain spiritual wisdom. Self-help gurus promote books and online courses to teach their devotees the secret of life. God's wisdom is not some esoteric knowledge available to only a few initiates. This treasure, beyond price, is offered freely to all. In the previous chapter, a seductive woman leads young men astray in dark corners. Wisdom personified, by contrast, calls out in a loud voice, in busy thoroughfares, for all to hear.

Knowledge, prudence, righteousness, discretion and justice are among the qualities that accompany wisdom (v 12). Do you know individuals who display these qualities?

King Solomon asked God for, and was given, 'a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong' (1 Kings 3:9). All who rule on

earth need such wisdom (vs 15-17), but it is not restricted to kings. It is offered to all who seek it. Where do you need discernment and wisdom?

As a king, Solomon had wealth and honour, but more importantly he had wisdom. What is the rich inheritance promised to lovers of wisdom in verse 21?

For wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her.

Proverbs 8:11

RESPOND

'If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you' (James 1:5). Bring to the Lord those situations you may face today which call for wisdom.

Saturday 18 April

Proverbs 8:22–36

Creative wisdom

PREPARE

Pray (or sing): ‘Speak, O Lord, as we come to You, to receive the food of Your holy Word. Take Your truth, plant it deep in us.’*

READ

Proverbs 8:22–36

EXPLORE

As wisdom’s appeal continues, her role in creation is outlined. The kind of wisdom described in the book of Proverbs is not a new set of principles dreamed up by the author. It is, literally, as old as the universe. This wisdom is the creation of the Lord himself. Therefore, it is to be prized.

According to verses 22–32, creation comes about not by random chance, nor is it from a God who sets the process going and stands back. Creation is God’s handiwork; he is intimately involved. Although the cosmology may not be exactly as we would describe it today, we recognise its careful ordering.

As scientists continue to explore the universe on very large and very small scales, many are led to marvel that it is so ‘finely tuned’, but, as Derek Kidner pointed out in his commentary, this passage ‘is not designed to preoccupy

the reader with metaphysics, but to stir him to a decision.’** Will we listen to the wise Creator?

Blessings are promised to those who eagerly seek God’s wisdom and follow his instructions. When a UK prime ministerial announcement is expected, reporters gather eagerly outside the door of 10 Downing Street, London (the PM’s official residence and office). Do we anticipate so eagerly a word from God (v 34)?

‘Now then, my children, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways.’

Proverbs 8:32

RESPOND

Think of a favourite place, or if you have time today, take a walk in nature and praise God for the wonder of his creation.

*‘Speak, O Lord’, Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, © 2005, Thankyou Music

**D Kidner, *Proverbs*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, Tyndale Press, 1964, p76

Reality check

PREPARE

Sometimes praising God is a matter of gritty obedience. Whether you feel like it or not, spend some time extolling and exalting his name (vs 1,3).

READ

Psalm 34

EXPLORE

If we were to approach this psalm like a contract, specifying what we, as a 'righteous person', could expect from God (v 9), we might want to sue. Those who fear the Lord often lack the basic necessities, dying of starvation alongside their atheist compatriots in a famine, for example. Christians break bones, suffer from terrible depression and die young. We must have theology that stands up to reality or we will grow bitter and disillusioned with God.

One way to ensure robust theology is to read scripture appropriately for its genre. The Bible includes history, prophecy, law and more. Psalms are prayers not contracts. They take the height, depth and breadth of human experience and express them to God as raw and unvarnished heart-cries.

Psalm 34 helps us renew our determination to 'give thanks in all

circumstances' (1 Thessalonians 5:18). It allows us to acknowledge that life can be tough. And alongside the subjective interpretation of circumstance, there is the revealed truth of God's character: the Lord is close; the Lord is attentive; the Lord is good. We can 'taste and see' (v 8) and experience for ourselves the blessing David speaks of when we take refuge in him.

Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

Psalm 34:8

RESPOND

Choose a couple of the verses of Psalm 34 to memorise. Use them in your prayers over the next few days.

Monday 20 April

Proverbs 9:1–18

Table d'hôte

PREPARE

Pray: 'Grant me, O Lord my God, a mind to know you, a heart to seek you, wisdom to find you, conduct pleasing to you.*

.....

READ

Proverbs 9:1–18

EXPLORE

Have you ever been in a holiday resort, looking for a place to eat when, as you pass each restaurant, a waiter calls to you, inviting you to dine there? In this chapter, which ends the introductory section of the book, there are just two such establishments. The house of wisdom and the house of folly both call out to all who pass by, but what they offer is very different.

The word picture painted here is worthy of a cartoon. On one side wisdom, from her very grand house, sends out servants to invite passers-by to a mouth-watering, life-giving feast of meat and wine. On the other side folly, or 'stupidity' (GNB), sits at her door and shouts in an uncouth manner offering only bread and water, which she has stolen, to be eaten among the dead.

Although both wisdom and folly make their appeal to the simple, only wisdom

offers to improve lives, but she demands repentance: 'Leave your simple ways' (v 6).

How does one leave behind simple ways and enjoy wisdom's life-giving feast? The answer is given in verse 10: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. This is a repetition of a phrase used at the beginning of the book (Proverbs 1:7). Only God is the source of true wisdom.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

Proverbs 9:10

RESPOND

Pray for anyone you know who needs to turn to and trust the Lord.

*From a prayer of Thomas Aquinas

.....

Journey of discoveries

The Israelites have been enslaved in Egypt for more years than any of them can remember. After 400 years or so of being exposed to pagan beliefs, they are on the way to their Promised Land. They've obviously thought constantly about this journey, but could they have had any real inkling of what it might entail?

About the writer
Liz Pacey



Recently returned to ministry as a Reader in the Church of England, Liz Pacey attends St Michael and All Angels in North Hull, where she has been actively involved in setting up St Mike's Crafty Coffee and Chat. She also enjoys being a part of St Columba Knitwits charity group and is passionate about the coming together of knitting and spirituality.

We move from nail-biting travellers' tales to the giving of laws and commandments. These, along with God's grace and deliverance, are at the heart of the covenant, God's blueprint for the lives of his holy people. Now set free from bondage, the Israelites have so much more to learn about their God. They will see how their lives will need to look as they approach their future destination. Justice is a big deal for God, and some passages make hard reading, particularly those containing laws which seem very strange to us. But there is still so much to learn through God's instructions to his chosen ones. Although leader of a vast people, Moses is only a man. His frustrations and need of advice show through. Help is at hand from his team. The journey is not one-sided; God journeys too. He reaches out to bring his people into relationship with him. True grit and excitement abound.

Our readings end with a glorious 40 days and nights with God for Moses. How we long for that quality time with God, and what an encouragement to keep us on our own journey.

Tuesday 21 April

Exodus 17:1-16

The staff of God

PREPARE

Do you ever feel like a football coach whose team isn't living up to expectations? Do you feel that if you take your eye off the ball all will be lost? Spend some quiet time today thanking God that he always has your back.

READ

Exodus 17:1-16

EXPLORE

Coffee time this morning: No water! Panic stations! Thankfully the communal water source downstairs was unaffected. This is rather different from the water problems the Israelites face. So much rests on Moses here, figuratively and literally. Leadership is a tremendous responsibility. He is experiencing justifiable frustration with these people. It's a hard enough job listening for God's instructions and putting them into practice. Then add in people arguing and blaming him for obstacles along the way. Admittedly, lack of water is a biggie, but it has been sorted before (15:24). Naturally they're all tired and frightened, and Moses is in the firing line. They've lost focus of what they have been promised.

Moses moves pretty much straight on from sorting the water shortage with the staff of God in his hand (v 5) to taking up the staff again to watch over the battle

(v 9). This time he has the support of Aaron and Hur. We too, and especially our leaders, need people who have our backs.

'I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.' So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel.

Exodus 17:6

RESPOND

Think about a leader you know who would benefit from support and encouragement today. What can you do to support them in their role? Reflect on how you might do this regularly.

Now I know

PREPARE

Are you delighted when you hear what God is doing in other places and through other people? Does it make your heart sing? Pray today for people you love, that they might know God's love for them deep in their hearts.

READ

Exodus 18:1-12

EXPLORE

Word travels, maybe not fast in our terms, but nevertheless Jethro hears what God has done.

Moses sent his family to safety with his father-in-law, but now they're back. Jethro can only listen (possibly wide-eyed and open-mouthed) as Moses tells him of all the trials they have been through and how God has come through for them (v 8). In the course of his response, Jethro utters three words which hold a wealth of meaning: 'Now I know...' (v 11). He feels every bit of what Moses has just said, and he can only reach one conclusion. The Lord is greater than all other gods. This is his moment of recognition of God's power. And his immediate reaction is one of praise to God (v 10).

Jethro is immediately welcomed into the family of believers. They all eat a

meal together, very consciously in God's presence (v 12). Moses and his father-in-law have mutual respect and a good trusting relationship. We will see further evidence of this tomorrow.

Jethro was delighted to hear about all the good things the LORD had done for Israel in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians.

Exodus 18:9

RESPOND

'Now I know...' Be quiet and repeat this phrase until it really sinks in to your heart. Change the emphasis on each word in turn, eg 'Now I know'. Enjoy God's presence and thank him for the wonder of knowing him in our hearts.

Thursday 23 April

Exodus 18:13–27

Relative advice

PREPARE

Have you ever tried to do something in your own strength when you knew you needed help? How was that? Ask God to show you your weaknesses, and others' strengths. Pray that you'll never be too proud to accept help.

READ

Exodus 18:13–27

EXPLORE

Hours before my first shift at the nursing home I was called to come in straight away. No explanation. I panicked. The senior staff were off to a meeting, and I was needed to cover. No induction for me.

No induction period either for Moses... He went straight into his new job. He has the care of thousands of people, and it will be too much for one man, even if he is deciding all disputes with God's decrees (v 16). However, father-in-law Jethro is looking out for him and realises that Moses is in danger of wearing himself out (v 18). Where would all these people be without him? So, Jethro shares his wisdom (vs 20,21). Moses needs to teach the laws then appoint capable people as leaders (v 25). They will then sort out the more straightforward cases and know when they must call in greater authority.

It is good for others to be involved and share their talents. Perhaps we too need to learn to let other people share our loads.

'Let them serve as judges for the people at all times, but let them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you.'

Exodus 18:22

RESPOND

Pray today for all in authority, especially leaders in your church, not forgetting their families. We never know what they may be facing. Ask God for guidance on how you can support them.

My treasured possession

PREPARE

Do you ever feel like just a go-between, constantly juggling other people's expectations, feeling that you yourself are getting lost somewhere in it all? Take time out with God today. Allow his love to surround you and quieten your heart.

READ

Exodus 19:1-25

EXPLORE

'You never rest. You need to slow down, take some me time.' These may be familiar words for many of us.

Moses is certainly never at rest here. There is so much to do, so much responsibility, a lot of coming and going here between him, the people and God.

The Israelites need reminding that they have already had indisputable proof of what God can do for them (v 4). They must learn to listen to him, obey him in the now. Only then will they be able to take advantage of being his 'treasured possession' (v 5).

God's instructions are very clear, the mountain is holy and the people need to be very careful to obey God's instructions about it. They are to set themselves apart for God.

The words of God are a warning. Do we sometimes ignore warnings to our detriment?

“You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”
These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.’

Exodus 19:6

RESPOND

Thank God today that you are his treasured possession. Pray for those close to you who don't yet know how special they are to God.

Saturday 25 April

Exodus 20:1-21

Rightful obedience

PREPARE

Do you ever feel lost in today's world, as if there are no clear guidelines? Do you wonder if anyone really cares how you do things? Thank God that he cares. If we follow him, we can't go far wrong.

READ

Exodus 20:1-21

EXPLORE

Have you ever had a conversation with someone who obviously knows you, but you just can't think who they are? And you can't quite pluck up the courage to tell them that... No chance of that here with God. He not only announces himself but reminds the Israelites how far he has brought them (v 2). He isn't setting out commandments as a framework to get to salvation. These are people he has already chosen, and he is educating them in the life they need to lead.

Pause now and take in the wonder of being chosen by God! Of course, they have a lot of back history of beliefs to be erased. They must concentrate on their new life now. The path God lays out involves their (and our) relationship with him (the first four commandments, vs 3-8). The priority is to be right with God. Then comes relationship with

others (the last six commandments, vs 12-17). God's love forges a path through our lives, demanding our complete obedience in every area.

'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.'

Exodus 20:2

RESPOND

'There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear' (1 John 4:18). The people are frightened that if they see God they will die (v 19). Does God's presence frighten us? Thank him that in Jesus there is absolutely no need.

Cries from the heart

PREPARE

Pray: 'Lord, thank you so much for each day of this past week. The ups and the downs. Thank you that you have been present with me every step of the way, even when I haven't always felt it. Amen.'

READ

Psalm 35

EXPLORE

I often used to ask my husband if he wanted the good or bad news first. A resigned sigh was the answer: 'Go on then.' He knew it wasn't really all doom and gloom... But our lives really do veer from good to bad and back again with surprising regularity. And we wouldn't be human if we didn't attach our own commentary to life's events. As people of faith, we will certainly be bringing God into the account.

David does all the above. It's a roller coaster as he tells God his circumstances, wants those seeking his life to be put to shame (v 4), and wants them to experience all kinds of horrible things (vs 7,8). In verse 9 he's rejoicing in the Lord because bad things have happened. But the rejoicing is that the poor and needy will triumph (v 10). We need to learn to walk in God's light,

whatever is going on around us, and try to look at suffering and injustice with his eyes, not our own.

My tongue will proclaim your righteousness, your praises all day long.

Psalm 35:28

RESPOND

'Do not take revenge ... On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink..."' (Romans 12:19,20). Reflect on these verses.

Monday 27 April

Exodus 21:1-11

Much more than slaves

PREPARE

'So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:36). What is your idea of freedom? Something as small as a break from daily routine? Or much bigger dreams? Reflect on God's precious freedom.

READ

Exodus 21:1-11

EXPLORE

The Israelites know all about being slaves. Now they are free and must take great care not to do to others what the Egyptians did to them. God doesn't want bad experiences to be perpetuated. They, and we, must learn to put the past behind us, but also learn from it.

In Old Testament times, slavery was a fact of life, the only resort for people who had nothing or no one. God has a lot to say to Moses on this subject. The Israelites need to be re-educated, to learn the importance of treating everyone equally. What a choice verses 5 and 6 bring: the slave going free on his own or staying in captivity with his family. But if the master is worthy of the servant's love, then there will be security not to be found elsewhere.

We don't have slaves, but we still must care for our fellow humans, regardless of their status. We don't have to listen to the news very often to realise modern slavery exists. We need to take a stand.

... the servant declares, "I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free"

Exodus 21:5

RESPOND

How do we treat people who others might look down on? What can we do to find out what they are most in need of, and how we can support them? Pray for people who have lost their freedom. Or never had it.

Tough justice

PREPARE

Do you blame God for letting bad things happen? Do you ever ask where he is in a particular situation? Think about times when bad things have happened to you. What helped you in such times? What passages of Scripture did you turn to?

READ

Exodus 21:12-25

EXPLORE

I like to watch a good old-fashioned murder mystery. Not the more modern realistic gritty ones. I'm more interested in the characters than the actual crimes. Today's passage gives us a good dose of realism as Moses tells forth laws which might be hard for us to comprehend.

This passage is pretty much all about personal injuries: hurt done to another person. There are many categories, many scenarios where death ensues. We might ask what value life has here. The basic premise is a life for life (v 23). Let the punishment fit the crime. Humans have always hurt other humans, deliberately or accidentally. Here, if killing is accidental, it is apparently forgiven (v 13). We would call it manslaughter and the sentence is reduced. But beating is forgiven if death doesn't result because the slave

is the master's property (v 21). That's a bit harder to stomach, but Jesus encourages us to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9).

'However, if it is not done intentionally, but God lets it happen, they are to flee to a place I will designate.'

Exodus 21:13

RESPOND

How has today's passage made you feel? Words to live by: 'He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8).

Wednesday 29 April

Exodus 22:1-15

Paying it back

PREPARE

Have you ever been burgled, personally or at church? How did that make you feel? Share your feelings with God.

.....

READ

Exodus 22:1-15

EXPLORE

I was chatting to a lady recently who had had an attempted break-in while she was asleep. How vulnerable does that leave someone feeling? My church frequently has windows broken. These crimes are sadly common signs of the times, and the perpetrators are not always caught.

This passage goes into detail about protection of property. We might be tempted to think, hang on, what's this all about? But it shows how important minute details are, and how necessary it is to get things right, especially for the one suffering loss. The punishments in these cases often go beyond the obvious. And the crime isn't always what is done. Negligence and carelessness are crimes too (vs 5,6).

At the end of the day, laws are there to protect people and justice must be made complete by appropriate

recompense being given. We might be quite confident that we do not deliberately do harm to others. But are we so confident about the things we omit to do?

'Anyone who steals must certainly make restitution, but if they have nothing, they must be sold to pay for their theft.'

Exodus 22:3b

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord, we may see things that seem unjust in our lives, but we confess that we don't always see the whole picture. We thank you for our country's lawmakers and enforcers. We pray you will bless them with wisdom in all their decisions. Amen.'

Do no evil

PREPARE

Pray: 'Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me' (Psalm 51:10–12).

READ

Exodus 22:16–31

EXPLORE

Much of this passage may seem alien to us. It is no longer solely about crimes that can be easily dealt with by punishment. Now we move on to the proper treatment of others.

All these social responsibilities will help to distinguish the Israelites' ways from the oppressive ways of the Egyptians. God loves his people dearly, wants the very best for them, and wants them to be aware of the needs of others (vs 25–27). Verse 28 warns that they must not blaspheme God or curse their rulers.

Today, believing in God is no longer a given. Curses flow freely without thought from many lips. In Britain, as in many countries around the world, we choose our government and we need to respect the choice of the majority, even if it is not ours. We can't pick and choose which bits we follow.

Most importantly, we must not hold back from offering our best to help steer our land in a godward direction.

'Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people.'

Exodus 22:28

RESPOND

God wants us to be his holy people (v 31). What do you think that means in practical terms in your daily life? Ask God to keep you focused on him today and make you aware of opportunities to spread his love.

Friday 1 May

Exodus 23:1-19

Godly routine

PREPARE

When you think about the concept of godly routine, what principles and practices come to mind? Which bit of your routine do you most value?

.....

READ

Exodus 23:1-19

EXPLORE

Back in the day (are you old enough to remember?!), weeks had their own routine. Monday was washing day and lunch was fry-up of Sunday's leftovers. Sunday was a day of rest; there were no shops open then. Maybe our lives aren't geared up to routine the way they once were, but a Sabbath day was important for the Israelites. And it should be for us too.

There are plenty of routines in this section on laws of justice and mercy. For animals too! They need their rest (v 12). They can't always look after themselves. They need us (v 4). This verse also illustrates the 'extra mile'. Not only do you have to look after a fallen donkey of a friend but even the animal of someone you hate (v 5).

What strikes me here is that, whatever the context, it is never only 'me' that is affected. We absolutely cannot live

in isolation. Do we have our own little clique that we treat well? We need to remember the donkeys, slaves and foreigners too (v 12).

'Bring the best of the firstfruits of your soil to the house of the LORD your God. Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk.'

Exodus 23:19

RESPOND

What stood out for you in today's passage? Where is God prompting you? How might you go the 'extra mile' in relation to mercy and fairness, Sabbaths or celebrating the main feasts?

Listen carefully

PREPARE

‘The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge...’ (Psalm 18:2). Pray: ‘Lord God, thank you that you are always surrounding me with your strength and protection. Amen.’

READ

Exodus 23:20-33

EXPLORE

We come out of the laws now and back into the stream of what these people can expect in their future. Once again it will be a bit of a roller coaster.

How wonderful to know that God means business. He is showing his power by sending his angel to prepare the way, to guard them (v 20) and turn back their enemies (v 27). He wants his people to take hold of that. They must listen to him carefully, so they know exactly how to cope (v 22). They must destroy all traces of other gods, so they are not distracted back into their old beliefs (v 24).

Are we good at listening carefully to God, especially when times are difficult? We too must make sure we have no redundant sacred stones in our lives.

All the laws we have read about have been leading to equipping God’s people to be good and just and ready to become the nation he desires.

‘But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you.’

Exodus 23:29

RESPOND

The children of Israel were encouraged to ‘listen carefully’ to what the angel said. How might we give some time to listening to God today? What does God want you to focus on? Where might you need to obey his Word?

Sunday 3 May

Psalm 36

God is our refuge

PREPARE

Think back over your life to the times when you have known God's faithful love. Remember how you have taken refuge in the shadow of his wings. Praise God for his unfailing love!

READ

Psalm 36

EXPLORE

I'm taking refuge this week. My flat is in chaos as a new kitchen is installed, and my lovely friend not only gives me a quiet space to write but feeds and waters me too! I'm certainly feasting on the abundance of her house (v 8).

This is a psalm of two halves. First, David knows God is speaking deep in his heart about the wicked and their sinfulness (v 1). They are totally obsessed with evil plans (v 4). Then we have the contrast of the beautiful poetic words of David as he luxuriates in the priceless, unfailing love of God (v 7). Words such as life and light lift him up. He knows the best refuge is in the shadow of God's wings. David longs for God's love to continue to all who know him (v 10).

Tomorrow we will see Moses experiencing the glory of God. Today, may we be thankful for these men of God, David

and Moses, for their ability to rise above the everyday, and the encouragement their faith brings us.

How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

Psalm 36:7

RESPOND

Picture yourself in the shadow of God's wings. How does it feel to be there? Where else is a place of refuge or security for you? Recall God's faithful love to you and sing or listen to the hymn 'Great is thy faithfulness'.

The God of Israel

PREPARE

Listen to, read the lyrics or sing the old hymn 'Trust and Obey'. 'There is no other way but to trust and obey' is a good motto to reflect on in preparation for today's reading.

READ

Exodus 24:1-18

EXPLORE

I saw a meme on social media that asks if coming home to an empty house is loneliness or freedom. I admit that, after being my husband's full-time caregiver for several years, I initially felt an element of relief and freedom when he died. The loneliness took longer to kick in.

Even with people around we can still feel lonely. Moses, surrounded by so many people, still walks a lonely path to freedom. He has been through much: journeying, receiving God's commandments and laws. He alone has been tasked with this. When he returns to the people, they with one voice say they will do everything God says (v 3). Sounds pretty good! But are they a bit carried away with the moment? Will they find it as easy in reality?

Do we sometimes say what everyone else is saying to be part of the crowd,

without thinking it through? Moses writes it all down (v 4) so it can't be forgotten. He builds pillars to represent the 12 tribes. Words and visual prompts are so important to us too.

Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

Exodus 24:18

RESPOND

Write a letter to God, thanking him for trusting you to share his love with others. Pray that you will always do your very best to be guided by his Word. Keep the letter safe to return to when you need encouragement.

Ladders and branches

Is equality essential? Definitely, yes! Inequality in opportunities and rights has created imbalances in society, and has been the cause of conflicts and struggles. But equality doesn't mean that every person has the same position or responsibility in the social framework. Institutions cannot exist or thrive without systems of hierarchy. Ranks and positions are not just decorations, but essential rungs on the organisational ladder.

About the writer **Jacob Kunnath**

A member of the Church of South India, Jacob Kunnath was brought up in the missionary and Anglican roots of the church, which helped him to develop Bible-based perspectives regarding faith and life. At college, Jacob accepted Jesus as his Saviour. He is glad to be in service to the Lord through his calling as a teacher for the past thirty years.



However, we often see situations of exploitation and imbalances when a system functions within strict structures. This crisis can be transformed when ladders become branches, through the magic touch of relationships.

In God's structure of governance, too, there is the ladder of hierarchy. The book of Hebrews, especially in its first chapters, offers pictures of these differences in position. Angels, prophets, saints, apostles and the like are rungs on this ladder. But God has transformed the ladder into a tree with beautiful branches, where relationships work towards harmony. When reading the first six chapters of the book, let us observe how God has ordained the relationship framework among the many players of his divine drama. Let us also be conscious to discover how humanity's rebellion and sin can mar this beauty of relationships. More than anything, let's discover afresh the salvation ministry of Jesus Christ that works towards setting up a right relationship with God the Father, and helping us all to move on until we reach the rest he has prepared for us.

Unquestionably unique

PREPARE

Let's pray and look forward to a new understanding about Jesus Christ while reading these sections from the book of Hebrews.

READ

Hebrews 1:1-4

EXPLORE

The world has never lacked wonderful teachers. Even when we do not give a whole-hearted allegiance to any one teacher, it appears OK to accept the good in any teaching. The opening verses of Hebrews make it clear that Jesus is not to be seen as just one among many good teachers. Yes, when we look to history, we do not see Jesus himself until a certain point of time. Before that, God spoke through the prophets. But that does not undermine the worth or value of Jesus.

The passage for today helps us to recognise some elements of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. He is not just another prophet. He is the Son of God, chosen by God to speak to us in a unique way. The universe came into being through him. God has placed him to be the heir of all things. He reflects God's glory unlike anyone else. His word is powerful enough to sustain all things.

He purifies us from sin. Heaven's majesty lies around him.

These four verses start with a mention of the prophets, and end with a note on angels. Jesus, the Son of God, is superior to both the prophets and the angels. He's not just another of God's spokespersons!

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.

Hebrews 1:3

RESPOND

Pray that God will open your mind to realise and recognise the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

Wednesday 6 May

Hebrews 1:5–14

Not just an angel!

PREPARE

Thank God for the uniqueness of Jesus and what that means for your faith.

READ

Hebrews 1:5–14

EXPLORE

Angels fascinate many of us. Today's passage in many Bibles has a heading telling us that Christ is greater than the angels. Quoting from the Old Testament, especially the psalms in this passage, the writer gives us a new understanding of Jesus Christ – he is not just another angel. Thus the author of the letter to the Hebrews is looking to reinforce the divinity of Christ, perhaps in response to those who challenged this.

The passage first focuses on the father-son relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ. While it is true that a father-child connection is possible between God and any human, the uniqueness lies in that Jesus is the 'firstborn', begotten not created, as the Nicene Creed declares. The angels are appointed to minister to this Son of God, who is also God. We also get glimpses of the eternal reign of Jesus

in verses 10–12. He was there from the beginning and his years will never end.

The angels are there to serve God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. And they are there to minister to us too, who inherit God's salvation through Jesus Christ (v 14).

**But about the Son he says,
'Your throne, O God, will last
for ever and ever; a sceptre of
justice will be the sceptre of
your kingdom.'**

Hebrews 1:8

RESPOND

Thank God for the salvation that we have received through Jesus Christ, his Son. What aspect of this are you most grateful for today?

Ignorance – not a bliss!

PREPARE

An understanding of the cost and worth of our salvation helps us to recognise how precious it is. Pray that today's reading will deepen this understanding in you.

READ

Hebrews 2:1-9

EXPLORE

The saying 'ignorance is bliss' means that it is sometimes good to be unaware of a situation. Today's reading teaches us the contrary: it is a bliss and blessing to be informed and reminded of something uniquely significant – our salvation. Today's passage outlines two matters that we are to be informed of.

First is the message spoken through the angels (see also Acts 7:53 and Galatians 3:19), which points to the just punishment for our disobedience. Next is the message of our salvation. We sense how serious and precious it is when we read about the different ways it was delivered to us. It was first announced by the Lord. Then it was confirmed by those who heard him. Finally it was established by signs, wonders and miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Verses 5-9 take us to another level in our understanding of this salvation: Jesus Christ. He was made, for a little while, a

little lower than the angels. Then he tasted death, which was part of God's grace to the world. Finally he was crowned with glory and honour. All this for our salvation!

But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Hebrews 2:9

RESPOND

Pray that you will become more and more aware of and alert to the worth and cost of your salvation, brought through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, whose glory we are to share in eternity.

Friday 8 May

Hebrews 2:10–18

Paths of glory

PREPARE

What does it mean when we declare we have been saved through Jesus Christ?

.....

READ

Hebrews 2:10–18

EXPLORE

Thomas Gray's poem 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' (1751) has this line: 'The paths of glory lead but to the grave'. The poet speaks of earthly glory, which vanishes with death. Today's passage introduces a different type of glory, and the path that leads to this. Interestingly, the path is already covered not by people who are to be partakers of the glory, but by Jesus Christ, the provider of this glory. As verse 10 indicates, this glory is through the experience of salvation.

What has Jesus Christ done for our salvation? The passage calls him 'pioneer of (our) salvation'. He brings us salvation because he suffered (v 10). He has made us holy and we are the same family with him (v 11). Jesus had to become human to be the forerunner, a new Adam, someone who would die for humanity, paying for their sins (v 17).

The path of glory etched out by Jesus Christ leads us beyond the grave. And it

is secure for the sinner saved by Jesus, the 'merciful and faithful high priest in service to God', who makes 'atonement for the sins of the people' (v 17).

For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

Hebrews 2:17

RESPOND

Thank God for the glory that is prepared for us through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Pray that your life will be a fitting response to that gift of salvation.

Focused and faithful

PREPARE

In what ways have you considered emulating Christ as your leader and guide in your heavenward journey?

READ

Hebrews 3:1–6

EXPLORE

Many of the characters we meet in the Bible, who are called by God to be leaders of the faith, bear comparison with some aspects of Jesus Christ.

Today's passage presents such a comparison between Jesus and Moses. The starting note of a 'heavenly calling' itself indicates a worthy and lofty destination. Moses was given just such a destination in the Promised Land, where he was to lead God's people. Both Moses and Jesus were faithful to the call of God.

However, the passage seeks to establish that Christ is greater than Moses, who was a servant, whereas Jesus is God's Son, a high priest and apostle. Jesus is worthy of greater glory.

The writer concludes this argument with a startling note: God's house, which is the lofty destination, is not just something we look forward to after our death. Indeed, we ourselves are God's

house (v 6), but only if we hold on with confidence and hope.

But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

Hebrews 3:6

RESPOND

What does being part of God's house mean to you? How does this idea support and encourage your faith?

Sunday 10 May

Hebrews 3:7-19

A mandate to be good

PREPARE

Are you able to follow God's commands in the Bible, rather than glancing at them as exhortations or suggestions?

.....

READ

Hebrews 3:7-19

EXPLORE

Much of today's passage goes back to the Old Testament. Verses 7-11 of Hebrews 3 directly echo verses 7-11 of Psalm 95.

Continuing on the note taken up in verses 1-6, the writer refers to Moses as a leader who faced multiple problems with his people: hardened hearts, rebellion, sin and unbelief are some. The passage warns against this disobedience when it starts with: 'So, as the Holy Spirit says...' It is not an exhortation but a mandate from God. Just as the Israelites in the wilderness were shown a destination, the New Testament believers are pointed to a divine and eternal rest. But to enter this, God seeks from us a heart that is not hardened against him and is free from rebellion. This comes with a sense of urgency: 'today' (v 13)!

The passage moves forward with a two-fold practical tip on how a believer has to practise this. The first is what we need to do for our own self: avoid 'a sinful, unbelieving heart' (v 12). The next is about the relationship with our fellow believers: 'encourage one another daily' (v 13). The final verses follow a Greek practice of asking and then answering questions to reinforce the points being made.

We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.

Hebrews 3:14

RESPOND

How serious are you regarding the divine warning to avoid rebellion and disobedience? Pray that you will focus on living God's way for the rest of your earthly life.

Divine destinations

PREPARE

Are you aware of the eternal rest that awaits you?

READ

Hebrews 4:1-11

EXPLORE

Isn't it a joy to work as a team, toil towards a goal and then have a time of collective celebration where we are at rest? God has arranged such an occasion for his people. In fact, it has already started, but the team has not yet fully arrived!

Today we read about the divine rest God has prepared for us. The significance of this collective rest is that God himself is a party to this. God has done his part, and he has accomplished what he was destined to do: '...and yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world ... On the seventh day God rested from all his works...' (vs 3,4).

Now it is for us to do our part. What stops us from being there? 'Let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it' (v 1). A few reasons are given in the passage for why some do not enter the rest: 'the message they heard was of no value to them, because

they did not share the faith of those who obeyed' (v 2).

The passage asks us to act 'today' (v 7). Let's turn our hearts away from disobedience and a lack of faith. The destination awaits us!

For anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his.

Hebrews 4:10

RESPOND

Pray that you will be serious about the invitation to enter the divine rest, and that you will mend your ways today so that you are worthy of this call.

Tuesday 12 May

Hebrews 4:12–16

Severe and sympathetic

PREPARE

‘That person is too severe. It would’ve been good to show a bit of sympathy.’ Has this, or the opposite, been a judgement statement you’ve heard about others or yourself?

.....

READ

Hebrews 4:12–16

EXPLORE

The two paradoxical attributes of justice and grace are juxtaposed in our understanding of God. He is said to be immensely merciful, and, at the same time, his sense of justice is impartial and of the highest standard. How can these two work together in anyone?

Today’s passage, divided into two paragraphs in many versions, helps us understand this paradox. The severity comes in the sharpness of God’s Word, presented as a double-edged sword. It has to penetrate to the innermost parts of the person, impacting the soul, spirit, joints, marrow, thoughts and attitudes.

To speak about grace and mercy, the writer points to Jesus Christ. He is presented from the human aspect – as a man, a high priest. His word reveals to us, with all severity, how fallen and sinful we are. But as a high priest between God and humanity, Jesus Christ views

and watches over us with sympathy. He knows that we are weak. He himself has gone through the temptations we face. He hasn’t sinned, but he knows the pain of sin – and its penalty. Through him, we receive grace and forgiveness.

**Let us then approach
God’s throne of grace with
confidence, so that we may
receive mercy and find grace
to help us in our time of need.**

Hebrews 4:16

RESPOND

Examine yourself: how far and how deep has the double-edged sword which is the Word of God gone into you? Pray that you will come to God’s throne with confidence to receive mercy and grace.

Humbled when elevated

PREPARE

When you or someone known to you is elevated to high positions of greater responsibility, do the aura and dignity of the position stand out? Amid this, do you get a sense that the new role demands more sacrifice and humility?

READ

Hebrews 5:1-10

EXPLORE

Today's passage has three sections. Verses 1-4 speak of the call received by a person to be a high priest. The person is not chosen for his perfection. Instead, his weakness stands out as one of his qualifications, as it enables him to sympathise with others who fail and fall.

The next section (vs 5,6) focuses on Jesus. Two aspects of his life are described: his sonship and his priesthood. Both these come to him as divine appointments by the Father. The writer quotes Psalm 2:7 in verse 5 to speak of the sonship of Jesus, as appointed by God. His being chosen as high priest is established through a statement from Psalm 110:4.

In the third section (vs 7-10), we are drawn to glance at the humility and submission of Jesus Christ, in response to the two lofty appointments bestowed

upon him. Prayers, petitions, reverent submission and suffering mark his obedience. As a result, he becomes the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

Once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Hebrews 5:9

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord God, may the humility and submission of Jesus Christ be reflected in me when I move into positions of responsibility as appointed by you, as well as in my daily life.'

Thursday 14 May

Hebrews 5:11 – 6:3

Grow up, child!

PREPARE

Do you have an understanding of the levels of growth you need to achieve in your Christian journey?

.....

READ

Hebrews 5:11 – 6:3

EXPLORE

It may be a cozy feeling to become a Christian. Many of us have cherished memories of the born-again experience, when we realised the saving power of Jesus Christ. On that occasion, we invited him into our lives as our Saviour and Lord. Looking back to this experience may help us keep going in our faith and life. Others of us will have experienced a growing awareness that we were choosing to follow Jesus.

Let's evaluate our present walk in Christian faith on the basis of verse 11 in chapter 5: 'We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand.' Are we Christians of stunted growth, with no capability to take in solid food? Do we still thrive on the basics alone?

Today's passage evidently points to the need for growth. Speaking to the

readers of the times, the writer says: 'by this time you ought to be teachers!' (v 12). Thus, chapter 6 opens with this demand to move on towards maturity. It takes effort and perseverance. But let's share the confidence stated in 6:3: 'And God permitting, we will do so.'

Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity.

Hebrews 6:1

RESPOND

God's desire for us is to grow up from the basics. Today, prayerfully decide on the areas you are going to invest in, to contribute towards your spiritual maturity.

Admonished and encouraged

PREPARE

When you think back to your childhood, was there some element of pampering and at the same time some element of scolding?

READ

Hebrews 6:4–12

EXPLORE

Today's passage is a challenging one, and there is no clear agreement as to how it should be interpreted.

Verses 4–8 can be seen as an admonishment. The passage appears as a message of hopelessness for those 'who have once been enlightened ... who have tasted the goodness of the word of God' (vs 4,5). But as verse 6 says, they 'have fallen away'. The indisputable terms used by the writer are shocking, and are intended to highlight the gravity of the fall. The fallen ones cannot be brought back to repentance; 'they are crucifying the Son of God all over again' (v 6). It is perhaps that their hearts have become too hard to repent.

Does the next section (vs 9–12) appear to be a soothing balm upon the severity of the statements above? The writer speaks of his conviction about those who remain in the faith. He encourages

them and comments on the 'better things' in their case (v 9). Their deeds of kindness, done out of love, will not be forgotten by God (v 10). At the same time, we cannot be complacent. As is said in verses 11 and 12, show diligence to the very end. Imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised!

We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realised.

Hebrews 6:11

RESPOND

Pray that you will be diligent in the faith that has saved you, and be humbled to know that your good deeds are before the eyes of God.

Saturday 16 May

Hebrews 6:13–20

Assurances of hope

PREPARE

Which of all the promises of God have been significant in your life?

.....

READ

Hebrews 6:13–20

EXPLORE

Vow, promise, pledge, affirmation, bond, guarantee... There are many words that indicate agreement between two parties. Such contracts have always been signposts of civilisation.

After explaining the relationship between God and humanity and exposing its possibilities and problems, the writer speaks about the solemnity of agreement between the two parties. The key note of this promise is this: 'I will surely bless you' (v 14).

This promise first comes as a swearing from God. Swearing, in its positive sense, is a verbal utterance based on trust. This promise of God, given to Abraham when he is promised descendants, can be seen in Genesis 12:1–3.

Next is an oath: God repeats his promise to Abraham at the point when he is ready to sacrifice Isaac. But God has no higher authority above him, and hence

he swears by himself, to make this an oath: 'I swear by myself, declares the LORD' (Genesis 22:16).

The climactic point of the display of God's love to us is through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ: 'We have this hope ... It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf' (vs 19,20).

Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.

Hebrews 6:17

RESPOND

The history of the Bible is the story of God's unchanging love, finally sealed at the cross. Can you respond to this with unwavering faith?

Who are you talking to?

PREPARE

In situations where you are unjustly hurt, are you willing to be comforted by the Lord?

READ

Psalm 37

EXPLORE

Here we see someone who feels they have been wronged, and some evil person or people are instrumental in causing hurt. David might be speaking to himself, trying to find consolation in a situation where he was unnecessarily wronged. Thus the whole psalm is a picture of contrast: speaking about people 'good and bad', their ways, and the fate that awaits them.

Consider this psalm as one that offers lessons of self-evaluation. How do we react and respond when we think we are surrounded by unfair people and circumstances? Let David teach us some lessons!

Towards the evil-doers: Do not be envious of them (v 1). Realise that God will deal with them in his own way (vs 7,9,10,13–15).

Towards God: Trust and take delight in the Lord (vs 3,4). Believe that he will vindicate you because he is just and righteous (v 6).

Towards your spiritual life: Be still and patient (v 7). Keep away from anger (v 8). Be filled with the Lord's Word and his wisdom (vs 30,31).

Towards your future: Be assured that God will reward you (v 11).

Towards your reward: We may sometimes think we have little (v 16), but God gives us that which is eternal (v 18).

The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord; he is their stronghold in time of trouble.

Psalm 37:39

RESPOND

Prayerfully consider if the attitude of anyone is worrying you. Commit this person and yourself into God's hands and pray that his righteousness will work effectively in all of us.



The Bible and me –

an SU council member's experience of the Bible



In this Spotlight article, we asked a member of Scripture Union's Council to tell us a little about

what the Bible means to them. For this issue, we talked with **Alison Keddity**, a Council member and Children and Families Mission Leader in her local church.

What was your early experience of the Bible?

My earliest memory of any book was a beautiful picture book, 'Baby Jesus'. Every night, I would ask my increasingly bored mum to read the same story again and again. I was fascinated by the story of God inviting an ordinary girl and boy into a rather dramatic and dangerous journey of faith. I wondered what God might ask me to do one day. As I got a bit older, I was given an illustrated Bible. I remember being captivated by the picture of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and flicking through the pages to find my favourite picture while I was still too young to read many of the

words. I still own both books and treasure them as reminders of the foundation of my faith.

How did your appreciation of the Bible grow as you got older?

My first 'proper' Bible was a Good News translation that painted a picture with words and occasionally relatively simple illustrations that always gave me great joy! I grew up using daily Bible reading notes that helped me to think about what the Bible meant for me and my life, rather than simply being enthralled by stories of angels, dreams and a guiding star.

By my late teens, scripture was so familiar that it was easy to let it wash over me. That changed when I discovered different translations of the Bible and the idea of critically engaging with scripture. Faith became unfamiliar and uncomfortable for a while as I wrestled with the Bible for the first time. But this tussle with scripture gave me deeper roots and the ability to defend my faith when challenges arose.

Standing firm

Of course, there have been plenty of challenges over the years. We all face our own battles. But I have been reminded each time that the 'sword of the Spirit' (the Word of God) is part of 'the full armour of God' (see Ephesians 6:10-18) that we are commanded to wear into battle. As I write this, I have agreed to another round of brain surgery that will be risky and difficult. I have spent the past few days expecting to be comforted by scripture that reminds me of the hope of heaven. I have been surprised that it has been the stories of Hannah, Deborah and Mary that have brought me solace. We read how these women all placed enormous trust in the Lord when faced with diverse challenges. They knew where their hope came from and in reading their stories my hope in the Lord is shored up. Another surprise was that it was not during my private Bible study that I found the hope that I was looking for. It was when I was sharing Bible stories with my children that the Lord interrupted my fear and replaced it with trust.

A story to share

Being a mother of six, I have spent countless hours sharing Bible stories with my children. I often think that

I'm reading the Bible to help our children grow in faith. But, in truth, it is the act of sharing scripture with the young that grows my faith. The Bible was never meant to be hidden away; it was written so that all could hear the truth. And there is such a blessing in sharing scripture with those who have fresh ears. The desperation and tears of Hannah, the steadfast leading of Deborah and the joy of Mary are all wondrous stories, especially when heard for the first time. Our 5-year-old is just as captivated by the drama of the nativity story as I once was. It is so special to him that he has placed a copy of the story in my study so that I can enjoy it. He doesn't understand the significance of his choice of story, or the blessing to me that I can see his enthusiasm for sharing scripture. One day, I hope and pray that he will share the story with his children. In the meantime, I will keep clinging to scripture and sharing it with those around me, for surely this is one of the greatest privileges of the Christian life.

Alison Keddity

Editor's note: We're pleased to let you know that Alison survived the brain surgery and continues to share Bible stories with her children.

Beyond disastrous

In December 2023, three academics, Benjamin Toff, Ruth Palmer and Rasmus K Nielsen, wrote a book called *Avoiding the News*. One of the main reasons people give for avoiding the news is that it is depressing. It is not just that bad news is always more notable than good news: the scale of bad news seems to have increased. Wars, ecological disaster, social breakdown and the dismantling of a world order are big items of news!

Moreover, they are not happening far away: they are on our doorstep and many people feel robbed of any sense of security they may have had.

If you share this disquiet, the prophet Joel will speak with incredible freshness. Scholars seem uncertain about the precise date of Joel's prophecy. That doesn't matter because it speaks to a common human experience.

Like many generations before and since, the people of Joel's day felt overwhelmed by political and ecological crises. Joel does not underestimate the scale of the disaster his people face. At the same time, he speaks with faith and prophetic authority of God's faithfulness and sovereignty. He speaks beyond disaster, even beyond restoration, to a time of undreamed-of blessing and the outpouring of God's Spirit.

No matter how bad the news, we live in the age of the Spirit and enjoy the good news that the Old Testament prophets such as Joel could only glimpse from afar (1 Peter 1:12).

About the writer **Steve Silvester**



Steve Silvester is Rector of St Nic's Nottingham, a thriving, international, city-centre 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.

Wake up!

PREPARE

What is going on in your life and in the world right now? Bring your concerns to God in prayer. ‘Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you’ (1 Peter 5:7).

READ

Joel 1:1–12

EXPLORE

Sometimes we experience life as wave after wave of crisis and disaster. The peace and prosperity of Joel’s contemporaries were being threatened by invaders.

His people were used to invasions by neighbouring nations (see 3:4–6). Now they faced a new invading force: locusts, stripping the land of its vegetation, came in plague after plague (vs 4,6).

Even today locusts can devastate whole nations. Between June 2019 and February 2022 there was an outbreak of desert locusts that threatened food supplies in East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian subcontinent.

How should we respond to a crisis? We might choose escapism. Why not hide from reality and drown your sorrows (v 5)? There are plenty of distractions available to us today.

Joel’s call to escapists is, ‘Wake up! Beneath the ecological disaster is a

spiritual reality that people need to wake up to. Repeatedly he uses the phrase ‘dried up’. The ground, the wine, the vine, the fruit trees are all dried up; joy is withered away (vs 10,12). They have lost their life-giving source. Ultimately, this is their relationship with God.

Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land.

Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your ancestors?

Joel 1:2

RESPOND

Escapism, even pious escapism, is not an option for the Christian. God’s Word calls us to wake up, look at the world with realism, see the underlying issues and be joyful in God. (Read Habakkuk 3:17–19.)

Tuesday 19 May

Joel 1:13–20

A time to lament

PREPARE

It's time to stop. Lay aside your to-do list. The greater the challenge you face, the more essential it is to do nothing but pray. Later, God will show you what actions to take.

READ

Joel 1:13–20

EXPLORE

What can we do when disaster strikes? The obvious answer – pray! – is not necessarily our first response. Perhaps this is because we are not sure how to pray in such circumstances. Lament, so central to the prayer of the Bible in the psalms, is not so widely practised by the church today. But before we can 'cry out to the Lord' (v 14) for answers, we need to mourn the gravity of the situation. This makes psychological as well as spiritual sense.

Joel addresses the spiritual leaders of his nation (v 13). They need to initiate a unified response to what is happening. The desperate food shortage had hit the very heart of the nation's worship, its daily sacrifice in which the fruits of the land were offered to God.

The call is then to go out to the elders and 'all who live in the land' (v 14) to

assemble together at the Temple to cry out to God. In verse 19, as forest fires take hold, the prophet himself adds his voice to this growing outpouring of prayer.

Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.

Joel 1:14

RESPOND

Is there a journey of prayer you need to go on? Is it one you need to take with others, not just alone? Does it lead through the unfamiliar territory of lament? Psalm 42 may be a place to start.

The day of the Lord

PREPARE

Can you think of a time when you were shaken to the core? What happened? How did you respond at the time, and what impact has it had on you since?

READ

Joel 2:1-11

EXPLORE

Until 26 December 2004, most people in the West had not heard the word 'tsunami'. However, the catastrophe triggered by the powerful earthquake in the Indian ocean that day brought 'tsunami' – an unstoppable, enormous wave of devastating destruction – into common parlance. In the same way, 'the day of the LORD' (vs 1,11) has the same ability to produce a vivid and fearful effect. 'The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?' (v 11).

But what is the prophet describing here? Is it an irresistible military invasion? Is it the locust plague (referred to as an 'army' in v 25)? Is it the army of the Lord? In Israel's collective memory, it is all these things and many other traumas.

There is not always a direct correlation between disaster and God's direct judgement on human sin. Jesus made this very clear to his contemporaries (see Luke 13:1-5). However, whenever disaster

strikes, it is a wake-up call. As CS Lewis wrote in *The Problem of Pain* (1940), 'God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.'

The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty is the army that obeys his command. The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?

Joel 2:11

RESPOND

Take time to bring before God any disturbing and challenging situations in your life. What might he be saying to you through them?

Thursday 21 May

Joel 2:12–27

Still there is hope

PREPARE

Another prophet, facing a similarly bleak outlook, was asked, ‘Can these bones live?’ (Ezekiel 37:3). He replied, ‘Sovereign **LORD**, you alone know.’ Ezekiel was not just hedging his bets: the Lord is sovereign, and he does indeed know what is possible.

READ

Joel 2:12–27

EXPLORE

Just when life seems unrelentingly awful, everything can change. ‘Even now’ change is possible (v 12). The change in this passage is remarkable. It begins as a possibility – ‘Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing’ (v 14). At this point, the change is within the people of God. They are urged to move from routine piety to genuine repentance (v 13), to unite across all classes of society in turning to the Lord (vs 15–17).

Then the change ceases to be a possibility and becomes a divine declaration (vs 18–20). Finally, it is a fact – ‘he has done great things!’ (v 20). Worship is restored, ecosystems are renewed, the rains again water the land and what was ‘dried up’ (see 1:10,12) is once more flowing with life. Finally, there is a promise for the future (vs 25–27) – ‘never again will my people be shamed’ (v 27).

When we look at the state of the world, our own nation, the church or even our families, it is easy to assume that what we see now will always prevail. But that is not the case. With God, there is always hope.

*... rejoice in the **LORD** your God, for he has given you the autumn rains because he is faithful. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before.*

Joel 2:23

RESPOND

Bring before God the situations that disturb you and seem intractable. Use this prayer from Mark 9:24: ‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’

Day of mixed blessing

PREPARE

Reflect on Jesus' invitation concerning the Holy Spirit in John 7:37: 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.' Do you have that thirst?

READ

Joel 2:28-32

EXPLORE

After all the 'dried up' descriptions of chapter 1, here is an abundant 'pouring out'. The day of the Lord is indeed 'dreadful' (v 31), but when God comes to us his presence is always two-sided. John the Baptist announced that Jesus would come to baptise with 'the Holy Spirit and fire' (Luke 3:16). On the one hand, Jesus comes to baptise with the blessing of the Holy Spirit; on the other hand, 'he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire' (Luke 3:17). Paul makes a similar point about how people respond to those who bring the good news of Jesus. 'To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life' (2 Corinthians 2:16).

So, the coming of God is great news to those who love him, but terrible news to those who resist him. That is why Joel combines the prospect of the outpouring of the Spirit as blessing, releasing spiritual life and prophecy,

with descriptions of celestial portents of disaster (vs 30,31). The good news is that 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (v 32).

Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

Joel 2:29

RESPOND

How much do you long for the presence of God? Enough for his holiness to burn up the 'chaff' in your life?

Saturday 23 May

Joel 3:1-21

Day of reckoning

PREPARE

The apostle Paul urges his readers to ‘Consider ... the kindness and sternness of God’ (Romans 11:22). Does this sound like the God you worship?

.....

READ

Joel 3:1-21

EXPLORE

Many Christians struggle with the idea of judgement. How can a loving God also be the one who punishes people? Others will ask, ‘How can God be loving if he allows the strong to get away with oppressing the weak?’ Joel is in no doubt: the day of reckoning is on its way. Surrounding nations have destroyed Jerusalem, looted the Temple (v 5), traded children as if they were commodities (v 3), and displaced God’s people (v 6). They will answer for what they have done.

Joel has a vision of these nations, armed to the teeth but ultimately defenceless before the Lord. They are funnelled into a valley from which they cannot escape, the valley of decision where God will decide their fate.

It is in God’s nature to be a father to the fatherless, to defend widows, to set the lonely in families, and to set people free (Psalm 68:5,6). He loves to take ‘the stone the builders rejected’ and to make

it central to his purposes (Psalm 118:22), and to make the despised city his dwelling place (vs 17,21). Ultimately, all this is fulfilled in Jesus. In Jesus’ death, God demonstrates his justice towards our rebellion, and at the same time opens up the way for us to be made right with him (Romans 3:26).

The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the heavens will tremble. But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.

Joel 3:16

RESPOND

Why not use Psalm 68 to pray for people who are oppressed today and desperate for justice?

Beyond restoration

PREPARE

The events we celebrate today were preceded by an extended time of waiting. Take a few minutes to wait silently on God.

READ

Acts 2:1-21

EXPLORE

Who would have dreamed that Joel's prophecy would be fulfilled like this? Joel would have been content with the rebuilding of his shattered country, the restoration of its ecosystem and justice for its enemies. And yet, in Joel 2:28-32, he glimpses something much greater. I wonder whether the prophet himself could make sense of what he wrote. Maybe he was thinking of Moses, who did not want spiritual gifts to be restricted to a chosen few (Numbers 11:29).

In the Jewish calendar, the day of Pentecost was like a harvest festival – a time to thank God for the autumn and spring rains, full threshing floors and vats overflowing with new wine and olive oil (Joel 2:23,24). And yet, on the day we have come to know as Pentecost, God did so much more! The heavens opened and poured down not just rain, but the Holy Spirit. And this gift was not just for the Jewish people, but truly for 'all

people' regardless of race, sex or age. This all began in Jerusalem, but travelled all around the world in a chain reaction of mini-Pentecosts (see Acts 8:17; 10:44; 19:6). The dwelling place of God was no longer a city, as Joel had envisaged, but a global community of people.

**In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on
all people. Your sons and
daughters will prophesy, your
young men will see visions, your
old men will dream dreams.**

Acts 2:17

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord, help me to see further, and to trust you for more than I have yet received. Fill me again with your Holy Spirit, abundantly generous Father.'

This is our God

About the writer **Louisa King**

Louisa King lives in Sheffield with her young family. She loves being part of her church family, and likes meeting people or journaling and reading in cafés.



Our passages over the next two weeks remind us of God's sovereignty, love and faithfulness to his people and world. Perhaps you have read them before, but I hope that the truths in them will astonish and encourage you afresh as you read and reflect.

The book of Isaiah is the writings of the prophet Isaiah (1:1). We don't know much about Isaiah, though we do know he was married, had a family and probably lived in Jerusalem (7:3). There are different theories about whether Isaiah wrote the whole book that we have in our Bibles. What we can definitely say is that chapter 40 marks a new section of the book. It was addressed to a time when God's people were living in exile, and they were discouraged. The key themes in our readings are of God's comfort for his people, alongside the proclamation of his sovereignty in the world and the revealing of his glory that is to come.

Some of what Isaiah writes specifically predicts things that would happen in, or not far along from, the time it was written; other bits point to Jesus and his life on earth (see John 12:41). However, we too need the truths today in our ever-changing world. Isaiah 40:8 says that 'the word of our God endures for ever'. May God's word show you his sovereignty and faithfulness in the next few days as you explore it.

God of comfort

PREPARE

Our passage today talks about knowing God's comfort. Before you read, take some time to breathe in deeply and sit in peace. Ask for God to meet with you and comfort you wherever you're at today.

READ

Isaiah 40:1-11

EXPLORE

This passage is bookended with words of comfort – see verses 1, 2 and 11. God commands Isaiah to speak tenderly to his people (v 2), to remind them of the forgiveness of their sins (v 2) and to reassure them of his loving, gentle care (v 11) alongside his power (v 10).

I remember verse 11 being helpful when I had just had a baby. It was a real reminder that as I cared for a young, vulnerable child, so God cared for me and carried me 'close to his heart'. Have you experienced God's love and tenderness for you? Remember and thank him for it.

You may recognise verse 3 as something John the Baptist says in the New Testament (see Mark 1:2,3). It's declaring a future of change and hope, where God's glory (v 5) will be revealed, bringing good news to God's people (v 9): Jesus! How exciting this must have been for

those Isaiah was speaking to, living in exile. But perhaps they also felt uncertain. How could they know it would come to pass? Because God's word 'endures for ever' (v 8). It is reliable and true.

**Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.**

Isaiah 40:1

RESPOND

Look up 1 Peter 1:24,25. God's word and his salvation are imperishable, indestructible, permanent. Pray for his Spirit to comfort you with the hope of Jesus in your life today.

Tuesday 26 May

Isaiah 40:12–31

Incomparable God

PREPARE

Our God is everlasting and powerful. Take some time to praise him now. You might enjoy listening to ‘Behold our God’ (2011, Sovereign Grace Music).

.....

READ

Isaiah 40:12–31

EXPLORE

In Isaiah’s time, God’s people were often unfaithful, complaining that God was far from them (v 27) and looking for idols to satisfy them (vs 19,20). Some commentators say that the reference to ‘the starry host’ in verse 26 links to a practice of astrology in God’s people rather than believing in the God who made the stars. What things are you tempted to hope in rather than God?

But here is the truth: all people are tiny, ‘like grasshoppers’ (v 22). Even those whom we think are strong and powerful, like princes and rulers, are brought to nothing compared to God (v 23). Nations are a ‘drop in a bucket’ (v 15), easily blown away like plants (v 24). God’s size and strength are unfathomable (v 12). He needs no advisers. We cannot instruct God!

And yet, God gives his immense strength to the weary, to those who turn away from idols to hope in the Lord

(vs 29–31). What an amazing, generous, undeserved gift of God to us.

But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Isaiah 40:31

RESPOND

Often we rely on ourselves, rather than God. Lay any tiredness or weariness you feel before the Lord in prayer. Repent of times when you have put your hope in things other than God. Read verses 29–31 again and ask for God’s strength to be renewed in you today.

God in control

PREPARE

What world events, conflicts and humanitarian crises are on your heart today? Bring them before the Lord.

READ

Isaiah 41:1-29

EXPLORE

This passage is a dialogue between God and those who oppose him. God's opponents encourage each other to find strength in idols (vs 5-7). They oppose God's people (vs 11,12) and cause them to fear (v 23). But twice in this chapter God encourages his people not to fear because he is with them (vs 10,13). I think he does this more than once because his people's fear is very real. He sees that they are 'little' (v 14). What are you afraid of today? Know this: God acknowledges your fear.

As God dialogues with his opponents, it's clear that God is in control. He is sovereign and uses leaders and events to fulfil his purposes (vs 2-4,25). From east to west, coast to coast, from the beginning to the end of time, he has chosen his people for himself (vs 8,9). He is promising a world of hope: deserts turned to springs (vs 17-19) and victory over worthless idols (v 24). It will be a time of rejoicing (v 16), when all will see God's victory (v 20).

Our world may be full of pain and unrest now, but God is teaching us to rely on him and put our hope in our future with him.

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Isaiah 41:10

RESPOND

Pray this prayer for yourself and for the situations you thought of earlier: 'Restless with grief and fear, the abandoned turn to you: in every hour of trial, good Lord, deliver us, O God most holy, God most strong, whose wisdom is the cross of Christ. Amen.*

*www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/topical-prayers/prayers-world

Thursday 28 May

Isaiah 42:1–9

God who is a gentle Saviour

PREPARE

Meditate on the words of Jesus in John 8:12: ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’

.....

READ

Isaiah 42:1–9

EXPLORE

Today’s reading is the first of four ‘servant songs’ in the book of Isaiah, although the only one we will read together in this collection of readings. The servant songs prophesy (v 9) about the Messiah to come, chosen directly and delighted in by God (v 1) (although the servant songs also have direct parallels with the situation Israel faced directly at the time the book was written).

God’s servant will rescue God’s people in a world of injustice (vs 1,4), blindness and captivity (v 7) and idolatry (v 8). The servant will be gentle (vs 2,3), just (v 4), a light (v 6) and a bringer of freedom (v 7) – not just for God’s people, but also for Gentiles: those who are not yet in God’s family (v 6).

Jesus shows us in Matthew 12:17–21 that this song is talking about himself. He is God’s servant, the light God’s people needed, and God’s Spirit is on him (v 1).

What a servant Israel could look forward to. Today, we are even more blessed because we can know Jesus personally!

‘Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.’

Isaiah 42:1

RESPOND

Think about and praise Jesus for all he’s done for you. You might like to listen to ‘If Christ is mine’ (2024, Joyful Noise).

God who brings judgement

PREPARE

Pray: 'Almighty God ... we have sinned against you and against our neighbour in thought and word and deed, through negligence, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault. We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins ...'*

READ

Isaiah 42:10-25

EXPLORE

God sending a Saviour gives us cause to praise (vs 10-13), but this passage – a dialogue between Isaiah and God himself – has some hard truths. There will be judgement on God's land and people, which will bring darkness and pain, like a woman in childbirth (vs 14-16). Those who trust in idols (v 17) and do not follow God's ways (v 24) will experience God's anger and wrath. In this passage, the 'servant' referred to in verse 19 is not the servant of earlier in chapter 42, but is the people of Israel, who are blind and disobedient.

Passages like these can be difficult for us to read, but when we look at the world around us there's no doubt that it's not a world that gives God the glory (v 12). We see intuitively that judgement is needed to proclaim God as 'great and glorious' (v 21).

The challenge for us is: will we pay attention to God's word? Will we listen to Jesus his servant (v 20)?

Which of you will listen to this or pay close attention in time to come?

Isaiah 42:23

RESPOND

Pray for those you know who aren't saved by Jesus.

*www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/common-material/new-patterns-12

Saturday 30 May

Isaiah 43:1-13

God who loves us

PREPARE

Some translations have verse 1 as 'this is what the **Lord** says'. What do you need to hear from God today? Have a posture of openness towards him.

.....

READ

Isaiah 43:1-13

EXPLORE

After yesterday's message of judgement, today's passage is more hopeful, and it's operating on two levels. Verse 3 in Isaiah's day is pointing to the immediate deliverance of Israel, when God will mastermind the rulers of the earth and use Cyrus to achieve his purposes for his people. Some of the language might also remind us of when God rescued his people from Egypt in the book of Exodus.

But there's also a wider purpose to the passage, and so we can take the truths of verses 1-5 for ourselves. What wonderful words they are: we are created and formed by God, and we need not fear, for he has redeemed and called us to be his by name (v 1). Whatever we go through – not least floods and fires, literal or metaphorical – he will be with us (v 2). How does this encourage and reassure you today?

In a mini trial scene, the blind and deaf from all nations (remember the blind

and deaf from yesterday's reading?) are brought together to hear the Lord speak and to witness to his mighty power (vs 5-13). May others too know, believe and understand that God is God, because apart from him, there is no saviour (vs 10,11).

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

Isaiah 43:2

RESPOND

If you know Christ, you are called, chosen and redeemed by God (v 1), through the blood of Christ. Read Ephesians 1:7 and Romans 8:38,39 and know these words are true.

Being in pain

PREPARE

When afflicted, we look for healing. Consider whether you might be able to locate specific areas where you have problems, and how you can be healed of these with God's help.

READ

Psalm 38

EXPLORE

Psalm 38 is entitled 'a petition'. The Lord has his wrath upon the psalmist because of his sins, and he cries out to God: 'your hand has come down on me' (v 2). How does it affect him when God is angry?

In the body: 'there is no health in my body' (v 3). 'My wounds fester' (v 5). 'My back is filled with searing pain' (v 7).

In the conscience: 'My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear' (v 4).

In the mind: 'I am bowed down and brought very low ... I groan in anguish of heart' (vs 6,8).

In those dear to him: 'My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds' (v 11).

In his enemies: 'Those who want to kill me set their traps, those who would harm me talk of my ruin' (v 12).

How does the psalmist respond? He fills himself with unwavering hope: 'LORD, I wait for you; you will answer' (v 15). He confesses his sins: 'I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin' (v 18). And finally, he offers a fervent prayer: 'LORD, do not forsake me ... Come quickly to help me' (vs 21,22).

**All my longings lie open
before you, Lord: my sighing is
not hidden from you.**

Psalm 38:9

RESPOND

Afflictions are points of testing. When you are worn down, can you focus on the Lord and move more towards prayer and trust, rather than continuing to dwell on the people and situations that have worn you down?

Monday 1 June

Isaiah 43:14–28

God of all time

PREPARE

‘I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more’ (v 25). Begin today by confessing your sins before a holy God.

.....

READ

Isaiah 43:14–28

EXPLORE

Today’s passage juxtaposes past and present (when Isaiah was alive) and future.

Past: Since the beginning of time, God’s people have been sinful and have rejected God (vs 22–28). There is no innocence that they can claim (v 26), for God has not burdened them with his demands (v 23). Have you ever read the whole Bible or done a Bible overview? If so, this will surely have been something you noted.

Present: There is a reality for Isaiah’s day as God uses Cyrus to bring defeat over the Babylonians (v 14). Even early empires fade; only God is the king (v 15). Think about our world today. Who is up in terms of power and who is down? Thank God that only he is the true king!

Future: God is calling his people to look forwards, not back (v 18). He is doing something new: bringing obedience from wild animals, water into

wastelands, and praise from his people (vs 19,20). Because of his promised Messiah, he will remember their sins no more (v 25). This message must have brought hope amid pain for Isaiah’s listeners.

‘I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.’

Isaiah 43:25

RESPOND

The Lord ‘made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters’ (v 16). It can be hard to look forward when we’re amid struggles. Pray for faith for what God is doing in your life today.

God who gives us his Spirit

PREPARE

Thank God that he has given his Spirit to those who trust in Jesus, and pray for the Holy Spirit to be at work in you as you read God's Word.

READ

Isaiah 44:1-8

EXPLORE

A repeated refrain here – and not for the first time in our readings from this part of Isaiah – is 'do not be afraid' (vs 2,8). We're reminded again that God has chosen his people and made them and formed them in the womb. He will help them (v 2). He will be their rock (v 8). There is no God but him (v 6). This reminds me of the time when Jesus calmed the storm in Mark 4:35–41: Jesus' disciples were so afraid, yet Jesus was in full mastery of the wind and the waves; they did not need to fear (though we can understand why they did!).

Why did God's people not need to fear? Because God will send his Spirit and pour out his blessing on future generations (v 3). This links to a prophecy in Joel 2:28–32 that Peter also spoke when he addressed the crowd at Pentecost in Acts 2:17–21. After Jesus had died and just before he ascended into heaven, he promised his disciples

that they would be clothed with 'power from on high' and be his witnesses (Luke 24:48,49), just as God talks about witnesses in our passage here (v 8). That's us too!

For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.

Isaiah 44:3

RESPOND

Pray for God's Spirit to be upon any sons and daughters you have, either directly or in your wider or church family.

Wednesday 3 June

Isaiah 44:9–23

God who hates idolatry

PREPARE

Use Exodus 20:1–6 to prayerfully prepare to meet with God today.

.....

READ

Isaiah 44:9–23

EXPLORE

In some Bibles this passage is quite dense text in verses 9–20, followed by poetry in verses 21–23. While the poem at the end is hopeful – God says, ‘I have swept away your offences like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist’ (v 22) – the bulk of the passage is bleak.

‘All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless’ (v 9). The passage explores in detail how a carpenter and a blacksmith go through the process of making an idol. Note how time-consuming the process of making and worshipping an idol is. It seems to have been an almost satisfying experience to make and worship, but ultimately it is a delusion, a lie (v 20).

Think of the things you treasure in life and how much time they take up. How does this passage challenge you? Do you need to open your eyes and your mind (v 18)? Our call is to return to God and seek his redemption (v 22).

All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame.

Isaiah 44:9

RESPOND

Meditate on these words: ‘Teach me, **LORD**, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end. Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word’ (Psalm 119:33–37).

God who will for ever reign

PREPARE

God is the maker of all things! Try to get outside or at least look out of the window. What can you see around you to delight in and praise him for today?

READ

Isaiah 44:24-28

EXPLORE

God is the Lord, the maker of all things (v 24). He is the Lord over false prophets and people who claim to do magic (v 25). He is the Lord over those who appear to be wise and learned (v 25). He uses worldly rulers to achieve his purposes, as with Cyrus, which is a matter of historical record (v 28). He is the Lord of his people's history, using servants, prophets and messengers to fulfil his purposes for his people (vs 26,27).

Last month on Ascension Day, we remembered Jesus returning to the Father in heaven, leaving his disciples with a blessing (Luke 24:50). On Ascension Day, our hearts look backwards to Jesus' life, and forwards to his Spirit's work in the church and his coming again. We have faith in what is not seen and we wait expectantly for his words to be fulfilled – rather like God's people in Isaiah's day!

Do you sometimes struggle to have faith that what God has promised will come to pass? The apostle Paul talks about how God is wiser than human wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:25). We can trust in God!

'This is what the LORD says – your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, the Maker of all things, who stretches out the heavens, who spreads out the earth by myself.'

Isaiah 44:24

RESPOND

Pray for faith in Jesus and praise him for all he has done and will do. You might like to listen to the song 'King of Kings' (2019, Hillsong Worship).

Friday 5 June

Isaiah 45:1–8

God who brings light

PREPARE

Reflect on Psalm 139:11,12: ‘If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.’

READ

Isaiah 45:1–8

EXPLORE

God is summoning Cyrus to ‘subdue nations’ (v 1) – even though Cyrus doesn’t know or honour God (vs 4,5). Cyrus is simply God’s instrument to fulfil his purposes. There are similar themes here to other passages we have looked at over the last week – God is the one in control, including in our world today. How do you think God’s people would have felt at the time? Let us not be discouraged, but instead pray for faith, when the world seems full of disaster.

In verse 4 God reminds us that all that he does is for the sake of his people, Israel. Just as God chose Cyrus, so he chose his people to be the ones through whom his purposes are fulfilled on earth. In 1 Peter 2:9,10, God reminds us that he has chosen his people for himself and called them (us!) out of darkness into light. God has power over light and dark,

as verse 7 of today’s passage affirms. Through all that happens in our world, God can bring light. He is promising hope, pictured here in the form of rain showering down, enabling righteousness to flourish (v 8).

For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honour, though you do not acknowledge me.

Isaiah 45:4

RESPOND

Reflect on 1 Peter 2:9,10. How does it change your day and priorities today to think that you are chosen by God and called into his light?

God we can trust

PREPARE

This is a grand ending to our readings in Isaiah. Thank God for what he has been speaking to you about over the past two weeks.

READ

Isaiah 45:9–25

EXPLORE

There are different responses to what God has been doing in this world and in his people. The first response is to 'quarrel' with God and to question what he is doing (v 9). It's natural to grapple with what is going on in our lives and world (this is surely what Job did), but is your ultimate response one of faith in the God who made the earth (v 12), rather than in idols (v 20) (see Romans 9:20)?

God does not ask us to seek him in vain (v 19), and Isaiah provides a model response in verses 15–17.

What is his faith in? A God of salvation, who does not put his people to shame (v 17). A God who made the heavens and the earth (v 18). A God who loves his people and created them to be in his world (vs 18,25). A God who plans the course of history and is without parallel; there is none but him (v 21). A God of integrity, whose word is sure and who all

will worship (v 23; see also Romans 14:11). Many of these truths we can see even more clearly in Jesus: surely the only response is to boast in him (v 25).

But all the descendants of Israel will find deliverance in the LORD and will make their boast in him.

Isaiah 45:25

RESPOND

'Turn to me and be saved' (v 22). Now turn your heart attitude and posture towards God, as you think about your day and your week, and the joys and the sorrows in your heart.

Sunday 7 June

Psalm 39

God who hears our cries

PREPARE

Reflect on these words from Ecclesiastes 3:14: 'I know that everything God does will endure for ever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him.'

READ

Psalm 39

EXPLORE

Our readings in Isaiah have shown us the complexities of life in a fallen world: a world where God is in control, but his restoration of our sinful world to a sin-free, joyful new creation has not yet happened. And so, sometimes, we suffer.

We don't always know the answers. It is not always clear what God is doing in our lives and in the wider world. Does this sound familiar to you in your life?

The psalmist here (probably David) begins by trying to be silent (vs 1,2), perhaps because he did not want to speak among his accusers. There's a sense here in which his suffering may be because of some sin of his (vs 1,8,11), but we don't know the details.

Ultimately, he isn't able to stay silent, and so he speaks to the Lord (v 4 onwards). He recognises the fleetingness of life and how he is a short-term

resident in our world (vs 4,5,12). He turns his hope to God and asks for salvation and protection from the scorn of fools (vs 7-10).

'But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you.'

Psalm 39:7

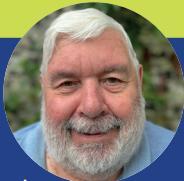
RESPOND

Perhaps today you will go (or have been) to church and be part of your church family. Pray that this might be a time when you are able to turn your hope to God and speak to and worship him. Read and pray through verse 7 in readiness.

Bible in a year: 2 Kings 23-25; Psalms 66,67

Grace trumps rules

About the writer
Emlyn Williams



Emlyn Williams worked with Scripture Union for many years, leading Schools ministry and then working with SU International. Until recently, Emlyn and his wife 'Tricia were editors for *Daily Bread*. Now living in Norfolk, they both continue their writing, editing and talking ministries, and are involved in a local Anglican church.

Like most schools, mine had a set of rules. More than 50 years on, I can remember only two. One was from the uniform list which mysteriously said 'swimming costume (optional)'. The other was the catch-all Rule 1: 'Any offence against common sense is an offence against school rules.' There was no way out of that one!

One of the main questions in Paul's letter to the Roman Christians (including Gentile and Jewish believers) is about the place of rules or law. While rules can make life much simpler, they can also complicate things (ask the lawyers!). In Paul's letter to the Roman Christians – written around AD 57, probably from Corinth – he emphasises that grace (God's unmerited favour to us) outweighs rule-keeping. This new way of thinking was a huge issue for the Jewish Christians. At the time Paul was writing his letter, Rome was the largest city in the world, possibly with a population of a million. One of Paul's big concerns for the church there was that they would be united.

Over the centuries this book – with Paul's explanation of God's grace – has had a massive impact on the world. From actor David Suchet (*Poirot!*) to St Augustine, Martin Luther and John Wesley, God has used this book to change people's lives. Pray that it will change yours.

Monday 8 June

Romans 6:1–14

Dead and alive

PREPARE

Read through the words of John Newton's hymn 'Amazing Grace' (1779). How have you experienced God's grace in your life?

.....

READ

Romans 6:1–14

EXPLORE

Some people – in the Roman church and across the centuries since – have cynically suggested that since we are forgiven by God's grace (his undeserved mercy), we might as well go on sinning (v 1)! Paul strongly refutes such a view. That's not what Christ's good news is about. It's about death and life (v 4). God's grace is the key to this tension.

Our sinfulness is what brings death. But God brought the solution through his perfect Son, Jesus. In his death, the penalty for our sin was taken and, in him, we have 'died to sin' (v 2). In Christ, our old self has been crucified (v 6). Sharing in the death of Christ brings the promise of life (v 5). Jesus died, 'once for all' (v 10). You can be sure of life in him because he was raised from death and is not going to die again (v 9).

How should we respond to such costly grace? We can easily be tempted to turn away from what is right and

allow ourselves to go sin's way (v 13). Remember what God in Christ has done for you. Choose to turn away from the old sinful desires and offer yourself to him. Grace rules now (v 14).

For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

Romans 6:14

RESPOND

How might living under his grace make a difference in your own life and to those who live around you?

Heart obedience

PREPARE

Lord, I offer myself to you afresh today to live in obedience to you. Give me the grace to fulfil my promise.

READ

Romans 6:15–23

EXPLORE

We've chosen a new master. No longer do we do as we want. No longer do we slavishly try to follow the law (and fail). We've died to all that. Now, we're under grace. We have chosen a new master – and now, we're slaves to righteousness, to obedience to God. Set free, there's no going back.

This obedience isn't about a pass or fail test, but is from our hearts (v 17). Its source is found in our loving response to his grace, which means we want to please him, to live according to his will. As that is happening, so his holiness grows in us (vs 19,22).

Let's rejoice that we've been set free from sin's mastery and can renew the offering of ourselves to God. Little by little his life is revealed in us.

Under the mastery of sin we were headed for death, but now there is a new reality. We're no longer working for

'wages'. Drawn to God by his love for us, we freely serve him and discover that his gift to us is life in Jesus (v 23).

You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

Romans 6:18

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord God, thank you for your gift of life in Jesus. Set me free from sin and guilt and help me to obey your ways from my heart. Amen.'

Wednesday 10 June

Romans 7:1–6

Freed to serve

PREPARE

Think about your priorities as a Christian. Which of them matters most to you?

.....

READ

Romans 7:1–6

EXPLORE

Do you or your church sometimes get bogged down in thinking about rules, rather than, for example, Christ's mission in our world today? The Jewish believers in Rome had a similar problem. They were finding it difficult to let go of the old rule book (the law) on which all their living had been based. Not that the law wasn't good (7:7), but in Jesus, things had changed.

The apostle Paul gives the example of the laws about marriage and adultery (vs 2,3) to illustrate what he means. Under the old law, once her husband had died, a woman was free to marry another (v 3). Now, in Christ, we have 'died to the law' (v 4), so we are set free from the burdens it brings. We joyfully receive God's gift of eternal life (6:23). But there's more...

Yes, we have been released from the anxiety of sin, death and punishment – but we have been set free for a purpose. In Christ, we are released from the law

so that we can serve in the new way of the Spirit (v 6). Our priority as believers, as people who are alive in Christ, is not about rule-keeping, but it is about how we can 'bear fruit for God' as we live in this world (v 4).

But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

Romans 7:6

RESPOND

How might you, in Christ, serve in the new way of the Spirit? Empowered by the Spirit, how might your life 'bear fruit' for him today?

The great enigma

PREPARE

How has your life changed as a result of being a Christian? Spend time thanking God for that change. Ask him to show you how he wants it to continue to change.

READ

Romans 7:7-25

EXPLORE

Before I was a Christian, I lived life my own way or according to the rules of my particular social group. When I responded to Christ, I became aware of how my living measured up to God's standards. God's 'law' taught me about living in God's way; it also showed me that, as a human being, I couldn't do it (vs 9-11)!

So here's the problem, the enigma: I want to do what's right, but often I do, say or think what is wrong (v 21). The longer I am a follower of Christ, the more I understand that I am sinful. I break God's law again and again (v 20). Paul understands our problem, using the personal pronoun 'I' to emphasise that this is his own inner experience. Our human sinfulness holds us prisoner, 'slaves' to sin. What wretched people we are (v 24)! But there is an answer.

'Thanks be to God' – Jesus has rescued us (v 25)! Through his death and resurrection the law of sin and death has been defeated. While we still struggle with the sinfulness of our fleshly life now, in Christ we are bound to his way. As we 'delight in God's law' (v 22), transformation comes about.

Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

Romans 7:25

RESPOND

Ask God to show you how you need to change in the here and now.

Friday 12 June

Romans 8:1-17

No condemnation

PREPARE

Try to remember an occasion when you felt freed from a huge pressure in your life. Thank God for the freedom Christ has brought to you.

.....

READ

Romans 8:1-17

EXPLORE

As believers we're quite good at condemning ourselves! Sins of today and yesterday haunt us. We can be slow to get the good news that God's Word brings us. We have been set 'free from the law of sin and death', not just in theory, but in reality (v 2). Through the 'law of the Spirit' we no longer need to be weighed down by sin. There is no longer any condemnation – no matter what our accuser may whisper (8:33).

Do you want to live for God, to listen to him and obey him? That's because God's Spirit is at work in you (v 5). Just as the Spirit brought Jesus to life from death, so we have life in him (vs 10,11). Here on earth, we are aware of our struggle with the old ways; but the Spirit living in us helps us. In this new life in Christ we discover that we are no longer slaves to sin, but are children of God – and we may come freely to our Father (vs 14-16). We don't need to live in fear

of judgement, but are heirs to all that's been achieved through Christ (v 17). No condemnation – we're heading for glory (v 17)!

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:1

RESPOND

Come to your Father God now and ask him to help you live for Jesus in the power of his Spirit today.

The greatest of hopes

PREPARE

Thank God that our hope is in Christ and pray for those you know who are needing to experience that hope today.

READ

Romans 8:18–39

EXPLORE

There's plenty for us to groan about today (v 22) – in the world, in politics, the environment, wars and disasters, and in our own lives. Drop in on any prayer meeting and you will quickly become aware of our 'present sufferings' (v 18)! Sometimes it seems as if the whole of creation is on the road to destruction. But there is hope!

'The children of God' have a different perspective. Like a mother in labour, the struggles we have now can be painful (v 22). But we know that we have this sure hope of liberation. Just now, we must wait patiently (v 25). Amazingly, the Spirit and Christ himself intercede for us before the Father, even when we can't find the words (vs 26,34). In this time, God is at work in us, making us like Jesus (v 29) – and he will bring us through (v 30).

Our hope? Because of Jesus, we are more than conquerors (v 37). Yes, there

may be troubles (vs 35,36), but our lives are not confined by the despair of this world. Nothing – nothing! – can 'separate us from the love of Christ' (v 35).

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

Romans 8:26

RESPOND

List some of the things that trouble you now, then read aloud Paul's words in verses 37 and 38. Put to one side your worries for this moment. Rejoice that you are loved by God and eternally safe in Christ.

Sunday 14 June

Psalm 40

God who rescues

PREPARE

‘I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart’ (v 8). Prepare a right posture within yourself as you come to read God’s Word today.

.....

READ

Psalm 40

EXPLORE

Last year, I had to go to a funeral. The person who had died was only middle-aged, and had their life snatched from them in a second. However, at the funeral we sang a song based on this psalm. This person’s life had lived and breathed faith in the Lord. Though they had died, they were truly blessed (v 4), and their life had an impact which was seen by many (vs 3,10).

We may experience evil from others or the effects of our own sin (vs 12–15); we may feel poor and needy (v 17) or that our heart fails us (v 12). But – and this is no surprise now after our readings in Isaiah – the Lord thinks of us (v 17). He hears our cries and helps us (vs 1,2) in ways that are incomparable (v 5). He does not stop having mercy on us or loving us (v 11).

This feels incredible – that God, the creator of the universe, thinks about us!

Do you find this easy or hard to believe? Who can you think of who needs to be encouraged with this truth?

He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the LORD and put their trust in him.

Psalm 40:3

RESPOND

Pray that today you will not stop saying, ‘Great is the Lord!’, that others might see your praise and worship God too (vs 10,16). Listen to ‘When I was lost’ (2005, Kate Simmonds) and praise God today for all he has done.

God's choice

PREPARE

Try to think of a time when things didn't go your way but subsequently turned out for good. Thank God that he is a redemptive God and apply that thinking to your present circumstances.

READ

Romans 9:1-18

EXPLORE

We often find it hard to understand what God is doing in the world and in our own lives. In today's passage, speaking to both Jewish and Gentile Christians, Paul looks back over Jewish history with the question of the fairness of God's choice. Paul is speaking in the light of all Christ has done (v 1). He honours the Jews' special place in God's plan (vs 4,5), but explains that all their history leads to the coming of God's Messiah, Jesus (v 5).

It was difficult for some Jewish Christians to accept that God was now welcoming Gentiles into his family. Paul gives a history lesson using Isaac (Genesis 21:12), Jacob and Esau (v 13) showing how it is God's sovereign choice that is in control – not our judgements. God's loving us does not depend on what we want or on our efforts, but 'on God's mercy' (vs 15,16).

In our own times, could it be that there are those who we exclude from God's mercy and compassion (v 15)? For example, my non-Christian neighbours, or the noisy, partying household down the road? But God wants everyone to know about his love and mercy (vs 17,18). It's his choice, not ours.

Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

Romans 9:18

RESPOND

Who do you know who God might want to speak to through you? Ask him to help you stay alert to his voice.

Tuesday 16 June

Romans 9:19–29

Arguing with God

PREPARE

Pray: ‘Father, I bring to you the things that are frustrating me. Help me to accept that you know best, even when I can’t see it.’

.....

READ

Romans 9:19–29

EXPLORE

Sometimes we just can’t understand what God is doing. Some may even doubt God, assuming that they know better. It’s not wrong to seek understanding, but at the foundation of our faith is knowing that God is God and trusting him. He is not answerable to human beings (v 20). He is the potter, we are the clay and our lives are shaped by him according to his purposes (vs 20,21).

Paul explains to his Roman Jewish listeners that God’s people are not only the Jews. His plan, his mercy, his love are for Gentiles too (‘all peoples on earth’, Genesis 12:3). He reminds them of what God said in the book of Hosea, calling the people his children when others did not (vs 25,26). Shocking though it might have seemed to some, God’s plans have always been for all people (and not all Jewish people will be ‘saved’, v 27).

We are human, and do not have the right to question God’s judgement. Yet, through our faith (Gentile or Jew), we are caught up in his family – and this is the Lord Almighty’s doing (v 29). Whoever we are, whatever our background, we are loved by him (v 25) and are now called ‘children of the living God’ (v 26).

**But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God?
‘Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?”’**

Romans 9:20

RESPOND

Pray: ‘Lord God, thank you that you have brought me into your family. Help me to trust you when I don’t understand. Amen.’

Good news for all

PREPARE

How would you sum up the gospel in 25 words? Thank God for what his good news means to you.

READ

Romans 9:30 – 10:21

EXPLORE

It didn't seem fair! The Gentile believers who didn't follow the law had been made right with God; the Jews who zealously tried to keep the law had failed. What they couldn't get their heads round was that all the law was summed up in Jesus (the rock in Zion, vs 30–33), and their failures were dealt with through his one sacrifice.

As Paul seeks to explain the meaning of the gospel, he refers to many Old Testament scriptures, showing how faith in God (rather than keeping of the law) has always been the way to righteousness before him. Jesus is the culmination and key (v 4). He has died for our sin and also – amazingly – risen from death and ascended into heaven (vs 6,7). The good news for all is that we simply need to believe with our whole selves (vs 9–13) in the risen Jesus. Blessing comes to all who call on him (vs 12,13).

How should we respond then? People need to hear the good news of Jesus if they are to believe in him. Jew or Gentile, we need to preach the gospel. Paul warns his Jewish listeners that through their history there are examples of their rejection of God and his drawing of others to himself (vs 19,20). As always, he holds out his hands to them (and us).

For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’

Romans 10:13

RESPOND

Who could you tell about the good news of Jesus today?

Thursday 18 June

Romans 11:1–10

Faithful minority

PREPARE

Do you ever feel in a minority as a Christian? Reflect on this often-used saying: 'one with God is a majority'.

READ

Romans 11:1–10

EXPLORE

God had not rejected his own people, but they had rejected him (vs 1,2; 10:21). For Jewish believers (and Christians today) there is hope in the Old Testament story of Elijah (1 Kings 19:10,14). The prophet, in his faithless society, felt as if he was the only believer left (v 3). Yet God told him he wasn't on his own (v 4); there were many who remained faithful to him, dependent on his grace (v 5).

The coming of Jesus didn't mean that Jews were cut off from God (10:21). For Jew and Gentile alike there are many today who do *not* come to him because they are blind and deaf to the good news God offers (v 8). Paul's quote from Psalm 69 (v 9) was originally about the Israelites' enemies, but here Paul swaps the meaning around to point to the Jews who were rejecting Christ. Their works and burdens of ritual weren't going to help them in knowing God (vs 9,10). But the faithful 'remnant'

were (and still are) being saved by God's grace (vs 5,6).

On your own at work or in your family? Here's reassurance – there are other believers, and God sees your faithfulness. You are not alone.

'Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me'

Romans 11:3

RESPOND

Ask God to reassure you of his presence with you now, and to help you to find the encouragement of other believers.

Pruning and grafting

PREPARE

Thank God that those of us who are Gentiles can be grafted into the family of God's people and share all the benefits.

READ

Romans 11:11-24

EXPLORE

It all sounds a bit complicated! Paul is talking to a church made up of Gentiles and Jewish believers, using familiar horticultural language (eg grafted, roots, branches). The Jewish believers were finding it hard to understand how Jesus' coming had affected their place in God's family – and the Gentiles needed to understand how their salvation story arose out of what God had done through the Jews.

There's a big plan going on. Through the Jewish people's failure, the gift of salvation has come to the Gentiles. Their loss is our gain (vs 11,12)! But Paul has something further in mind. Could it be that Jewish 'envy' of Gentiles' faith will eventually lead them to embrace faith through Christ (vs 14,15,23,24)?

Paul warns the Gentile believers: there's no place for feelings of superiority (v 18). After all we didn't plant the root – God is the gardener. It's the root which supports our

life (not the other way around). 'Grafted in' because of faith in Christ (v 17), there's no room for pride on our part. We must continue to rely on God's kindness (v 22). There's good news for Jewish believers too. Those who believe will be grafted in again to 'their own olive tree' (v 24)!

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.

Romans 11:22

RESPOND

Thank God for his big plan of salvation for all people. Pray for Jewish people that they also will be drawn to faith in Christ.

Saturday 20 June

Romans 11:25–36

Extravagant generosity

PREPARE

‘God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform / He plants His footsteps in the sea / and rides upon the storm’ (William Cowper, 1731–1800).

.....

READ

Romans 11:25–36

EXPLORE

We might imagine the Gentile believers in Rome feeling proud that they are now God’s chosen ones, while the Jews are rejected. But Paul warns against such conceit (v 25). We are all, Jew and Gentile, recipients of God’s extravagant generosity and mercy (vs 30–32).

Here’s the mystery for us. God’s mission to the Gentiles is under way. Paul was keen to preach the gospel to Gentiles everywhere (v 13). But in the future, the Jews would also receive God’s mercy as a result of the Gentiles’ experience of God’s mercy (v 31). God remains faithful to his promises to the Jewish patriarchs (Abraham, Jacob and Isaac) (v 28), as he is faithful to the ‘grafted in’ Gentile believers (v 17). All his people, Jew and Gentile, are recipients of God’s mercy, dependent on the work of Christ who takes away our sin (v 27).

Paul now sums up all that he has been teaching about Christ and God’s salvation in the earlier part of his letter in this hymn of praise (vs 33–36). We cannot understand the ‘mind of the Lord’ (v 34). He owes us nothing, yet gives beyond measure, and beyond our understanding. ‘To him be the glory for ever!’ (v 36).

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out!

Romans 11:33

RESPOND

Pray that God will increase your understanding of his extravagant love and that this will overflow as you speak to others about your faith in Jesus.

Thought for the weak

PREPARE

When have you experienced God's deliverance from a tough situation? Pray for someone you know who needs similar deliverance.

READ

Psalm 41

EXPLORE

Some people always seem to be having a hard time, always in some kind of trouble. Yet in today's psalm we notice that the Lord has a special concern for the weak – and if we care for others in times of need, we find ourselves included in his blessing (vs 1-3). The psalmist gently moves himself into the position of one of 'the weak'.

Acknowledging his sin (v 4), he cries out to God about the evil of his enemies. They speak about him, wishing he would die (v 5)! They imagine and tell others that he is finished (vs 7,8). Even his close friends seem to have given up on him (v 9). As in Jesus' experience (Mark 14:50), those close to their suffering friends may turn away. But God stays close to those who love him. Even in his deep despair and loneliness, the psalmist asserts his faith in God – who upholds him and in whose presence he has eternal confidence.

Out of the depths he praises his faithful God (vs 12,13).

We, like the psalmist, are the ones who are 'weak'. Yet we have a God who sides with those who know that they are poor.

Blessed are those who have regard for the weak; the LORD delivers them in times of trouble.

Psalm 41:1

RESPOND

Out of thankfulness to God for his rescue of you (v 1), how might you stand with someone else today who is suffering and alone?

Sequels

About the writer **Nigel Roberts**



Nigel Roberts has worked in Christian theological education, youth work with Youth for Christ and chaplaincy with the Saltley Trust for many years. He writes and directs Red River Theatre Company, a professional collective of actors in the midlands, and is chair of governors in a Church of England infants' school.

Sequels are popular and have been for hundreds of years. Take the success of *Robinson Crusoe*: Daniel Defoe felt he should write a sequel, and did to rather less acclaim. Tolkien followed up *The Hobbit* with an adult trilogy. Similarly in films, look at the Marvel series. Why are they so loved? I think it's something to do with how the creator has made the main characters so attractive. We grow to love them. We don't want the story to end. We want to know what happens next.

There are sequels in scripture too. Acts clearly follows Luke. And then there's 2 Samuel, perhaps the best of them all.

In 1 Samuel we are introduced to Saul, Jonathan and David, God's chosen one. We discover God's plans for them and are amazed at the incredible adventures they endure. But then the book ends, and David is not king. If this was a film, the following questions might flash across the screen: Have God's blessing and purposes been thwarted? Has David's calling been confounded? Find out in the next exciting story.

2 Samuel is a sequel in which those questions are met with a resounding no! It is a book in which God's blessing and purpose are fulfilled and David's calling is confirmed, but not before a final raft of emotional, spiritual, physical and political challenges. So, get comfortable and be ready to read on. The story isn't over...

The heart of David

PREPARE

Pray for discernment to know the truth in a world filled with lies and fake news.

READ

2 Samuel 1:1-16

EXPLORE

This difficult passage gives a vivid character portrait of David, who, on hearing the news of Saul's death, is devastated. He has lost his king, and in Jonathan his best friend, and the pain runs deep, as we shall see in tomorrow's reading. Despite the conflict that had existed between David and Saul, David still mourned. He possessed a sensitive heart, one like God's in many ways (Acts 13:22).

So why kill the messenger? The clue is in the different accounts of Saul's death. The truth of how Saul died is in 1 Samuel 31:4. We do not know if David knew what really happened to Saul, the text does not tell us. But clearly he was distressed at his death. While the end of this scene is shocking, it is understandable. David will not condone the murder of the Lord's anointed.

We live in a world filled with tragedy and fake news and what we see and hear should bring tears to our eyes and prayer to our lips. We need sensitive and discerning hearts to fight for justice and to stand for truth. We need hearts like David's.

They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and for the nation of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

2 Samuel 1:12

RESPOND

How might you respond to what you read and hear in the news today?

Tuesday 23 June

2 Samuel 1:17–27

Devastated

PREPARE

Remember and pray for those who are struggling with the loss of a loved one.

.....

READ

2 Samuel 1:17–27

EXPLORE

When my father died a few years ago, my first response was to write my grief into a poem. It was raw and painful, but the words helped in the healing. That's what we are seeing here. This is not a psalm. It is not worship. God is not even mentioned. It is a national and deeply personal lament.

David pours out his grief at the death of a man who once treated him like a son and one he loved as a brother. It's a grief that mourns the loss of what once was and what might have been. David may well have held a hope in his heart that one day he and Saul might be reconciled. For David, the loss of Jonathan means the loss of one who knew him and loved him like no other. There would never be another like him in David's life again.

David's song was to be taught to the people of Judah (v 18). It was not just a pouring out of his emotions, it was a

song that David wanted others to know and learn from. He had a message to impart. It is a song honouring a king he had a complex relationship with and the king's son who was as a brother. It is a lament on the sorrows of war.

'A gazelle lies slain on your heights, Israel. How the mighty have fallen!'

2 Samuel 1:19

RESPOND

How might you support those who are struggling with grief?
How might you remember with gratitude those you have lost?

Choosing right

PREPARE

Reflect on how you make decisions. Do you pray first?

READ

2 Samuel 2:1–11; 3:1

EXPLORE

This part of David's story appears very political. Parties are manoeuvring for position, sending out olive branches to potential opponents (2:6), picking sides in what will be a long fight (3:1). But amid all these stratagems, verse 1 in chapter 2 reveals how David made his plans. Before he acted, David enquired of the Lord.

David now had years of experience. But he never took God for granted. He never relied solely on that experience. He knew that he was a key player in a drama whose author was God. He wouldn't take direction from anyone else. To do so would invite disaster.

Looking at our world, watching parliamentary debates, hearing politicians interviewed, makes me wonder if they ever refer to God before choosing the path they will take. And not just politicians. How often have I spent money, forged plans, formed relationships, said things, without first

enquiring of the Lord? The answer, if I'm honest, is often.

David reminds us who is in control. When we committed our lives to Jesus, we became his to command. We need to remember that our first thought should be of him and what he requires of us. It's not easy, but it bears fruit, as we see later in our readings in 2 Samuel.

... David enquired of the LORD. 'Shall I go up to one of the towns of Judah?' he asked. The LORD said, 'Go up.' David asked, 'Where shall I go?' 'To Hebron,' the LORD answered.

2 Samuel 2:1

RESPOND

If you have a to-do list like me, why not include what's on it in your prayers at the start of each day?

Thursday 25 June

2 Samuel 5:1-12

Patience rewarded

PREPARE

List the promises God has made in your life. For those fulfilled, give thanks. For those yet to come, offer up your trust.

.....

READ

2 Samuel 5:1-12

EXPLORE

David was a patient man. He was anointed by Samuel when still a boy (1 Samuel 16) and here he was, years later, finally being acknowledged as king, not just by Judah, but also by Israel. Yet he knew this day would come because he trusted God's promises patiently.

In Galatians (5:22, NLT), Paul calls patience a fruit of the spirit, the fruit being proof of the presence of Jesus in a person's life. A person displaying patience or forbearance is someone on intimate terms with God, the Holy Spirit. David was just such a person (v 10). God's promise was fulfilled. David knew it was only through God that it had been possible (v 12) and that it was not the result of his strength or military genius.

Are we so patient? In a social media world where communication is instant, online orders delivered the same day, patience seems to have been lost. Do we long for God to act in our lives and our

church in the same speedy way? Are we angry with God because a promise he made seems unfulfilled? Let's learn from David and draw close to him who has plans for us. In that loving embrace, we learn patience and wait upon the Lord, for his timing is perfect (Psalm 27:14).

**David was thirty years old
when he became king, and he
reigned for forty years.**

2 Samuel 5:4

RESPOND

Spend time in God's presence.
Wait patiently and listen.

A wrong step

PREPARE

Reflect on your motives when you make decisions. Do they please God or yourself?

.....

READ

2 Samuel 6:1-23

EXPLORE

This difficult passage shows us David's humanity, God's holiness and Michal's bitterness. The burning question is, 'Why did Uzzah die?' The answer lies, in part, in one of our earlier readings. It began with 'David enquired of the LORD' (2:1). That phrase is absent here.

Some suggest that David's decision to move the ark had mixed motives. He wanted to glorify God, but also wanted to proclaim his status. Doing something involving God to bring honour to ourselves is dangerously manipulative. The results were tragic. Uzzah's death cannot be explained easily. Surely he was keeping the ark safe. Did his act imply that God was powerless? Was his touch unholy? We will never know, but his death originated in David's decision, taken without consulting God.

David's anger is understandable, but it changes as realisation dawns. He looks in a mirror and sees the truth. Later,

he gets it right and his joy knows no bounds. He no longer cares about status. He is undignified, unroyal, and God gets the glory.

When I started in ministry, someone warned me my downfall would be my pride. 'Shun the big stage' so that God can be seen. That wisdom saved me. Let's be honest with ourselves, be humble, so that God can be made great (John 3:30).

*After he had finished
sacrificing the burnt offerings
and fellowship offerings, he
blessed the people in the
name of the LORD Almighty.*

2 Samuel 6:18

RESPOND

Pray: 'Father God, purify my heart, so that all I do is inspired by the desire to glorify you.'

Saturday 27 June

2 Samuel 7:1-17

House-building

PREPARE

Who walks with you on your journey? Thank God for them.

.....

READ

2 Samuel 7:1-17

EXPLORE

My wife and I have a competitive relationship. We each like to outdo the other in doing nice things for our spouse. That's what we see here. David wants to build God a house. God, on the other hand, wants to build a house, a dynasty, for David (vs 11,12). It's a great picture of a mature relationship with love at the heart: love that prompts both the desires of David and the grace of God.

David is also growing in faith. He has a spiritual companion and adviser in Nathan. He has a deepening understanding of the nature of God, who affirms the symbolism of the tabernacle as a sign of God's desire to be with his people wherever they go, foreshadowing the promise of Jesus in Matthew 28:20.

David models something important here: what our relationship with God can be like. Here are intimacy, wisdom, trust, grace and faithfulness. Are we there yet? Do we, like David, have friends to

journey with, companions on the way? Are we longing to do things for God, just because we love him? I think this chapter paints a picture of what I should be aiming for. Let's seek that maturity daily.

Nathan replied to the king, 'Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you.'

2 Samuel 7:3

RESPOND

If you don't have a spiritual friend, ask God to bring one to you and together seek to know God better. Think, too, what one thing can you do for God today just because you love him?

Thirsting for God

PREPARE

What's the hottest day you can remember? Try to recall your feelings and how your thirst was quenched!

READ

Psalms 42,43

EXPLORE

Originally these two psalms were probably one and it's helpful to read them that way. A big clue to this is the repeated refrain (42:5,11; 43:5). Can you see any other clues?

This psalm comes out of an experience which many (most?) of us have at one time or another. The psalmist is spiritually thirsty – he feels dry (42:1,2). He is homesick, a long way from his beloved Jerusalem (42:4,6; 43:3) and feeling depressed (42:5,11; 43:5). God seems distant. It seems that the only water he has is his tears, a night and day experience (42:3). The joy of worship has disappeared (42:4). Foes, within or without, taunt him saying, 'Where is your God?' (42:10).

So thousands of years before it became a recognised treatment for conditions such as depression, the writer engages in some talking therapy. First he talks to himself, 'Why, my soul, are you

downcast?' (42:5,11; 43:5). And he also talks honestly to God, 'Why have you forgotten me?' (42:9). This psalm gives us a useful prescription for such times: pour out your soul to God (42:4), put your hope in God (42:5), remember him (42:6), ask for his help (43:1,3).

**Why, my soul, are you
downcast? Why so disturbed
within me? Put your hope in
God, for I will yet praise him,
my Saviour and my God.**

Psalm 42:5

RESPOND

Can you identify with the experience in these psalms? Perhaps you or someone you know is going through a similar experience right now. Read the psalms again and turn them into prayer.

Monday 29 June

2 Samuel 7:18–29

Amazing grace

PREPARE

The old hymn urges us to count our blessings. List the blessings you have received in your life. It may take some time...

.....

READ

2 Samuel 7:18–29

EXPLORE

This passage feels very New Testament. David is amazed at the grace he has received. ‘Who am I?’ he asks (v 18). God has promised him and his family an eternal inheritance. God has opened the curtain and shown David the final piece in his salvation plan (v 26). In the future is another king: the King of kings whose kingdom is for ever.

David’s response is almost one of disbelief. How is this possible? Why would you do this? The answer is love. God’s gift is motivated by love. By the end of the passage David understands and accepts everything as truth. Praise pours out of him. His gratitude is evident for all to see.

I remember the first time in ministry someone gave our family a gift that blew us away. We needed a car and a friend called from a garage to tell us God had asked him to buy us one and it

was ready to collect. We couldn’t believe it. Why would anyone do that? The answer was the love of God and the love of a friend. How much more, then, is our response to the grace we have received in Jesus! Why us? Who are we? We are the beloved of God and like David’s our gratitude should be boundless.

**Sovereign LORD, you are God!
Your covenant is trustworthy,
and you have promised these
good things to your servant.**

2 Samuel 7:28

RESPOND

Write your own prayer of thanks for the grace you have received.

Who does he think he is?

About the writer
Ro Willoughby



For many years Ro was a commissioning editor with Scripture Union. Now a lay minister in St Chad's Woodseats, Sheffield, she enjoys the many benefits of life in Sheffield, which include the company of family, friends, neighbours and fellow pilgrims.

The popular TV series *Who Do You Think You Are?* throws up many surprises for celebrities researching their family tree. The broadcaster Jeremy Paxman was deeply moved to hear that his indomitable great-great-grandmother raised her many children in abject poverty. Composer Andrew Lloyd Webber was delighted to unearth musical talent in his ancestry.

By the age of 12, Jesus had clearly realised his divine origins. He must have gradually grown aware of his identity and where his destiny lay. Some people who encountered him mockingly said, 'Who on earth does he think he is?' Others recognised something in Jesus they found attractive. Many chose to follow him.

These chapters in Mark's Gospel make us pause to wonder at how extraordinary it is for the God of this world to make 'himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness' (Philippians 2:7). In writing this series I've reflected on how fascinating Jesus is in his deity and humanity. Some titles I've given him may seem disrespectful. This is not my intention, but simply to reflect on God as a fully rounded human being, a first-century Jewish Palestinian who, as God, fully identifies with those of us who are twenty-first-century citizens of heaven.

May you 'see' Jesus in a fresh way through these chapters in Mark's Gospel.

'Our God, contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man.*

*'Let Earth and Heaven Combine', Charles Wesley, 1707-1778

Tuesday 30 June

Mark 6:1–13

The elder brother

PREPARE

Who do you think Jesus is? What three roles or titles would you attribute to him?

.....

READ

Mark 6:1–13

EXPLORE

Years ago, I heard Brother Andrew speak about some Christians under persecution in Eastern Europe. When questioned about why they were meeting, they replied, 'We're meeting with our brothers and sisters to hear the last will and testament of our elder brother.' In one sense that is very true! According to the writer of Hebrews, Jesus identified himself as a brother to those who 'are made holy' by God.

The people in the synagogue in Jesus' home town may be amazed at Jesus' eloquence and miracles, but this does not compel them to respect or believe him. 'He's very ordinary! We know all about him.' Their statements underline the fact that Jesus had truly become 'one like us', a son, with a skilled trade and named brothers and sisters. What became of his sisters, I wonder?

The people's lack of faith takes Jesus by surprise. He'd laid aside all the glory

of heaven resulting in restrictions upon his exercise of power, though he can still bestow power upon his disciples to heal and cast out demons (v 13). He prepares them to expect rejection, just like him.

... Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.

Hebrews 2:11

RESPOND

We share the same father and have brothers and sisters in common. What could it mean for us in the next 24 hours to have Jesus as an older brother, taking responsibility for us?

.....

Bible in a year: 2 Chronicles 31,32; Luke 1:1–38

John's cousin

PREPARE

As you read this unsavoury story, focus on just how decadently corrupt, abusive and godless Herod is. What can God say to you through this story?

READ

Mark 6:14–29

EXPLORE

John the Baptist and Jesus were related through their mothers. Both became well known. John was an Elijah-type figure, as some people labelled Jesus (v 15).

He looked to the future, since someone more powerful would follow him (1:7), he launched Jesus' ministry through baptism (1:9) and aroused such intense opposition that ultimately it led to a gory death. Jesus was more powerful than John. His teaching also aroused violent opposition ending in a cruel death and faithful followers buried his body too. Unlike John, Jesus truly was raised from the dead.

Herod Antipas, who ruthlessly ruled in Galilee, was fascinated by Jesus. He associated the cousins with each other, believing Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead. Herod was still guiltily plagued over John's beheading. Luke writes that Herod's wish to meet Jesus was only satisfied at Jesus' trial

(Luke 23:8,9). Neither John nor Jesus courted fame or power. They knew the message from God they had to announce, calling people to live holy lives, to enter the kingdom of God. Their 'celebrity' status was costly.

... Jesus' name had become well known ... Herod ... said ... 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!'

Mark 6:14,16

RESPOND

We too are called to holy living in our unsavoury and broken world. It may be costly. Ask for an opportunity today to be faithful to your calling to follow in Christ's footsteps.

Thursday 2 July

Mark 6:30–44

Foodbank provider

PREPARE

Imagine yourself walking with family and friends some distance to see this miracle-worker. What role would each play as you listen all day and are then fed well?

.....

READ

Mark 6:30–44

EXPLORE

If you'd been in the crowd, what one thing might you always remember? The chase, anticipating where Jesus' boat would land? Spending time with Jesus all day and listening to his teaching? Feeling hungry and anxiously wondering how you'd get home? Watching Jesus give thanks, break bread and then everyone has enough to eat? Amazement at how much was left?

Throughout this day, Jesus reveals so much of his character, far more than just feeding over 5,000 people. He's a leader who desires to spend quality time with his followers (vs 30,31); the most compelling human being anyone could ever meet (v 33); a riveting teacher who shares the mind of God with those who will listen (v 34); a pastor with the power and compassion to meet human need (v 37); a miracle-worker who makes sure

everyone is satisfied (v 42) with more than enough to go round (v 43) because of his generous heart. What else could you add to the list? (You might add, as John does, a popular figure who refuses to lead a revolt against the Roman authorities.)

Looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves.

Mark 6:41

RESPOND

Who does Jesus think he is? Take one of his characteristics revealed in this story. What does this aspect of Jesus mean to you as you pray and meet with him?

Water strider

PREPARE

Pause to reflect. What troubles you most about our polluted, broken world?

.....

READ

Mark 6:45–56

EXPLORE

Where air meets water, liquid water molecules are attracted to one another. This creates surface tension, like an elastic membrane. Long-legged insects like water striders, spreading their weight over a larger area, don't break the water's surface. They appear to glide. (It's a bit more complicated!) Ever wondered how Jesus could walk on top of water? Did he get wet feet?

He sends his disciples out on the lake where they end up in a tempestuous storm, without him. In due course he strides towards them. Immediately the wind dies down. How come? At the beginning of time Jesus was involved in creating the world. He knows how water, surface tension and storms work.

More obviously, as God he can do what no human being can. His statement to the disciples, 'It is I' (v 50), the Greek saying 'I am', resonates with

God's self-disclosure to Moses from the burning bush – 'I AM WHO I AM' (Exodus 3:14). The disciples have an advantage over Moses because it is Jesus who makes the Creator God visible, stepping onto water to be seen by them in their distress.

But when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out.

Mark 6:49

RESPOND

We live amid a climate crisis. All creatures living in or relying on rivers and seas (including water striders) are affected. Yet the Lord of creation is with us. Cry out to him to have mercy on this beautiful but polluted planet.

Saturday 4 July

Mark 7:1–8

Rule interpreter

PREPARE

Are you a natural rule-keeper or do you find rules irksome?

.....

READ

Mark 7:1–8

EXPLORE

A recent podcast compared hand-washing dishes with using a dishwasher. Which is more environmentally friendly, more effective, more costly, more convenient? The dishwasher won on all counts, but with conditions. It depends on washing on a longer wash but lower temperature, rinsing dirty plates in water first and only running a programme when full. I wasn't convinced! Who knows best?

In general, according to the Old Testament, the only specific washing instructions were for priests in their priestly duties (Exodus 30:19–21).

Everyone else only became understandably unclean if, for example, they touched some form of bodily fluids (Leviticus 15:11). However, in Jesus' time, many of the Jewish authorities are less concerned with matters of hygiene than they are about ritual purity to maintain a distinctiveness from Gentiles and certain Jewish sects.

The Pharisees live with complicated cleanliness rules, which Jesus often breaks, about mixing with tax collectors (2:14) and Gentiles (5:1) – even touching corpses (5:41). Don't you love how he defends his disciples? Being God, he isn't bound by 'the tradition of the elders' (v 3). He authoritatively interprets the prophet Isaiah's words, calling out empty worship. He invites people to abide by the rules of the kingdom of God.

'You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.'

Mark 7:8

RESPOND

What attitudes in society do you currently struggle to understand in the light of the rule of God? Pray about that now.

A desperate cry

PREPARE

Have you ever felt that God has let you down? Think back to how you came through it, and be thankful.

READ

Psalm 44

EXPLORE

This is a psalm of desperation, the cry of someone with deep faith who is suffering and has lost sight of God. It starts with the writer joyfully recounting the good times they have enjoyed with God. They use the word 'we' frequently, for example, '... we push back our enemies; through your name we trample our foes' (v 5). The relationship with God was a joyous partnership, a cause of celebration. Then, suddenly, things change, and as far as the writer can see there is no reason for it. They remain faithful but life is no longer a joyful journey but a path of suffering and sorrow.

I imagine that is something we all experience – the mountaintop joys and the dark valleys. It was how I felt through my days of cancer and the treatment I underwent. My prayers were more often those of this psalm rather than those of the more joyful ones that follow. How

do we get through the mystery of those dark days? The psalmist has an answer that's easy to miss. In verses 17 and 20 we read that they have not forgotten God. The memory of who God is – his love, his care, his faithfulness – are embedded in the psalmist's heart and that is what keeps him true.

Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing love.

Psalm 44:26

RESPOND

Remember the good times you have enjoyed with God; hold fast to him who will never let you go.

Monday 6 July

Mark 7:9–23

Perceptive teacher

PREPARE

Reflect on Psalm 51:10: ‘Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.’

.....

READ

Mark 7:9–23

EXPLORE

Jesus hasn't finished with cleanliness regulations. He addresses the Pharisees, the crowd and his disciples. Notice his different approaches. With the Pharisees he compares the words of Moses to their regulations. Read verses 10–13 out loud to capture Jesus' accusatory 'You'. Righteously forceful, he has swept away their traditions which have the opposite effect from their original intention. He is criticising the Pharisees for their focus on complying with the law in a way that negates the spirit of the law, through withholding support for parents. Thus, they dishonour their parents, breaking God's fifth commandment.

Jesus addresses the crowd, which may or may not have included his accusers. He wants everyone to understand something radically challenging. By eating with unclean hands (v 2) his disciples would never have made

themselves unclean inside. Impurity is harboured in the inner being (v 15).

Finally, to explain how impure thoughts can lead to a long list of destructive behaviour, he takes his disciples aside. They are among those who are most receptive to his teaching. He knows what he needs to say. He doesn't shy away from speaking the hard truth.

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, 'Listen to me, everyone, and understand this.'

Mark 7:14

RESPOND

Pray for those who preach God's Word week by week. Following Jesus' example, they need God's wisdom not only to discern what comes from a pure heart in what they say, but also to assess the receptivity of their audience.

A friend of Gentiles

PREPARE

Remind yourself of how the Pharisees respond to Jesus in verses 1 to 23. Ask God to help you marvel at today's contrasting response to him.

READ

Mark 7:24–30

EXPLORE

Jesus has swept aside the regulations of the Pharisees. Now, probably wanting to escape their fierce opposition and maybe even Herod's sinister interest in him (6:14), he travels to the Gentile area around Tyre, on the coast of modern-day Lebanon. Mark even suggests Jesus wants to hide (v 24). In Jewish eyes, he is discovered by the most unacceptable person possible – an 'unclean' woman, a Greek Gentile, from the deeply pagan area of Syrian Phoenicia.

She hasn't come to criticise. All that comes out of her heart (v 21) is a desperate and bold request. Jesus tells her she is not a priority and even infers she's a dog. (The Greek word suggests a little dog, like a pet.) Astonishingly, she's not offended but accepts his primary Jewish calling, yet claims her own right to his attention. What a contrast to the hostility of the Jews!

Her daughter is restored to wholeness. Far more than that, Jesus has forever commanded her with the words, 'Woman, you have great faith!' (Matthew 15:28). Martin Luther wrote, 'She took Christ at his own words. He then treated her not as a dog but as a child of Israel.*

Then he told her, 'For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.'

Mark 7:29

RESPOND

Jesus, knowing this woman's background, still accepts her and gives her far more than she expected. Pray for anyone you know who feels second-class in God's eyes, asking that they hear Jesus' words of acceptance and affirmation.

*R Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1950, p362

Wednesday 8 July

Mark 7:31–37

Hoped-for healer

PREPARE

Can you imagine the day when the glory of the Lord is finally fully revealed?

.....

READ

Mark 7:31–37

EXPLORE

Jesus now travels 120 miles into Gentile territory, going up the Mediterranean coast to Sidon, then down to the ten Graeco-Roman cities, east of Lake Galilee. Maybe he wants a break from his Jewish critics.

His fame has gone ahead of him. People bring a deaf-mute man for Jesus to touch (v 32). In need of privacy, Jesus leads the man away from the crowd. Once more, Jesus becomes ritually ‘unclean’, engaging with and touching a Gentile man, then placing spit upon his tongue. The man must have seen Jesus looking to heaven, the source of his power to heal, but hears nothing until... he hears Jesus’ voice and his own!

The Greek word for ‘could hardly talk’ (v 32) only appears once more in the Bible, in the Greek Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament), in Isaiah 35, a chapter that rejoices in the future day when the glory of the Lord will be revealed.

In earlier chapters, God’s wrathful judgement upon Israel’s neighbours has been foretold, nations that have defied God. Is Mark presenting Jesus, the restorer of speech and hearing, as the beginning of the fulfilment of that expected day of the Lord when Jews and Gentiles alike will see God’s glory?

**... they will see the glory of the
LORD ... the ears of the deaf
unstopped ... the mute tongue
shout for joy.**

Isaiah 35:2,5,6

RESPOND

God still heals today. Occasionally someone’s hearing is restored. For many deaf people, deafness is part of their identity. But on the day of the Lord nothing will hinder their hearing or speech. Pray for anyone you know who’s deaf.

Crowd controller

PREPARE

Why do you think the story of feeding the 5,000 is better known than the feeding of the 4,000? Ask God to speak to you today.

READ

Mark 8:1–13

EXPLORE

When attending a large sporting event or a festival, I'm aware of being organised. Officials speak into walkie-talkies; certain routes are closed off; notices dictate crowd behaviour; tickets are checked; bags are searched; cameras are everywhere!

Unlike in the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus makes the first move in taking charge of the crowd of 4,000. He notices they are hungry after having been with him three days – a devoted, long-suffering crowd in a remote spot, probably still in a Gentile region. He cares very deeply for them (vs 2,3). What do you notice about how Jesus relates to this crowd? Why hasn't he observed their hunger earlier? Did they not intend to stay so long?

He provides for their well-being. They are satisfied (v 8). We don't know what this crowd make of his teaching, unlike the crowd of 5,000 (John 6:15). But he

doesn't dictate how they choose to respond. His return across the lake, to be confronted yet again by his Jewish critics, emphasises that Jesus does not control how people believe in him, whether Jew or Gentile. Note, he himself refuses to be controlled. He won't provide proof of his identity to order.

The people ate and were satisfied. Afterwards the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

Mark 8:8

RESPOND

Pray for someone you know who is a Christian but finds it difficult to accept Jesus' compassion for them, or for someone who has not yet put their trust in him.

Friday 10 July

Mark 8:14–21

Disappointed mentor

PREPARE

Are you good at recognising where God's at work? Are you slow to connect the Word of God with your everyday life? Is anything obstructing your growth in faith?

.....

READ

Mark 8:14–21

EXPLORE

Some people take to driving a car as the proverbial duck takes to water, others are almost paralysed by anxiety, others are just slow to learn and build up confidence, while some never learn.

Jesus is disturbed by the Pharisees' blank refusal to give him a fair hearing (v 12) and he's frustrated by the disciples' slowness to understand. Is there a difference between the two? On Tuesday we read how he probably travelled north to get away from the unbelief and rejection of the Pharisees and Herod. Here he's not deserting his disciples but longing for them to make progress in understanding.

Ironically this discussion begins because one loaf of bread is not enough to feed a boatful. Someone has forgotten to bring the lunch. They've all forgotten Jesus is in the boat. They've all forgotten how Jesus can provide enough bread for all. Would Jesus perform another

miracle, or find another solution? We don't know. Like the Pharisees who are bound by material regulations, the disciples are bound by material things, not the spiritual bread of life. They are slow learners, spiritually short-sighted.

... Jesus asked them: 'Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened?'

Mark 8:17

RESPOND

A few Pharisees put their faith in Christ. Filled with the Holy Spirit after Pentecost, Jesus' disciples were emboldened in faith. Pray for yourself and anyone you know who's a slow learner when it comes to trusting Jesus.

Hands-on healer

PREPARE

Read Mark 6:1 to 8:21 again to remind yourself of your reflections in Mark.

READ

Mark 8:22–26

EXPLORE

As I've written these notes, I have noticed how the Gospel-writer finds links between incidents and the words of Jesus.

For example, he traces the theme of rejection and unbelief with opportunities for Gentiles to hear Jesus' message and not just Jews. He includes two contrasting feeding miracles. This sight-restoring story relates to the blindness of faith in the previous discussion and also Wednesday's hearing restoration story (7:31–37). These two healing miracles are the only ones in Mark that don't also appear in Matthew and Luke. What similarities are there between the two?

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus lays his hands on or touches someone more than in any other Gospel. In all but one case it's in the context of healing. Here, rather beautifully, he privately takes the man by the hand. Then he touches his eyes in two stages, initially applying his spit. (Saliva was recognised as having healing

properties.) Unlike in 7:34, he doesn't command the man to see. Unusually, he asks a question in the style of those in 8:17–21, as though probing the man's experience and understanding.

Is Mark presenting Jesus' question here (v 23) as one he might ask of anyone, Jew or Gentile? 'Do you see anything?' Partial vision can turn into faith-filled clarity.

He took the blind man by the hand ... When he had spat on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, 'Do you see anything?'

Mark 8:23

RESPOND

This is the last reflection on these chapters of Mark's Gospel. If Jesus were to ask you, 'Have you seen anything?', what would you say?

Sunday 12 July

Psalm 45

For a royal wedding

PREPARE

The institution of marriage has changed over the centuries and is hotly debated. The importance of faith within a marriage attracts less interest. Ask God to help you reflect on this.

READ

Psalm 45

EXPLORE

Every message on a wedding card contains warm, appreciative comments. The bride and groom are the prince and princess on this one day. This song is no exception. Possibly it is composed for King Solomon marrying yet another foreign wife. As such it is culturally freighted.

More is made of his virtues than hers. As God's representative he's challenged to rule well, being faithful to God (v 4) for his throne is ultimately God's (v 6). Solomon's descendants did belong to an eternal line, which is why the writer of Hebrews, when referring to Christ, quotes verses 6 and 7 (Hebrews 1:8,9).

The royal bride is told to reject the gods of her own people (v 10). Jezebel, King Ahab's wife, is one example of failing to do so for she turned her husband's heart away from the Lord to serve her

foreign gods (1 Kings 16:31-33; 21:25,26). In sharp contrast, Ruth, another foreign bride, rejected the gods of her dead first husband and eventually gave birth to the royal line of David (Ruth 1:16).

Marriage today is different from this writer's understanding. For a start, in most countries, polygamy is unlawful. In Christian marriage husband and wife are both accountable to God and both are called upon to enable the flourishing of faith and trust in him (Ephesians 5:21).

**Led in with joy and gladness,
they enter the palace of
the king.**

Psalm 45:15

RESPOND

Pray for those preparing for their marriage.

Hold on tight!

About the writer **Nudrat Malik**

A Pakistani Christian immigrant, Nudrat has only recently started describing herself as Asian British, despite having lived in England for most of her adult life. She lives with her family in Buckinghamshire, where she enjoys a recently discovered love of gardening.



Prophets announced their message publicly to whoever would listen. The book of the prophet Isaiah, commonly known as the 'fifth Gospel', can be divided into three sections, each with a particular theme or flavour and therefore with its own distinct tone. Although there are questions concerning the authorship of the book, a number of linguistic, structural and thematic features suggest its overall unity in the prophetic tradition. The book must be understood in the context of the exile – before, during and after. In this series, we will be delving deeper into 'Second Isaiah': the book of comfort.

Isaiah brings the message of the 'Holy One of Israel' to his people. The message is one of comfort and hope to a people who are beaten down, tempted and oppressed. Could it be true that rescue and release are at hand or even possible? Although Isaiah delivers a message of restoration, it is not without challenging words: an unfaithful, unbelieving nation that has lost sight of its role in the world, tensions between God and Israel have become apparent.

As you read Isaiah, sit with the prophet's words, no matter how sharp and prickly they might be, not forgetting the message that he wants to deliver: God's faithfulness and goodness have been tasted, which means that he can be trusted for the future. Be prepared to broaden your horizons and extend your vision!

Monday 13 July

Isaiah 46:1–13

Me, mine, myself

PREPARE

Listen to any contemplative or instrumental music of your choice.

.....

READ

Isaiah 46:1–13

EXPLORE

The human condition is such that we have an overwhelming desire to control and order things our way. In a modern, busy and sometimes chaotic life, it is much easier to deal with the gods that we construct and control. The notion of a personal God who is relational brings with it demands and unpredictability, which may be too much to handle. The gods of our own making, depicted in our own way, using our own treasures – surely this is what we want: a situation in which we are at the centre. We become gods! These gods give us comfort because we can see them where we put them, we control them, we put them in a box: predictable and comfortable.

And that is exactly the opposite of what our Creator, Saviour God is! He is a personal God who responds to us, has a relationship with us (v 4). This passage is an invitation to identify those gods that we have chosen, shaped, decorated and

then put in a spot of our choosing, going to any lengths to maintain our control. Isaiah wants us to acknowledge all those situations when we put ourselves in control, and to reflect on what it is that we fear facing.

... they set it up in its place, and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move. Even though someone cries out to it, it cannot answer; it cannot save them from their troubles.

Isaiah 46:7

RESPOND

Make a list of things, situations or habits that put you in control. These may be leaving little room for a relational God in your everyday life. Say out loud: ‘May your kingdom come in my life.’

Faithfulness to obedience

PREPARE

Recall some of the good things God has done in your life.

READ

Isaiah 48:1-11

EXPLORE

If the Scriptures tell us about God, they also tell us about ourselves and our humanity: broken, damaged, fickle and ungrateful. In Isaiah's words, the Holy One of Israel is trying to prove himself to the house of Jacob by telling the 'new' and 'unknown' things to come because they have failed to recognise who he is and what he has done. This zealous defence shows God to be one who tests, is patient, yet jealous. With its tendency to take control, Israel seems to have forgotten its relationship to the Lord Almighty. Are we any different?

Eugene Peterson in his introduction to the book of Isaiah in *The Message* writes, 'Isaiah involves taking the stuff of our ordinary and often disappointing human experience and showing us how it is the very stuff that God uses to create and save and give hope... nothing is unusable by God.' Could it be that we too have forgotten to recall the

experiences of our lives which are an essential witness to God's faithfulness? May it be that reliving something jubilant or traumatic imprints the important message deep within: the Holy One is faithful and able to save!

For my own name's sake I delay my wrath; for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you, so as not to destroy you completely.

Isaiah 48:9

RESPOND

Look at a photo or postcard of an occasion – happy or sad – a trip, or a person. Is it possible to share this with your close family so that the blessing can be remembered or relived?

Wednesday 15 July

Isaiah 48:12–22

If only...

PREPARE

Use silence to still yourself: calm your breathing and wait for your heartbeat to find a comfortable rhythm.

.....

READ

Isaiah 48:12–22

EXPLORE

It's clear that God lives with a huge 'if only' in his relationship with Israel. If only... if only Israel had listened and believed the one who 'laid the foundations of the earth' and told them 'these things' (vs 13,6). This refrain rings out clearly in this passage. The Holy One of Israel is trying to prove that he is God Almighty, one who should not be ignored. Yet, Israel continues to overlook her redeemer, the Lord.

Here, Isaiah brings his message to the people by explaining the loss they have had to experience; they have forfeited the blessings that would have been theirs. Isaiah is pointed but plain – Israel herself has become the biggest hindrance to experiencing continual and numberless blessings because she has failed to acknowledge God in relation to her very existence; yet he continues to appeal to them! In the words of Jo Bailey Wells, 'God neither insists on his way nor desists from loving them'.*

Now that this tug-of-war relationship is exposed, Isaiah makes it clear that one party is never going to give up in his faithfulness: the Holy One of Israel.

**Listen to me, Jacob, Israel,
whom I have called: I am he;
I am the first and I am the
last. My own hand laid the
foundations of the earth, and
my right hand spread out the
heavens; when I summon them,
they all stand up together.**

Isaiah 48:12,13

RESPOND

Think about the image of a taut rope being pulled by God on one side and you on the other. Linger here for a while. What have you realised about yourself?

*J Bailey Wells, *Isaiah: The People's Bible Commentary*, Bible Reading Fellowship, 2006

.....

God's justice on earth

PREPARE

Read Psalm 136 in two different translations.

READ

Isaiah 49:1–13

EXPLORE

This is a picture of redemption, of salvation; one that is extended to all and encompasses all, especially the beaten down, afflicted ones. It is a hope-filled passage for those who have faced challenging times. One cannot ignore the very physical nature of the afflictions: captives, those in darkness, hungry and thirsty (vs 9,10), all things that we still see. Food larders, pantries and food banks may be part of how redemption is announced to those who need it today and the reality of the world is that it is unjust for so many.

Many faith-based communities, for example churches, mosques and gurdwaras have become experts in attending to physical needs but sometimes have been hesitant to ask the more pertinent questions about the afflictions: captives of what? What is the nature of the darkness? Hungry and thirsty for what? It may be that

redemption is on offer in the here and now only when systemic injustices are put right and through it the image of God is restored in each one of us.

Today's passage ends with a note of hope: God comforts his people and has compassion on those who suffer (v 13), he is a gracious God.

... the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

Isaiah 49:13

RESPOND

Listen, really listen, to the captive who has just been freed, or that person who has stepped out of darkness, or someone who is hungry. Reflect on the image of God being restored in you both.

Friday 17 July

Isaiah 49:14–26

Unbelievable!

PREPARE

Listen to one of the following pieces of music using an online search facility: 'The Lark Ascending' by Ralph Vaughan Williams; or 'A Change Is Gonna Come' by Sam Cooke.

.....

READ

Isaiah 49:14–26

EXPLORE

Impossible things are done: exile to restoration. Unbelievable things happen because of the sovereign Lord. In this passage, Isaiah urges the reader to look beyond the current painful experience and keep an upward, hopeful perspective on things. The people felt that God had forgotten and forsaken them (v 14) but God never forgets us: as 2 Timothy 2:13 reminds us, God remains faithful even when we are faithless.

Living in the moment, being present with all our senses, is one way to manage and counter anxiety. But it could be argued, there are times when living in the moment, being present in the here-and-now, does no good. Think of someone who has had to live through traumatic times because of the actions of others.

I wonder if it would be beneficial or wholesome for them to linger in that present reality? We know that people need to move forward and look ahead.

And yet, the trauma of a situation must have been an ever-present companion as it seemed to be with the children of Zion. In such circumstances we should hold fast to the hope that God, the Redeemer, will prevail (vs 25,26). Unbelievable things can happen, and will happen, because of the Sovereign Lord who is prepared to make them happen!

... captives will be taken from warriors, and plunder retrieved from the fierce; I will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save.

Isaiah 49:25

RESPOND

Recall a time when something seemingly impossible or unbelievable happened, and thank God for what he did and who he is.

Awake, awake!

PREPARE

Read Psalm 139 in full.

READ

Isaiah 51:1–16

EXPLORE

I wonder if this passage brings any comfort to those who are living in constant fear, those who experience the wrath of the oppressor who is bent on destruction. If this text tells us anything, it is a description of the world as it is: where people experience the injustice of living in fear, where one human being will oppress another just because they are determined to do so, and where death is a reality that brings everything to an end.

As surely as this reality needs to be acknowledged, so does the salvation of the Lord who seems equally bent on working out his rescue plan, a way to rebuild that which is destroyed, restore that which is fruitless. In this, the physical earth is not forgotten: deserts are made into Eden, wastelands into gardens (v 3). If there ever was a call to keep perspective when things go wrong, this is it! These prophetic writings are here so that we can remember what the

important things are. Isaiah, like the other prophets, brings a new awareness of the reality of God's involvement in everyday life – not bound by our definition of time and space. Justice, light, righteousness and hope are words used here to remind us of what salvation will look like.

For the moth will eat them up like a garment; the worm will devour them like wool. But my righteousness will last for ever, my salvation through all generations.

Isaiah 51:8

RESPOND

What role, if any, are you playing or are willing to play – in partnership with God – to bring about justice, light and comfort?

Sunday 19 July

Psalm 46

The eye of the storm

PREPARE

How troubled are you by current global challenges to life on earth? Are you tempted to wonder if God is powerless?

.....

READ

Psalm 46

EXPLORE

Our ears and eyes are regularly assaulted by evidence of climate crisis: drought, floods, famine, mudslides, melting polar icecaps, rising sea levels, changing weather patterns. Recent wars have released global insecurity and cataclysmic devastation. We are faced with malign forces of nature and the brutal forces of war. Psalm 46 could well be describing our world (vs 1-3,6). The psalmist is not urging people to have faith in God but is raising the question whether the God they have put their faith in can be trusted. What evidence for confidence do you find here?

Interestingly, the Hebrew for 'break of day' (v 5) is the same phrase for the time Moses called the walls of the Red Sea to collapse (Exodus 14:27), evidence of God's power over both the natural world and the might of the enemy, in this case, the Egyptian army. Moses' and Miriam's subsequent songs graphically describe

God's power (Exodus 15:7-11,21). This psalm has other resonances with that Red Sea escape.

God calls us to be still, to experience his presence in the eye of the storm, a refuge in the centre of a hurricane.

The LORD Almighty is with us.

Psalm 46:11

RESPOND

Hold out both hands. In your mind, place in one a war zone that troubles you, in the other a natural disaster that distresses you. Plead with God to intervene. Then hold out empty hands to receive God's powerful stillness.

Love practically

When the Christians at Rome first received Paul's letter to the Romans, I wonder if they settled down to listen to it in one session. It would have been quite a heavy session, requiring great powers of concentration! Or did they break it up into, say, three sessions? If so, the last third of the letter, which is the five chapters we are looking at, would have been the most practical and the easiest to follow.

These chapters come after Paul has been explaining God's good news of Jesus Christ in some detail. Then Paul takes a big breath and says, 'Therefore...' (12:1). He spells out in straightforward language how he expects Christians to respond. He urges us all to live consistent lives of distinctive Christian character. In other words, the theme of our readings is, one way or another, 'love': loving behaviour towards our fellow believers, our neighbours and even our enemies.

About the writer
Roger Combes



Roger has ministered in parishes in London, Cambridge and Hastings, and as an archdeacon in West Sussex. Now retired, he and his wife Christine live in Crawley with good views of planes from London Gatwick. They have two daughters and two energetic grandchildren.

This love that Paul speaks of is genuine and active. It includes being a team player in the church and a good citizen in the state. It is strong under pressure and gentle with the sensitive. It is discerning, principled and disciplined. It is warm-hearted and affectionate. And, as the letter comes to an end, the great apostle begins to step out of the pages and meet us as a sympathetic, caring and very human Christian leader.

Monday 20 July

Romans 12:1–8

Responding to God

PREPARE

‘Come!’ is the gentle but firm invitation from the Lord to us. As you come to the Bible today, also come to the Lord himself.

.....

READ

Romans 12:1–8

EXPLORE

‘I think what you need is Romans chapter 12 verse 1.’ No one had ever spoken to me like that before. I was a typical 15-year-old with an uncomplicated trust in Christ. I was on a Christian skiing holiday, and the leader and I were having a chat. I was curious to discover what he meant, and we looked up Romans 12:1 together. I read that I needed to make a present of myself to God.

This is what the apostle Paul was looking for from the Christians in Rome in response to all God’s mercies (v 1). The simple act and attitude of giving ourselves to God expresses the gratitude of our hearts and releases us to act on it in our lives. We shall find we can have a sturdy independence from the attitudes of the world around us (v 2), a more objective assessment of ourselves (v 3) and a much greater usefulness in the mission and ministry of Christ’s church (vs 4–8).

When it comes to using our abilities and gifts in God’s service, Paul urges that we play our part and do it with heart and soul. And that includes ‘generously’, ‘diligently’ and ‘cheerfully’ (v 8).

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.

Romans 12:1

RESPOND

Think of other Christians in your church/fellowship as fellow team members, with their own tasks and specialisms, complementing and belonging to each other. How might you encourage them?

What to do and not to do

PREPARE

Pray to be a doer of the Word and not a reader only.

READ

Romans 12:9–21

EXPLORE

This is one of the Bible's most practical passages. It mentions about 21 things to do, and 7 things not to do. Its meaning is mostly straightforward. The hard part is living it out.

Overall, good Christian living is about love (v 9), and, as the passage makes clear, it needs to be a sincere, practical and resilient love. In a loving church, the Christians will have a mutual commitment to, and respect for, each other (v 10). Love will be hard work sometimes: for example, when entertaining visitors or refugees, when helping at a food bank or when there is opposition or suffering. This love needs to develop stamina, if we are to keep keen in the Lord's service, including praying for others. Paul knows what it's like. We need to refuel spiritually and to allow our hope of glory to cheer us up (vs 11–13)!

Love means doing good to our enemies too, never retaliating or seeking revenge (vs 17,19,20). Our response to evil in the world is not to add to it, but to abhor it and replace it with good (vs 9,20,21). We want to be a blessing to everyone, even to those who reject us. Love includes sympathising with people, not being superior, and living at peace with everyone we can (vs 14–16,18).

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

Romans 12:9

RESPOND

Select two or three imperatives in the passage that you think may be the Lord's word for you to act on in the coming days.

Wednesday 22 July

Romans 13:1–7

God's public servants

PREPARE

Resolve that the next few minutes will be a good investment. Make the most of the time, absorbing something of God's Word.

.....

READ

Romans 13:1–7

EXPLORE

'What do you do?' the hitchhiker asked the driver who had stopped to pick him up. 'I'm in public service,' the man replied, with a marked Welsh accent. The driver was the then Speaker of the British House of Commons, George Thomas. 'Public servants' is how we often describe our politicians, police, judges, administrators etc, and so they are. It is a noble calling. In our passage we find that they are not just servants of the public but 'servants of God' (vs 4,6).

God has given them authority to govern, maintain order, administer justice, commend those who do right and punish those who do wrong. God has set this up for the common good (vs 3,4).

In essence, our primary duty as Christian citizens is to subject ourselves (vs 1,5) to these God-given 'governing authorities', so that society can function well. We pay our taxes, even if we don't agree with everything the government does.

.....

We show respect to officials, even when we think they're wrong, out of respect for their office (v 7). Ultimately, if governments or officials go badly wrong, other scriptures speak about how to oppose, resist or patiently endure them, like the examples of Daniel, Jesus himself or his apostles.

Give to everyone what you owe them: if you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour.

Romans 13:7

RESPOND

Pray for those in prison and for those who have been affected as a consequence: their victims and their families, and the prisoners' partners and children.

Action time

PREPARE

‘Know yourself’ said an ancient oracle. Ask the Lord to show you yourself as well as your Saviour.

READ

Romans 13:8–14

EXPLORE

‘Wake up!’ The words may mean we have lost concentration, or that it is time to rise and get dressed at the beginning of the day. There is an urgency in Paul’s words (vs 11,12). He is reminding the Christians in Rome that a new day has dawned with the resurrection of Jesus and the present old era will pass away without further notice. The trouble is that we believers can blithely carry on as if in a daze, oblivious that our behaviour still reflects the dark old times. ‘Change now!’ is the message. We need a change of clothes into new behaviour that reflects Jesus Christ (v 14).

So some old behaviour needs to be thrown away: in fact, all the ugly items in verse 13. They are quite out of place in Christ’s new world. Then we need to kit ourselves out with some new behaviour – in summary, love for other people. For example, we must choose to respect people’s life and property so that we

do not steal or kill. We must choose self-control in sexual matters so that we do not commit adultery. We must choose contentment so that we do not covet what belongs to another (v 9). This is the love required (v 10). This is the love Jesus taught (Matthew 19:18,19).

And do this, understanding the present time: the hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

Romans 13:11

RESPOND

Do you have a pattern of behaviour that needs changing? Can you think of a strategy for achieving it?

Friday 24 July

Romans 14:1-12

Different opinions

PREPARE

Pray to learn something you need from the Lord today.

.....

READ

Romans 14:1-12

EXPLORE

It was over 50 years ago and it seems silly now. I was in a hot, crowded, stuffy church on a sultry Sunday evening. Most men had taken their jackets off (yes, the men were wearing jackets then!) to feel more comfortable. I took my jacket off but felt distinctly uncomfortable. Somehow, I felt I was being disrespectful to God, to the church and to the Lord's Day, worshipping there in my shirtsleeves. So I put my jacket back on and felt at ease again. My friends smiled indulgently at me. (Nowadays, my conscience does not object if I worship dressed more casually.)

How do we react to Christian people whose conscience is more sensitive than others', especially about something we think of as minor? In Paul's day, perhaps some believers could not bring themselves to eat meat that had passed through pagan temple processes. Or perhaps opinions varied about whether

observing certain days, eg for prayer or fasting (vs 2,5), was helpful or unhelpful.

Don't think worse of a believer whose conscience is different from yours, says Paul (vs 3,10). Rather, show them respect for wanting the best (v 6). The Lord knows their heart. We must not get above ourselves. Who are we to set ourselves up as judge of someone else's conscience? We and they are all answerable to God (vs 11,12).

If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

Romans 14:8

RESPOND

Think of someone you know who has a different opinion from you on some aspect of conscience. Determine not to fall out over it!

Mountains and molehills

PREPARE

As you open today's passage, open your heart both to the Lord and to the needs of others.

READ

Romans 14:13-23

EXPLORE

Seeing things in their right perspective can sometimes be difficult in Christian circles. Big things can get ignored and small things can become huge. In Rome, it may have been the case (though we are not told the details) that some Jewish Christians were still only comfortable eating meat according to the strict Jewish way, and they found it deeply upsetting to their faith that Gentile followers of their Messiah would eat any meat cooked anyhow. Was this a big matter? Yes, to those Jews! But to those Gentiles? No, they carried on regardless.

Paul's view on it (and God's) is different. Something we regard as minor is a major thing if it builds up, or trips up, someone else's faith (vs 13,15). Our molehill can be another person's mountain. What we eat and drink in themselves are clearly not as important as doing right and pursuing peace (v 17). Yet if our choices in these

mundane matters affect the exercise of someone's faith and conscience, they can become very significant.

Avoiding, say, a meal once associated with paganism, or a glass of alcohol, because of someone else's weakness or sensibility, may be very constructive and supportive (vs 19,21). Things that build up another's faith and encourage unity are big things.

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Romans 14:17

RESPOND

How well do you know your conscience? Is it sensitive enough? Or too sensitive? Do you listen to it? Thank God for it.

Sunday 26 July

Psalm 47

Celebrate!

PREPARE

Read the Psalm using *The Message* translation; then read it again in a different translation.

.....

READ

Psalm 47

EXPLORE

This psalm declares, in very definite human terms, that God is king. We are called to celebrate his kingship as we would any other victory: clap your hands, sound the trumpet, shout praise. Not only this, the victory is also portrayed in language that announces the complete and overpowering rule of the Lord Most High (v 2).

If the God of the Psalms – this very particular Jewish literary genre – is king, what does it mean for us in the here and now? Top of your list may be a cessation of wars around the world, as we are increasingly aware of the injustice of such all-encompassing conflict. Closer to home, you may be able to identify a neighbourhood dispute, the result of which is injustice faced by particular people and places. Advocating for those without a voice may be the start of God's rule.

The psalm declares God as 'king of all the earth'. What does this victory mean for the whole of creation? A stop to the destruction of nature – plants and habitats – may feature in your mind.

Let true victory be as the domino effect that brings about the righteous rule of God in the world: restoration for all of creation so that it can be declared 'good', as in the beginning of the world.

Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy.

Psalm 47:1

RESPOND

'Sing your best song to God' (v 6, *The Message*). Which song would you sing, given the challenges of life for you at the moment? Use this suggested song* to celebrate with *all* of God's creation!

*The Lost Words – Spell Songs, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hg1xFYpXuWA>

.....

Give way!

PREPARE

A prayer to start with: ‘Lord, mould me today as a potter moulds her clay. Amen.’

READ

Romans 15:1–6

EXPLORE

‘Give way!’ says the road sign, as the traffic lanes merge. Are you the sort of person in life who tends to give way when there’s conflict or do you dig in your heels? The truth is, of course, that sometimes we need to be able to stand firm and sometimes we need to be able to give way, or to negotiate. Love ‘is not self-seeking,’ says the apostle elsewhere (1 Corinthians 13:5). Paul is saying here we need to develop an ability to give way to others (‘not to please ourselves’, v 1).

The supreme example is so obvious we might miss it – the Lord Jesus himself. His whole ministry and sacrifice could be summed up as not pleasing himself. The Old Testament reinforces this, highlighting for us how he willingly suffered in his Father’s service (v 3).

All this is very practical. The Scriptures, as always, give us encouragement to endure (v 4). Jesus’ example inspires us to live for

the good of others, not just for our own pleasure (v 2). In the church fellowship, there are bound to be some tensions and differences of opinion. But, if everyone shows this same generosity of spirit toward each other that Jesus showed, then our worship and our fellowship will glorify God so much more (vs 5,6).

For even Christ did not please himself.

Romans 15:3a

RESPOND

‘The fruit of the Spirit is ... forbearance’ (Galatians 5:22). How true is this in your life and experience?

Tuesday 28 July

Romans 15:7–13

For the many not the few

PREPARE

Step outside your own life and fellowship for a few minutes to hear the Lord speak to you from his worldwide vantage point.

.....

READ

Romans 15:7–13

EXPLORE

If you're writing a long email, you might want to mention your main points again at the end. As Paul begins to conclude this major letter to the Romans, he underlines the good news that the gospel is for everyone everywhere. He stresses it four times.

1 Christ became a servant for Jew and Gentile alike (vs 8,9). 2 In Christ, God fulfils his promises to the Jews in such a way that non-Jews (Gentiles) also can praise God for his mercy (vs 8–11). 3 From the beginning, God intended the Jews to be his instrument through whom the whole world might come to praise and glorify God (v 12). 4 The exalted Christ reigns in righteousness over all the nations of the world. Because of this, all people can have hope (v 12).

The practical implications for us are, first, to accept one another, as Christ accepted us (v 7). How terrible if we should shun someone for whom Christ

died. Secondly, be filled with hope!

Think about verse 13. We could learn it by heart. Trust the God of hope. He has worked down the centuries to bring joy and peace in Christ to us, whoever we are, by the power of his Spirit (v 13).

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13

RESPOND

Think of all the various ways Christians in different countries praise God and bring glory to him. Give thanks to God for this wonderful worldwide spread of the gospel.

Gospel imperatives

PREPARE

Be curious, looking for something in the Bible that is new, unexpected or forgotten, and receive it gladly.

READ

Romans 15:14–22

EXPLORE

Paul was more sensitive and more considerate than he is often given credit for. Was he worried here that he might not have got the tone quite right for his audience? He reassured them of his high opinion of them (vs 14,15) and he offered a further explanation (following 1:10–13) for why he had not visited them yet (v 22).

The main reason behind everything Paul did was that God had given him this huge privilege of ‘ministering Jesus Christ’ to the non-Jewish world (vs 15,16). Three times Paul mentions ‘proclaiming the gospel’ (vs 16,19,20). This was his overarching joy, duty and ambition. Hence his delay in visiting Rome. He had been busy! He felt he was primarily a pioneer and therefore should prioritise places where the gospel had not yet reached (v 20).

When I was 21, someone much older implored me, ‘When you are a vicar in a new parish, please remember that God

was at work there before you.’ A strong sense of call to God’s work doesn’t mean we can ignore God’s people around us. See how Paul, the great apostle to the unreached, still affirmed the brave Christians in Rome; he still took trouble to explain his plans to them (v 22) and he took care not to muscle in on someone else’s ministry (v 20).

It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation.

Romans 15:20

RESPOND

Pray for wisdom to know when to resist other people’s expectations and when to accept other people’s advice and insight.

Thursday 30 July

Romans 15:23–33

Please pray

PREPARE

Pray this Bible reader's prayer: 'Lord, may your Word be my rule, may your Holy Spirit be my teacher and may I be a good learner today. Amen.'

.....

READ

Romans 15:23–33

EXPLORE

Life was never easy for Paul. But he must have been worried about road safety. Bandits were common. He was uninsured, on a long journey, carrying a large amount of cash collected from the churches of Macedonia and Greece to relieve poverty in their 'mother' church in Jerusalem. Was he carrying large bags of gold coins? Sea travel was hazardous too. Paul was shipwrecked four times in all.

Also, if he arrived in Jerusalem safely, he faced an uncertain reception. Jewish opponents might block him or even try to kill him (as did in fact happen, Acts 23:12–22) and Jewish Christians might not accept a gift from Gentile Christians (v 31), or they might not see the importance of believers from different cultures helping each other in a united church (v 17). Moreover, Paul was determined, under God, to go to Spain (another long journey!) and yet he longed to visit the church at

Rome for some fellowship and support (vs 23,24,28,32).

So, please pray! he urged (v 30). Even if we are trying to do God's will and are mindful of God's good providence, we still need the prayers of the Christian family, and they need ours.

I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.

Romans 15:30

RESPOND

Is there a church or Christian organisation that has helped you spiritually in the past that you can now help financially or through prayer, to say thank you?

Greet if not meet

PREPARE

Pause to ask the Lord to make clear what he has to say to you from his Word for today.

READ

Romans 16:1-16

EXPLORE

Imagine you are gathering in a house in Rome for fellowship and worship. A certain Phoebe (v 1) has brought this letter from Corinth from the apostle Paul addressed to the group. Then imagine that, as it is read out for the first time, you are one of the believers Paul identifies by name as 'my dear friend' (v 8), or 'a hard worker in the Lord' (v 12) or 'faithful to Christ' (v 10). You'd feel ten feet tall!

Which of the 26 believers mentioned here can you identify with most? The heroic (vs 3,4), the house church member (vs 5,14,15), the tested and persecuted (vs 7,10) or the caring and dependable (v 13b)?

Notice Paul's kindness. He greets people personally, by name. Many are women, most of whom he singles out as deserving recognition. Some are Jews, many are Gentiles; some are longstanding believers, some have typical slave names; and Paul greets

them all with affection. He knows the value of these short comments of appreciation and encouragement. In addition, Paul asks if anyone can help Phoebe practically while she is in Rome. He hopes so. She has been a generous helper to Paul and many others back home. Christians help people, of course. Supporting someone who has helped others is doubly appropriate (v 2).

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

Romans 16:7

RESPOND

Who can you acknowledge and encourage today by name?

Saturday 1 August

Romans 16:17–27

Practical and sublime

PREPARE

Something to consider: are you as sensitive to the Word of God as you are to the words of your friends?

.....

READ

Romans 16:17–27

EXPLORE

Watch out for scammers, we are told. Such people phone us or email us and they sound genuine but they're not. It's all very convincing. They pressure us to do what they say. But it's a scam. They are trying to steal our money. We need to be alert and hang up.

'Watch out' is Paul's final practical message. Watch out for those who are divisive and obstructive in the fellowship. They may be able to talk convincingly, but they deceive those who are easily swayed. Steer clear of them. By contrast, Paul is glad about his Roman friends. They are well-practised in following good teaching and have little experience of evil. Paul wants them to keep it that way (vs 17–19).

Paul makes room for sending greetings to Rome from the believers who are gathered around him in Corinth (vs 21–23) before his momentous

journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20–26). The end of the letter (vs 25,26) echoes the beginning (1:1–5), reminding us of our debt to Paul for the sublime truths that he laboured to bring us – the good news of Jesus Christ, the eternal purposes of God, the revelation of the Scriptures and the obedience of faith for all peoples. May we be immovable, firmly 'established' (v 25) on these truths.

**The God of peace will soon
crush Satan under your feet.
The grace of our Lord Jesus be
with you.**

Romans 16:20

RESPOND

Erastus (v 23) was a Christian with considerable civic responsibility in Corinth. Pray for those who work in government locally in your city, town or district.

City view

PREPARE

Like the prodigal son with his father (Luke 15:18–21), let us humble ourselves before our Father in heaven.

READ

Psalm 48

EXPLORE

There are many towns and cities in Europe with ancient walls still standing, testifying to the defence of the town centuries ago. Tourists and locals can walk along the walls and enjoy a fine panorama of the town, absorbing the history of the place.

Jerusalem was similar. People rejoiced to ‘walk about Zion’ (v 12). Its impressive defences reminded them of the city’s past deliverances. They saw the city’s great beauty, and more importantly they recalled the city’s Great King who had graciously saved them (vs 1,2). From the walls, they could see where, fairly recently, vast Assyrian forces had besieged the city but had then been thoroughly vanquished (vs 4–7). The people had heard about the Lord’s saving power; now they looked at it, in this very place (v 8). The beauty and security of Jerusalem’s architecture strengthened everyone’s faith in God’s power and continuing love (vs 9–11).

They may have walked around Zion physically, or they may have done it in their imagination (‘meditation’, v 9). We can all view Jerusalem in our mind’s eye: see its impressive walls, the towers, the Temple, and then the cross, the empty tomb, and the Pentecost crowd. We too can meditate on this city of the Great King, who will be our God for ever, alongside us to the end (vs 2,14).

For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end.

Psalm 48:14

RESPOND

Pray for peace, security and confidence for all people living in present-day Jerusalem.

Presence and promise

About the writer
John Grayston



Now retired after 37 years serving in various roles on Scripture Union staff, John is part of the teaching team in his church and also teaches regularly in other churches and on Oak Hall holidays. He and his wife Jenny have two children and seven grandchildren. He prefers walking in the mountains or cultivating his allotment to sitting on the beach.

For the next two weeks we will be joining Jacob as he runs from his brother Esau and then later returns. It's not always easy to like Jacob. In earlier readings we have seen how he first stole Esau's birthright and then his blessing. He is devious, deceptive and manipulative – qualities which we shall see repeated as he spends years with his uncle Laban, marries, has children and then finally returns to face Esau.

It is not all bad; he worships God, trusts God (some of the time) and acknowledges God's place in his life. Despite his flawed character and inconsistent behaviour, God meets with him again and again, in his grace ever-present. Jacob is still within the promise and purpose of God to bless all nations through Abraham's descendants (Genesis 12:1-3).

We who fail frequently can be encouraged. God does not give up on us. His promise to us is different from the promise to Jacob and we live in a very different world. But he has assured us that he will never leave us (Hebrews 13:5). That does not give us permission to behave as we like, but it does reassure us that when we fail and return we will be received. God is still working out his ultimate purpose to restore all things through Jesus. As you read, look for places where you see God at work today, in your life, in your church and in the wider world.

God never lets go

PREPARE

Sit quietly and expectantly, looking for God to come and meet with you. Sense his presence, awesome and mysterious, gracious and loving.

READ

Genesis 28:10-22

EXPLORE

Jacob is heading for Harran for two reasons: first, Esau is out for revenge for his stolen inheritance and blessing; and secondly, his mother Rebekah has ensured that Isaac, his father, sends him off with a blessing to find a wife from her own people. So this is not a happy journey. His life may not be falling apart, but it is fraught. Then God steps into the picture and reminds him of his promise to Abraham, a promise which now involves Jacob. Note how similar the language is to Genesis 13, verses 14 and 15. Jacob responds with awe, worship and obedience.

When we have questions, doubts and fears, when life is not working out as hoped, we may need to remind ourselves of God's presence and promise. It is not that God has left us, although it may feel like it. He has not forgotten his promise. Sometimes we will have powerful experiences of God being

with us, sometimes a quiet assurance, and sometimes we just have to hold on to his promise. He will faithfully ensure that the plans he has for us will come to completion. We can journey on confidently, despite the pressures and the fears.

He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.'

Genesis 28:17

RESPOND

Recall a special time of meeting with God. How did it make you feel? What impact does it have on your life today? How might you draw fresh confidence and direction from it?

Tuesday 4 August

Genesis 29:1-14a

God in the everyday

PREPARE

Open your heart and mind to the God who meets us in the everyday. Prepare to meet him in the ordinariness of today.

.....

READ

Genesis 29:1-14a

EXPLORE

Sometimes we have great spiritual experiences – it may be at a large celebration, in our regular Bible reading, in a conversation with a friend or as we reflect on the wonders of creation. But most of life is not like that. It is more ordinary and sometimes it is hard to see where God is or what he is doing. Jacob would have identified with that. Yesterday, we read about Jacob's awesome and powerful meeting with God. Today he is back to the world of long journeys and meetings. His Bethel moment is replaced by a getting-water-for-sheep moment, the spectacular by the mundane. But this meeting with Rachel is a key part of the narrative, moving God's story forward.

While it may not be so obvious that God is still leading him, his presence is just as real, if not as spectacular. So it is with us. God is with us in everyday encounters in the workplace, at the school gates,

on social media, in the coffee shop. For Jacob, what appear to be chance encounters are part of God's plan to fulfil his promise to Abraham. For us, apparently chance encounters may be God-appointed moments to show and share his love.

**When Jacob saw Rachel
daughter of his uncle Laban,
and Laban's sheep, he went
over and rolled the stone away
from the mouth of the well
and watered his uncle's sheep.**

Genesis 29:10

RESPOND

Pray about some of the encounters you will have this week. How might you see them as opportunities to experience God's presence and to show his love?

Unexpected bride

PREPARE

Pray: 'Lord, I release to you any pressure or tension I feel. I calm my busy mind to hear your word to me.'

READ

Genesis 29:14b–30

EXPLORE

This messy story of deceit, sexual desire, exploitation and betrayal does not make for easy reading. The idea of women being used as bargaining pieces is deeply disturbing. Jacob's virtual slavery makes us uncomfortable. But despite significant cultural differences, this is a world we know. Misogyny and objectifying of women are still with us. Slavery can still be found in various forms. Most of us will have experienced exploitation or betrayal in some form or another.

This incident reminds us that life in a broken world populated by fallen human beings will always be messy. But this was never God's intention. He created men and women to be companions sharing together in caring for his creation. Jesus and Paul give new dignity and status to women. In the new community of God's people there is neither slave nor free (Galatians 3:28), preparing the way for the eventual abolition of slavery, admittedly

not yet fully achieved. In contrast to a world of lies and manipulation, Jesus models truth and integrity.

Above all, through the mess of today's reading, God is working out his promise to Abraham, and remains faithfully active in the confusion of our individual lives and the brokenness of our world.

When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?'

Genesis 29:25

RESPOND

Can you think of anyone caught up in a web of lies and manipulation? Pray for them now.

Thursday 6 August

Genesis 29:31 – 30:24

Happy families?

PREPARE

Take the psalmist's words to heart: 'I have calmed and quietened myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother' (Psalm 131:2).

.....

READ

Genesis 29:31 – 30:24

EXPLORE

This could so easily be the plot of a twenty-first-century soap. Leah lives with the pain of being unloved, Rachel with the pain of childlessness. Jacob enjoys sexual activity without offering genuine affection. He shows little understanding of Rachel's or Leah's pain. And we can only guess at the feelings of Bilhah and Zilpah. This is dysfunctional family life at its worst.

But it is not beyond redemption. The beautiful words 'God remembered Rachel' do not mean that he had forgotten her. They mean that at this point in the story God chose to intervene and show grace to Rachel. Why then and not earlier we cannot know: there are things we do not understand about how God works and sometimes we have to trust without knowing all the answers. The names of all these sons are familiar to us as the tribes of later Israel. We begin to see that the promise

to Abraham is for the long term. The mention of Judah brings to mind one who will be known as the 'Lion of the tribe of Judah' (Revelation 5:5). We can rejoice that, out of the pain and difficulty that we see here, Jesus will come to deal with the sin, deceit and failure of humanity, to stand with the lonely, the hurting and the marginalised.

**Then God remembered
Rachel; he listened to her and
enabled her to conceive.**

Genesis 30:22

RESPOND

Think of someone you know who is wondering what God is doing. Pray that God will 'remember' them.

Consequences

PREPARE

Pray these lyrics: 'Speak, Lord, in the stillness,/ while I wait on thee,/ Hushed my heart listen/ In expectancy.*

READ

Genesis 31:1-21

EXPLORE

Laban is still in the business of deception and manipulation – for some background to these verses, read chapter 30, verses 25–43. With our modern understanding of genetics, these breeding arrangements don't make sense, but God is overruling and frustrating the ploys of Laban and enabling Jacob to prosper. Jacob has the wisdom to recognise this. To believe that we have achieved things in our own strength or through our own ability is a dangerous mistake (Deuteronomy 8:17;18).

Jacob knows that his wealth comes from God and that God is working in his life, but he does not act as if that were true. He has already spoken of his desire to go home (Genesis 30:25) and now, having heard God's instruction, he obeys, but in deceptive ways that will lead to further problems. We too can be tempted to take things into our own

hands. The better way is to remember God's past faithfulness and trust him for the future. That does not mean doing nothing; it does mean listening to God and acting in line with what he says.

Rachel and Leah clearly resent the way they have been treated. Laban, through his selfishness, is about to lose his daughters and grandchildren, a direct consequence of his actions. Little we do is done in isolation; there are always consequences.

**Then the LORD said to Jacob,
'Go back to the land of your
fathers and to your relatives,
and I will be with you.'**

Genesis 31:3

RESPOND

Pray that you may always be ready to hear God and to obey.

*'Speak, Lord, in the Stillness', Emily Crawford, 1864–1927

Saturday 8 August

Genesis 31:22–42

Religious smorgasbord

PREPARE

Pray: 'Lord, I come conscious of my failure. Speak your words of forgiveness and comfort to me.'

.....

READ

Genesis 31:22–42

EXPLORE

No one comes out of this well. There is anger, resentment, deception (again!), fear, self-justification and suspicion. Jacob no doubt felt that leaving secretly was the only option, and with good reason given Laban's track record – even here his words about giving them a good send-off ring hollow. Laban does not share Jacob's relationship with God; he talks about the God of *your* father and seems more concerned about the loss of his household gods than anything else, but at least he hears from God and obeys. Rachel seems confused. Was she stealing the household gods to ensure good fortune or to spite her father? Jacob shows faith – but only sometimes and only in part.

We know the feeling. We can get it right, but we can also get it wrong. Sometimes our faith is strong; at other times we fail to trust, we go our own way or we put our trust in the wrong things – not small, man-made statues, but wealth,

health, career, relationships... And in a world of many pressures there is always the danger of compromise. Like Rachel, we can absorb the values of surrounding culture in subtle and unnoticed ways. But we have resources that were not available to Jacob – the example of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit living in us.

Then God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream at night and said to him, 'Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.'

Genesis 31:24

RESPOND

Pray that you may see clearly when you are in danger of living by the values of your peers rather than the values of Jesus.

God, death and wealth

PREPARE

‘Hear’ and ‘listen’ to gain ‘wisdom’ and ‘understanding’, says today’s psalm (vs 1–3). Pray that you may do just that.

READ

Psalm 49

EXPLORE

Money can buy many good things in life. Multimillionaires can buy themselves a tourist ride in space if they wish. Many wealthy (and not so wealthy) people give generously to good causes. Some on the Rich List even pledge to give away their vast fortune during their lifetime.

Money has its limitations too, as all the world can see (vs 1,2). ‘You can’t take it with you’ (v 17). In the end, everyone without exception leaves their money behind (v 10). Beyond the grave, it has no leverage or purchasing power. It cannot buy us a ticket out of death (vs 8,9). In life, money can fund houses and great estates, but the best accommodation it can manage in death is a tomb (v 11)! Yet some still live for their wealth, and in some hands it means oppression and misery for others (vs 5,6).

But what money can’t do, God can. ‘God will redeem me from ... the dead’, says

our psalmist (v 15). Death is a cash-free zone. But, as the New Testament insists, we are redeemed from futility not with silver and gold but with the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18,19). Our money will not welcome us into glory, but our Redeemer will (v 15).

But God will redeem me from the realm of the dead; he will surely take me to himself.

Psalm 49:15

RESPOND

Money and death affect us all. Pray for help and support for those with money issues and for those attending the funeral of a loved one at this time.

Monday 10 August

Genesis 31:43–55

Peace treaty

PREPARE

Recognise that God is an ever-present reality in your life. Sit quietly and allow yourself to become aware of his presence with you now.

.....

READ

Genesis 31:43–55

EXPLORE

How do we settle our differences, especially when there is suspicion and mistrust? Perhaps we don't bother and just let things drift on. Jacob and Laban are determined to have clarity. So they make a covenant, a binding agreement. Today we might have solicitors draw up a document to remind us and to ensure that there will be no misunderstanding later. Their equivalent is a pillar and a heap of stones, acting as a permanent reminder and making the boundaries very clear. Then they have a meal, because that is how in their world you ratify an agreement (v 54). If there are things you need to resolve with others, why not make a plan to do it?

God is the ultimate witness (v 42) who sees all that they do (v 49). God is the final judge who will hold both parties to account (v 53). There is a sacrifice acknowledging that everything has taken place in the presence of God (v 54).

No doubt there were times when Jacob wondered what God was doing, but he never completely lost sight of God who had been ever-present, leading, directing, sustaining, protecting, providing. This is no less true for us. How far are we aware of it?

'Come now, let's make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us.'

Genesis 31:44

RESPOND

Pray that throughout this week you will know that God is with you in every situation. Pray that others will see it and take note.

Trust the promise

PREPARE

Identify some areas of your life in which you want to see God work. Look for his reassurance today.

READ

Genesis 32:1-21

EXPLORE

Laban returns home and Jacob is left to continue his journey with the uncertainty and fear of meeting Esau. If he ever needed reassurance, it is now. And God provides it in the form of a meeting with angels. But this does not completely remove his fear. And so he turns to God with a memorable prayer.

He acknowledges his own weakness. He recognises all that God has done for him. He reminds God of his promises. He prays for protection. There is much that we could learn about prayer from his example. Our prayers are first and foremost to be based on the character and promise of God. They are to be grounded in our relationship with him. They will acknowledge that we are dependent on him. If you have a few moments check these points against the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13.

Jacob doesn't seem to have complete confidence in God. Fear makes us

behave in strange ways and can work against trust. Jacob carries on with his elaborate plan to pacify Esau with gifts and to protect at least part of his wealth and family by dividing them into two groups (v 7). There's nothing wrong with making plans – unless they reveal a lack of trust in God.

But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'

Genesis 32:12

RESPOND

Where do you need to have more faith? Talk to God about it now.

Wednesday 12 August

Genesis 32:22–32

New name, new calling

PREPARE

Almighty God, fill my heart with love for you, my mind with thoughts of you and align my will to yours.

.....

READ

Genesis 32:22–32

EXPLORE

If you are anything like me, you will find this a strange or even disturbing incident. It's not easy to make sense of the details and we wonder what is going on and why it takes place. God initiates the contact/contest for he has new things to teach Jacob. These unexpected meetings with God form a pattern in the life of Jacob. Sometimes God meets us at the times we least expect and in surprising ways. God is not predictable and does not operate in ways that we can understand. But all he does, however strange it may seem, is done for our ultimate benefit.

Names are significant in the ancient world and carry significance and power. Abram becomes Abraham (which is seen as signifying 'father of many nations', Genesis 17:1–8), and now Jacob is renamed Israel. The name change and the blessing are marks of God's call. The change of name sets the tone for

the future of God's people. Something significant has happened and life for Jacob will never be quite the same again.

When God calls us to some particular task, he is unlikely to change our names, but he will give us his blessing and the resources that we need. Like Jacob, we may find that life takes on a new dimension.

Then the man said, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.'

Genesis 32:28

RESPOND

Prepare to set out on the next stage of your journey with God with a sense of joy and expectation.

Faith sees beyond

PREPARE

Name anything which might distract you. Ask God to help you gather your scattered thoughts and focus on him.

READ

Genesis 33:1-20

EXPLORE

Life can be confusing. Sometimes it is hard to make sense of things and decide on the best course of action. Take comfort from Jacob. On the one hand, he is still suspicious, possibly with good reason, devious, deceptive and perhaps self-serving. On the other he has a sense of guilt, wants reconciliation with Esau and is prepared to make reparation for his previous behaviour, although it does look a little like a bribe. He acknowledges that God has provided for him (v 5).

God remains at the centre of his life. The exact meaning of 'El Elohe Israel' (v 20) is uncertain, but it firmly links Jacob/Israel with God. His use of his new name highlights his acceptance of his new calling and relationship with God. His building of an altar indicates to us that, although Jacob only owns a small portion of the land, he has faith for more. It reminds us of Abraham, who travelled through the land, promised but

not yet owned, erecting altars as a mark of faith (12:7,8; 13:4,18). Both men are mentioned in Hebrews 11 as examples of faith. Against the odds, they believed that God would be true to his promise and come through. Having faith and being in God's plan does not require perfection. And that gives us hope.

For a hundred pieces of silver, he bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, the plot of ground where he pitched his tent. There he set up an altar and called it El Elohe Israel.

Genesis 33:19,20

RESPOND

Where might you need to exercise more faith in the promises of God? Pray that God will increase your faith and confidence in him.

Friday 14 August

Genesis 35:1–15

Back to the beginning

PREPARE

Recall your first experience of God. Let that memory prepare you to meet with him in new ways today.

.....

READ

Genesis 35:1–15

EXPLORE

We can be slow to learn. Lessons have to be repeated. God takes Jacob back to where it all started. Sometimes going back is the best way forward. If we lose sight of God, we can remind ourselves of the time God first met with us and let that strengthen our faith. When doubts and questions arise, we can go back to the cross of Jesus and recall his love.

Going back gives us an opportunity to refocus our priorities. It will help us to get rid of anything which might pull us away. Far from the household gods providing protection, they have proved a hindrance. It's good to review from time to time and get rid of anything that is hindering or damaging our relationship with God.

Once Jacob has refocused, he is in a better position to hear God refresh his promise and renew his call with a further reminder of his new name.

God has great things for him. They are not dependent on Jacob – although he has to play his part of worship and obedience – but on the faithfulness and the long-term plan of God. Today we, the church of Jesus Christ, have a role to play in God's faithful plan for his world.

And God said to him, 'I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will be among your descendants.'

Genesis 35:11

RESPOND

What might you need to put aside in order to give God his rightful place in your life?

Blessing for the nations

PREPARE

Invite God to renew his call on your life.

READ

Genesis 35:16–29

EXPLORE

Here's a glimpse into the future. We have met these names before and have noted that they will become familiar as the tribes of Israel who will later enter the Promised Land and from whom will come the Saviour not just of Israel but of the whole world. (It's worth noting that when the land is divided, Levi, having become the priestly tribe, has no land allotted while Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh both receive land.) The promise to Abraham, renewed to Jacob, is fulfilled in the people of Israel but receives its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus (Galatians 3:16), through whose death and resurrection the whole world is blessed.

There is pain. Rachel the beloved wife dies. Benjamin has a special place in his father's heart – Jacob too readily has favourites, an attitude which leads to trouble (37:4). Reuben has sex with Bilhah – an action which will have far-reaching consequences (49:3,4).

Isaac dies, but his death brings about a further reconciliation between Jacob and Esau. The brokenness of the world is evident.

We are invited to see our place in God's ongoing plan for the world. Although separated from Jacob by hundreds of years, we stand in the same purpose of God – to redeem fallen humanity, restore a broken world and form a new community of people who will bear witness to his deeds.

Isaac ... died and was gathered to his people, old and full of years. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

Genesis 35:28,29

RESPOND

Thank God that in Jesus, he is making all things new. Ask what you can do to share this good news.

Sunday 16 August

Psalm 50

True worship

PREPARE

Today, join the psalmist and prepare to ‘Worship the **Lord** in the splendour of his holiness...’ (Psalm 96:9).

.....

READ

Psalm 50

EXPLORE

Today we join with others in worship. It will take different forms. At its best it will be focused on God’s character, his saving activity and his purposes in the world. But sometimes it will reflect more of our preferences and desires and be aimed to please us rather than God. This psalm addresses just such issues.

In verses 1–5, God summons his people to the place of judgement. The picture is of a glorious and powerful God, somewhat reminiscent of his appearance at Sinai. Then in verses 6–15, God tells them that, while there is nothing necessarily wrong with their sacrifices, it is their motivation that matters. He does not need their sacrifices, for anything they can offer is already his, but delights in their worship – and ours – if it expresses gratitude (v 14) and dependence (v 15). Worship which, like that of the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable (Luke 18:9–14), is more about how well we are doing than about God is

not acceptable. Verses 16–23 are darker and touch on the hypocrisy of worship offered to God from those whose lives do not honour him – a reminder that worship is not just about what we do in church on Sunday, but about how we live during the rest of the week.

Sacrifice thank-offerings to God, fulfil your vows to the Most High.

Psalm 50:14

RESPOND

Teach me, my God and King,/ In all things Thee to see,/ And what I do in anything/ To do it as for Thee.*

*George Herbert, ‘The Elixir’, 1593–1633

.....



The Bible and me – a ministry trainer's experience of the Bible



In this Spotlight article, we asked a youth ministry educator and trainer to tell us a little about what the Bible

means to him. **Graham Stanton** is ordained in the Anglican Church of Australia and is a member of St Jude's in Parkville, Melbourne.

What was your first Bible?

I've owned my own Bible at least from as early as 8 years old. I know this because I still have my copy of the 1971 hardcover edition of the RSV Bible. The details on the presentation page are in my own handwriting: 'Presented to Graham by Mummy and Daddy, 9.10.76.' I'm loath to count how many Bibles I've owned since then, for fear that I may have owned more copies than times that I've read it through.

Why have you continued to read the Bible?

My daily reading practice still goes through seasons of greater and lesser consistency. Here are three of

my favourite quotations about the Bible that keep me coming back to continue, or renew, or recapture my routines:

'The splendour of the divine countenance ... is for us like an inextricable labyrinth unless we are conducted into it by the thread of the word; so that it is better to limp along this path than to dash with all speed outside it.'

This quotation comes from the sixteenth-century reformation leader John Calvin, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1.6.3). I love his description of the reason that we read the Bible in the first place: that we might behold something of 'the splendour of the divine countenance'. Or, in simpler language, to see God's face and be wowed by it! What a gift we have in the Bible that gives us 'the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Calvin reminds us that the Bible is indeed a precious gift, because without it we'd be lost in an 'inextricable labyrinth'. That is, we'd be stuck, with no way of finding

a way through on our own. But the Word leads us forward, even if at times we find it difficult to understand what we're reading. It may be slow-going, but better to shuffle down the right track than to run in the wrong direction.

That idea of sticking at reading the Bible even when it's hard is what the second quote is about. It's from theologian Miroslav Volf, in his book *Captive to the Word*, which says, 'In our encounter with the Bible, tarrying in persistent non-understanding is often the condition of possibility of genuine disclosure, in which we hear more than just the echo of our own internal voice' (2010, p35).

'Tarrying in persistent non-understanding' is such a beautiful way of saying sticking with the Bible even when what I'm reading still doesn't make sense. I don't read the Bible once and have all its mysteries revealed. The Bible isn't like a newspaper article to be read and consumed like a fast-food meal. I read the Bible over and over and over again, in faith that God will keep his promise: that by reading these words we might 'hear his voice' (Hebrews 3:7). We read the Bible because we trust that, as we keep listening, we will hear a revelation from God that speaks something new into our lives.

Finally, the third quote, and my favourite of all, is from the Anglican Prayer book. After the Bible reading in church, the reader says, 'This is the Word of the Lord', and the congregation responds with 'Thanks be to God'. Thanks be to God indeed! We've just been given the opportunity to pay attention to scripture 'as to a light shining in a dark place' (2 Peter 1:19). The liturgy reminds me that reading the Bible and hearing it read is a gift of grace. God didn't have to speak to us, but he has! Many people don't have the privilege of hearing the Scriptures read in their own language, but we have! So it's good and right that our first response is one of thanks.

I especially like the way that the Anglican liturgy invites us to give thanks to God even before we've had the Word explained to us. I'm very thankful for preachers and teachers (and *Daily Bread* note-writers!), who, like Timothy, are able to correctly handle the word of truth (see 2 Timothy 2:15). But before preachers and teachers can do their work of teaching the Bible, we should give thanks that we have the Bible in the first place.

Reading the Bible is not always easy, but it's always worth it. And for that, I am deeply thankful.

Graham Stanton

Turned upside down

About the writer **Penelope Swithinbank**



Penelope is ordained in the Anglican Church and is a Chaplain at Bath Abbey. She has written three books, led many pilgrimages and has offered Spiritual Accompaniment for many years. Penelope is married to Kim, who is also ordained in the Anglican Church, and they have three adult children and six grandchildren. Her other passions include books, sunshine, dogs, travel and the theatre. They live in Combe Down, Bath and attend Holy Trinity Church.

Let's head into an adventure together. The Acts of the Apostles could be known as the Acts of the Holy Spirit – turning the world upside down. Or the right way up! As we read about the missionary journeys of Paul and his companions, we'll travel through Asia Minor, now modern-day Turkey, and discover how the good news of Jesus began to spread, giving rise to Turkey being called the 'Second Holy Land', the cradle of the young Christian church. Just before writing this, I was privileged to lead a pilgrimage to visit many of the places mentioned, and the Christian heritage is still visible, although many ancient churches are being turned into mosques. Turkey needs our prayers.

Paul was born in Tarsus, in modern-day Turkey. On these journeys we will be reading about, he travelled vast distances, presumably walking, as the Spirit led him on to the next place, the next adventure, the next preaching of the good news of Jesus. From Acts 13 on, it's really the Acts of Paul, directed and empowered by the Spirit, as he interacts with men and women, wealthy and poor, Gentiles and Jews. Even more, it's the Acts of the Spirit, with energy and excitement, crises and persecution. A microcosm of the present-world church. How will it inspire our lives and ministry today?

You might like to find a map of Paul's journeys – either online or at the back of a Bible – to see exactly where we'll be.

Monday 17 August

Acts 16:11–15

An influencer

PREPARE

Prayerfully ask the Lord to bring to your mind those who have influenced you in your faith journey. Thank him for them.

.....

READ

Acts 16:11–15

EXPLORE

Are you on social media? Do you follow any influencers or fashion designers? Lydia was in that world, trading in the most expensive purple cloth; a person of means, an entrepreneur, able to have her own household (vs 14,15) with room for hospitality. She was from Thyatira, an important centre of the cloth trade, and had already become a worshipper of God.

Maybe Lydia was also an influencer. Paul later wrote a very personal letter to the Philippian church, full of joy; and a church grew in Thyatira too (Revelation 2:18). Did Lydia take the message home with her on a visit? We don't know for certain, but from this little group of women the gospel undoubtedly spread.

Where do you interact with others? For instance, social media, work, school, the gym, travelling, commuting or shopping? You may not be either an influencer or an entrepreneur, but, like Lydia, we

each have people and places in our lives where we can be an influencer in the power of the Holy Spirit. How might the Lord be calling you to be an influencer, talking about his good news to others?

When she and the members of her household were baptised, she invited us to her home. 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay at my house.' And she persuaded us.

Acts 16:15

RESPOND

Lydia devoted herself to the Lord (v 15). Ask the Holy Spirit to help you be an influencer and to refresh your vision and calling as you devote yourself to the Lord and to his good news.

In the name of Jesus!

PREPARE

Hold out open hands to God, as a symbol of willingness for whatever he wants in your life.

READ

Acts 16:16–28

EXPLORE

Did you notice the brief sentence Paul uses to heal the young slave girl? ‘In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!’ (v 18, italics mine). There’s no laying hands on her or anointing with oil (not that there’s anything wrong with those: James 5:14) nor a lengthy prayer. It’s short, simple, sincere. And authoritative. Not, ‘If it’s your will, please heal her.’ Is it a bit of a cop-out if we pray like that? Or a good excuse if nothing happens?

Two things stand out for me in these verses. First, Paul doesn’t hesitate: he loudly prays a quick, commanding, healing prayer on the spot. I remember John Wimber saying how they used to pray for no one and no one was healed; and then they prayed for everyone and some were healed, and at least it was an improvement.

Secondly, the girl was a slave, used by her owners as an oracle or medium.

There are many enslaved people today, apparently more than ever before. We can’t change history, but we can change how we react to such issues today. We can make a difference for the lives of enslaved adults and children, just as Paul tried to (and was thrown into prison with Silas for doing so).

She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, ‘These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.’

Acts 16:17

RESPOND

Who do you know who needs healing prayer? What could you do to help end slavery? Ask for the Spirit’s guidance as you think about these questions.

Wednesday 19 August

Acts 16:29–40

From prison to praise

PREPARE

Listen to, and/or sing aloud, a praise and worship song or hymn. Take a moment to think of the one you'd like to use.

.....

READ

Acts 16:29–40

EXPLORE

Did Paul and Silas wonder where it all went wrong, or why they'd been diverted to Philippi? And yet, even in prison, they were still praying and singing and worshipping God! The Spirit hadn't left them – Paul could sense what the jailer was about to do. (He couldn't see; there were no lights, v 29.) The terrified jailer, fearing at least torture if not death if prisoners escaped, cried out, 'How do I get out of this mess?'

Is it a deeply theological question? He knew nothing, or next to nothing, about Christian faith and belief. But Paul and Silas knew the deep answer, if you look at their reply. None of them went to bed that night: there was a heart-to-heart about the gospel, and lots of baptising; the jailer gave them medical attention and a meal, and then... Then there was yet more rejoicing (v 34). How do you think Paul and Silas felt at that point?

What influence did the prayer and praising have? Think about it in regard to the Holy Spirit, the prisoners, the jailer and the situation. It's certainly a powerful reminder to 'give thanks in all circumstances' (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God – he and his whole household.

Acts 16:34

RESPOND

What are the differences between praise, worship and thanksgiving? What difference do praise and worship make in your life? How could you praise God more – now and every day?

Is it worth it?

PREPARE

Thank Jesus that he never changes: he is the same, yesterday, today and for ever. Recall some of his characteristics you particularly appreciate.

READ

Acts 17:1–15

EXPLORE

How do you feel when change looms? Psychologists say that fear of change, metathesiophobia, is one of the biggest fears affecting people's lives and it can paralyse and impede anyone. Change can indeed be scary; we prefer to remain within our comfort zones. Yet anything that doesn't change becomes static or may even die.

So maybe we can sympathise with the rioters in these verses, to some extent. They didn't want anything to change; they believed in the rightness of their beliefs and were not persuaded by Paul's message. They were jealous of the attention Paul was getting and his influence on others. They were jealous and they were fearful, and they incited a riot. And so the pattern continues. Paul preaches, there is huge opposition often leading to imprisonment and torture, or Paul and his companions have to escape (vs 10,13).

Dr Helen Roseveare, a Christian missionary who was tortured for her faith in the Congo in the twentieth century, was asked if it was worth it. No, she replied, but he is worthy.

'They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.'

Acts 17:7

RESPOND

What would you do if you faced huge change in your life, especially if it involved opposition to your faith? Is it worth it? Pray for persecuted Christians around the world.

Friday 21 August

Acts 17:16–34

Speaking words of wisdom

PREPARE

Who do you know who needs to hear the good news of Jesus?

.....

READ

Acts 17:16–34

EXPLORE

While Paul waits in Athens, he engages in the Athenian pursuit of debating. After wandering around sightseeing, he gets involved with the Epicureans, who thought life was 'eat, drink and be merry' and the Stoics, who believed it was better to live simply, practise self-discipline and be indifferent to pleasure and pain. Both sides agreed they wanted to hear more about Paul's ideas and took him to the Areopagus to speak to judges, councillors and philosophers.

Isn't it interesting how different Paul's speech in Athens is to how he has preached before? Here, although distressed by altars seen in the city, he immediately looks for ways to connect with the locals. He mentions what is common to them all and then speaks to the culture of their day. He mentions their great interest in spirituality, in creation and the environment, then he cleverly links it all to the good news of Jesus.

What similarities can you spot with our own culture in the twenty-first century?

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would give words to his disciples at a time of challenge. 'The Holy Spirit will give you the right words when the time comes' (Luke 12:12, *The Message*), and we can expect the same. When and where might you be needing 'the right words'?

... I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.'

Acts 17:23

RESPOND

As you pray for someone needing to hear the good news, ask for the right words at the right time.

Guidance

PREPARE

Ask God to speak to you through today's verses. Tell him you want to be open to the Word, the healing, the probing, the consolation, the guidance – whatever you need. And ask for grace to accept it.

READ

Acts 18:1–17

EXPLORE

Do you find it difficult to know God's guidance? Or find it comes at the last minute? Or worry that you'll miss God's plans? It's interesting how the Lord guided Paul here – what he needed, when he needed it, often at the very last minute! I used to think that God has a Plan A for my life – the 'right' job, house, spouse and so on. While I do believe he is interested in the minutiae of my life, I now believe that his main plan is a deep, lasting relationship with him. Everything else is secondary.

Corinth was a thriving port at the centre of world trade, known for its debauchery and for the huge temple of Aphrodite. Did Paul intend his usual plan – preach in the synagogue, make a few converts and then move on? He had to wait for the others (v 5) but then the usual pattern emerges, leading to opposition.

Did he then want to depart? Travelling gets into the blood! But Paul has another vision, not to move on this time (Acts 16:9), but to stay put. I wonder how easy he found that.

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: 'Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent.'

Acts 18:9

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord, help me to be willing to ask for and wait for your guidance. And then to take it! Amen.'

Sunday 23 August

Psalm 51:1-19

Forgiven praise

PREPARE

‘Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,/ Who like thee his praise should sing?’*

READ

Psalm 51:1-19

EXPLORE

David knows he has messed up. Probably not surprising, as a prophet has told him a story about a rich man robbing a poor man of his lamb, and when David becomes angry at the rich man’s behaviour hits him with, ‘You are the man!’ (2 Samuel 12:7). Harder for us in a world of compromised standards where knowing right and wrong can be difficult and where we can be subtly affected by the worldview and moral standards of those around. It’s worth making a regular practice of asking God to show you where you have gone wrong, and perhaps find a ‘prophet’, a trusted friend to whom you can be accountable.

Overwhelmed by the enormity of his failure, David turns to God, confesses his sin and pleads for forgiveness and restoration (vs 7-12). He knows he deserves nothing, but that God is gracious – something which we can see even more clearly as a result of Jesus’

death. This is where we often leave this psalm, but there is more. David promises, once forgiven and restored, to praise God (v 14) and tell others how good God is (vs 13,15). That’s an important part of his story and of ours. Forgiveness is not just for our personal benefit, something to keep to ourselves; it is good news to tell.

Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Saviour, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

Psalm 51:14

RESPOND

Think about the way that God has forgiven you and praise him. Who could you tell about it this week?

*‘Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven’, Henry Francis Lyte, 1793-1847

The ministry of others

PREPARE

Thank God for those who have shared the gospel and encouraged you in your Christian life. Be specific!

READ

Acts 18:18–28

EXPLORE

Apollos made a considerable impact, through God's grace, on the believers (v 27). Paul wrote, 'I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow' (1 Corinthians 3:6) when people said they preferred Apollos to Paul. And Luke attributes the impact of Apollos' ministry to God's grace alone.

Sometimes one notices in a church or group there's just one leader, keeping a firm control on everything and everyone. Or that someone is jealous of the ministry or work of another. What do you learn in these verses about how the early church worked?

They blessed the ministry of others, giving them the freedom to develop their part in God's work of grace. Far from limiting Apollos when he hadn't grasped the full implications of the gospel, it seems Aquila and Priscilla, themselves newly part of the ministry team, gently taught him and encouraged him (v 26).

How easy do you find it to do everything yourself and be in control? Take care: it can lead to burnout for you and it stifles the gifts and ministry of others who are also able through God's grace to be a part of the work. Paul has now added a number of people to his team and, far from finding that a threat, he can see that it has enabled the ministry to spread.

When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed.

Acts 18:27

RESPOND

Pray for your church leaders to have discernment in encouraging others.

Tuesday 25 August

Acts 19:1-22

It's magic!

PREPARE

Ask for the Holy Spirit to be powerfully at work in your life. What difference will it make to you and to others you know?

.....

READ

Acts 19:1-22

EXPLORE

The people of Ephesus, an important city at the centre of ancient trade routes, liked power, and liked to make things happen. Ephesus was powerful in every way – including a powerful type of magic or sorcery (v 19). And so Luke, the author, emphasises the contrast of the power of the Holy Spirit, who is again at work in Paul’s ministry. Where is the power of the Spirit most noticeable? Verses 6, 8 and 12. This is in stark contrast to the powers of magic and sorcery.

When the power of the Holy Spirit was seen, what were the effects (vs 17-20)? What a powerful impact indeed!

Where and when have you heard mention of ‘sorcery’ and belief in magic powers? Or even been impacted by them yourself? There are a variety of practices that need to be completely avoided by Christians, such as modern occultism, horoscopes, palm readings, Wicca, alternative spirituality, self-described

wizards and witches, and so on. Such beliefs are all flourishing and many, particularly young, people are drawn into such practices, especially when exploring spirituality and other ‘powers’ online. How might you pray for people you know, to be protected from such power and to resist its fascination?

In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

Acts 19:20

RESPOND

Pray for the Spirit’s powerful protection in the lives of people in your family and at your church who may be drawn away from God towards spiritual practices or beliefs which have a negative impact on them.

Challenging the world

PREPARE

Pray: ‘Lord Jesus, help me to turn the world upside down for you, through the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.’

READ

Acts 19:23–41

EXPLORE

Walking the streets of Ephesus today, one imagines the enormous, bustling city it once was, with vast statues of gods and goddesses and the Roman Emperor; fountains and public toilets; a majestic library; thriving shops and businesses. A meteorite had once landed nearby, thought to be the goddess Artemis (Diana to the Romans). Many made their living from her and were exceedingly disgruntled when Paul said that man-made gods are no gods at all. Their livelihood was threatened, and maybe underneath it all they wondered if their man-made gods were not real – they feared being exposed. They were certainly able to stir up enough anxiety to incite the hysterical crowd to chant and riot for several hours. What an impact Paul’s words made! Do your words, actions or life have any impact on those around you?

Perhaps, for many of us, it’s been all too easy to be sucked into the world’s way

of viewing things, to stay quiet when others use God’s name for swearing, or to ignore behaviours that go against God’s ways. Can we speak out against the world’s views, even if it means losing our friends? What do you need from the Holy Spirit to stand strong?

‘... Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here ... He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all.’

Acts 19:26

RESPOND

Prayerfully reflect on Romans 12:2: ‘Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.’

Thursday 27 August

Acts 20:1-12

How long?

PREPARE

Be aware of the Lord's presence with you. Open yourself to what he wants to say. Take all the time you need.

.....

READ

Acts 20:1-12

EXPLORE

Do you like epic films, such as *Lord of the Rings* or *Avatar*? Lengthy, all-absorbing adventures? We're a very sedentary generation, and we'll sit for long films but not always for times with the Lord or for lengthy sermons! Someone once said that what orators lack in depth they make up for in length. I can't think that was true of Paul, who, knowing he was on the move, wanted to ensure he shared as much as possible with his audience. Even Eutychus' accident didn't stop him speaking right through the night. And no one is mentioned as leaving.

I'm reminded of how little time I actually spend going deeper in my love for and knowledge of the Lord. How I race through my daily readings or cut short my prayers, or hope the preacher isn't too long on Sunday because I've things to do and places to go and people to meet. Does that resonate with you too?

What might need to change in your attitude to both length and depth in your time with the Lord?

The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.

Acts 20:12

RESPOND

Think about your priorities. When could you have a longer time, what would that involve? A walk; reading an epistle in one sitting; listening to a podcast or sermon; maybe going on retreat? What needs to be put in the diary/schedule so it happens?

Just one thing

PREPARE

Pray: 'Lord, I know sometimes/often you aren't the most important thing in my life. Please forgive me and fill me with your Spirit. Amen.'

READ

Acts 20:13-24

EXPLORE

Did you ever watch *City Slickers*, a film about some city men who go on vacation out west to learn to be cowboys? The rancher holds up one finger to tell them the secret to life: it's just one thing.

'I'm not indispensable; I just want to go on doing what God has called me to – telling everyone I meet about the extravagant grace of God' (my translation of verse 24). Here is Paul's one thing. In spite of all the difficulties and pain he's experienced, in spite of knowing there's more to come, Paul is determined to follow God's calling on his life and carry on spreading the good news. The power of the Holy Spirit is still filling him as Ananias had said it would (Acts 9:17).

What's your 'one thing'? Money or job; family or friends; possessions or desires? Or something else entirely? If you're absolutely honest, what matters most? What fills your time, your attention, your

mind? And how important are you – does your life matter to you?

'However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.'

Acts 20:24

RESPOND

Allow the Spirit to show you what's most important to you, being open and honest with yourself. Are confession and repentance needed? A refilling with the Holy Spirit? A rededication to the things of the Lord? A finding of your true one thing?

Saturday 29 August

Acts 20:25–38

The power of a blessing

PREPARE

What does ‘blessing someone’ mean to you?

.....

READ

Acts 20:25–38

EXPLORE

A young mother came into Bath Abbey, pushing her baby in a stroller. I smiled and asked how old the little one was. ‘Just three weeks,’ the mother replied. ‘May I pray a blessing over her?’ I asked. The mother’s attitude changed immediately, declining my offer rather coldly, hastily moving on. I was mystified; it’s not very often that anyone refuses prayer, let alone a blessing.

Shortly afterwards, I led the hourly prayers and ended, ‘A final blessing for you and those you love.’ And I raised my hand as I prayed a blessing over the people in the abbey. Afterwards, the young mother came to find me. ‘Is that what you meant by a prayer of blessing?’ she asked. ‘Because I’d like that for the baby.’ It made me realise that our ‘Christian jargon’ is not understood by many non-churchgoers. Yet as I prayed a blessing, the mother’s face softened, she thanked me and took the ‘Why Jesus?’ booklet that I offered her.

Praying blessings on others is a rich privilege, and one that we often forget about. Paul prayed strong blessings on people – here in verse 32 and in his letters to churches. We too can pray blessings on everyone.

‘Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.’

Acts 20:32

RESPOND

Use Paul’s words in verse 32 to bless someone, or Ephesians 1:17–19 or 2 Thessalonians 2:16,17, for example. You might pray it now, or later you could send it in an email or letter, or even pray it with them in person.

A green olive tree

PREPARE

Pour a few drops of olive or other oil into a little container to help you reflect on this psalm.

READ

Psalm 52

EXPLORE

Think about your olive oil and where it grew. Maybe sniff it, swirl it around, notice its colour. Have you seen olive trees growing in Mediterranean countries? Their leaves are a distinctive grey-green evergreen, and turn silvery when the wind tosses them. It is a very strong, comparatively stocky tree, able to withstand the fiercest gales, and both the fruit and wood are useful. The pressed oil has historically had spiritual, culinary and medicinal uses – think of Moses sprinkling Aaron with oil, David being anointed by Samuel and the Good Samaritan using oil on wounds.

The olive is a significant tree in the Middle East. What was it to David (v 8)? Saul has tried to kill David several times, and now David has been betrayed after he ran away. Saul orders a massacre in retaliation (1 Samuel 21,22). David is intensely pained by all this evil (vs 1–4), but what gives him confidence (v 5)?

Olive trees grow fairly wide, due to their strong, massive root system.

In contrast to the weak plant of the wicked enemy, which is easily uprooted, nothing can shake the solid olive tree. This was David's confidence because he was deeply rooted in the faithful and trustworthy God.

**But I am like an olive tree
flourishing in the house of
God; I trust in God's unfailing
love for ever and ever.**

Psalm 52:8

RESPOND

Anoint your forehead, cross-shaped, with a little oil, as a precious reminder that you belong to God and are firmly rooted and grounded in him.

Love is the greatest

About the writer
Suzy Pearson

Suzy is a vicar in the West Midlands, where she lives with her husband and two young children. She enjoys running, cycling, reading and spending time with her family.



The prophet Hosea lived during a tumultuous time in the history of Israel. They had become a divided kingdom and, with Jeroboam II (one of the worst kings of Israel) on the throne, they were headed for destruction. God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, provided for them and led them to the Promised Land, but they had strayed from the covenant that God had made with them at Sinai and had worshipped other gods.

The book of Hosea uses marriage as a metaphor to explore the relationship of covenant between God and Israel. A common interpretation of this metaphor positions Gomer, Hosea's wife, as representing unfaithful Israel and Hosea as symbolising God. Like all metaphors, this metaphor has limitations and care must be taken not to make problematic extrapolations. Unfortunately, this text has been used to oppress people, particularly women. There may be parts of the readings this week that you find uncomfortable. Before we begin this week's reflections, I want to make clear that the metaphor is not about shaming people who have had extra-marital affairs. It is not about dismissing the pain caused by unfaithfulness. It is not about endorsing slavery or human trafficking. It is not about blaming women as the root of corruption. It is not about God orchestrating suffering for the purposes of a sermon illustration. Rather, it is about the relentless love of God towards each one of us and our response.

God in Gomer

PREPARE

Take a moment to recall people or situations that have shown you something about the character of God. What did they teach you? As you enter prayer now, thank God for these characteristics and for revealing them to you.

READ

Hosea 1:1 – 2:1

EXPLORE

The Bible is full of examples of God working through people and situations that we find surprising. We often see God in places that we might not expect, seem unlikely or cause us (or the religious leaders of the day) to raise our eyebrows. Perhaps you were surprised to read that God told Hosea to 'marry a promiscuous woman'. It doesn't sound like the advice you might expect to hear in church.

The woman who is chosen is Gomer. She gives birth to three children and one is named Lo-Ruhamah, meaning 'not loved'. But notice in verse 8 it says, 'After she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah...'. This little verse shows us that Gomer nursed her child, nurtured her and protected her. She loved her daughter, regardless of what was said about her. It is through Gomer that God's purposes are brought about and we see God's love demonstrated.

It wouldn't be the last time that God chooses a woman in unlikely circumstances to do this. Many years later, a young woman in Nazareth would be chosen by God to carry a child to reveal God's love.

... 'Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD.'

Hosea 1:2

RESPOND

Where do you see God at work through surprising people or situations? Pray that God would remove any prejudice and help you to be aware of and open to God at work today.

Tuesday 1 September

Hosea 2:2-23

Faith in the Creator

PREPARE

‘Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made’ (John 1:3). Give thanks for all that God has created and provided for you.

.....

READ

Hosea 2:2-23

EXPLORE

In today’s reading, Hosea highlights how Israel has been unfaithful to God by offering worship to Baal. Baal (meaning ‘master’ or ‘husband’) was the Canaanite god of fertility and rainstorms. As an agrarian society in an arid climate, Israel was dependent on both of these at the best of times.

But this was the worst of times. There was political unrest, economic hardship and trade instability. No doubt anything that would bolster their reserves would have appealed – anything to increase their crop yield, expand their flocks and grow their population to strengthen their defence; literally anything – even if it meant not living according to the values that God had called them to live by, even if it meant exploiting the poorest and employing unfair work practices. So, instead of seeking God earnestly, they look to the Canaanite Baals to provide for them. They ‘forget’ that it is God who

is the Creator of the rain and causes all things to grow.

‘I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called “Not my loved one”. I will say to those called “Not my people”, “You are my people”; and they will say, “You are my God.”’

Hosea 2:23

RESPOND

When times are tough, it can be challenging to depend on God and not place hope elsewhere. What do you turn to when times are tough? Does it compromise your faithfulness to God? Ask God to help you live faithfully today.

Non-controlling love

PREPARE

Slow your breathing and focus on your breath. As you inhale, breathe in love. As you exhale, breathe out love for others. Repeat, using words such as peace, hope, joy, faith or the fruits of the Spirit.

READ

Hosea 3:1–5

EXPLORE

Whenever anyone uses an analogy in which they may be seen as representing God, I am a little suspicious of how they understand their power in relation to others. So when I read the book of Hosea, it does alarm me that Hosea might have seen himself as taking on the role of God in his relationship with Gomer. But perhaps by doing so it reveals that God loves in a very different way to how Hosea thinks God loves.

Notice that the instruction God gives in verse 1 is to Hosea and is about how Hosea should love. It is not about how Gomer should love and neither does God tell Hosea that he should force Gomer to behave in a certain way. Nevertheless, Hosea takes it upon himself to tell Gomer how he thinks she should behave. Hosea might think he is loving Gomer the way that God loves, but actually he

is not. Coercive control is not love – it is abuse. In contrast, the love of God is non-controlling, non-coercive. God's love for us does not falter or depend on our actions – it is unconditional.

Then I told her, ‘You are to live with me for many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will behave the same way toward you.’

Hosea 3:3

RESPOND

If possible, look up the lyrics for the hymn ‘Let Love Be Real’ by Michael Forster (or even better, listen to it too) and use these words or 1 Corinthians 13 as a prayer.

Thursday 3 September

Hosea 6:1 – 7:2

Love languages

PREPARE

Offer to God those things that concern you today. You might find it helpful to hold clenched fists in front of you and then release them open to God as you pray.

.....

READ

Hosea 6:1 – 7:2

EXPLORE

When my now husband and I were preparing to get married, we were asked if we knew what our 'love languages' were and if we knew each other's. It sparked a 'debate' between us about how I had thoughtfully, or so I had thought, bought us theatre tickets as a surprise for his birthday. It turned out that John did not like surprises and what he appreciated most about birthdays was being able to specify what he wanted. I could pretend that this was the last time that we've had crossed wires but 16 years on, it's happened quite a few more times!

Fortunately, it's not this complicated where God is concerned. God sees our heart. God sees our intentions. We do not need to package our love for God in particular ways. Equally, nothing gets past God. God sees our inner motives hidden beneath our outer performance – when we're doing the sacrifices and

the burnt offerings, as it were, but it doesn't match up with our desires (v 6). God knows when our 'love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears' (v 4).

**'For I desire mercy,
not sacrifice, and
acknowledgment of God
rather than burnt offerings.'**

Hosea 6:6

RESPOND

What does God see in your heart? What motivates you? Is there anything that you try to keep hidden? Pray: 'Holy God, make my love for you steadfast. Amen.'

Divine parent love

PREPARE

Read this summary of Romans 8, verses 38 and 39 several times slowly: ‘Nothing can ever come between us and the love of God.’ Try placing the emphasis on a different word each time you read it.

READ

Hosea 11:1–11

EXPLORE

In today’s passage, God is depicted as a parent who has taught, nurtured and fed Israel. How we relate to this may depend on our own experiences of being parented, being parents or the absence of these relationships in our lives. I have two young children and sometimes they do things that I have asked them not to do. Usually, after a while, they say sorry and we chat about what they can do to remedy the situation and what they would do differently next time. While I would like for them to learn from the situation, what I really want is for them to know that I love them. If that is my desire as a very imperfect parent, how much more does God as the perfect parent desire this for us?

In verse 9, God says, ‘I will not carry out my fierce anger ... For I am God’. God’s very nature is love. God sees everything – the things we have said, done and

thought – and loves us. Nothing is or can be hidden from God.

‘I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.’

Hosea 11:4

RESPOND

Are there things that you have said, done or thought that you like to keep hidden? How does it feel to know that God sees it all and still loves you? Pray: ‘Loving God, help me to experience your love for me today. Amen.’

Saturday 5 September

Hosea 14:1–9

The end is not the end

PREPARE

Look back at the readings for this week and thank God for any insights that have been revealed to you.

.....

READ

Hosea 14:1–9

EXPLORE

The book of Hosea ends with a poem that beckons Israel to repent and describes what the healed Israel will be like – a tree providing shade for people to dwell beneath its branches. There is then a short note (v 9), probably written by the editor after Hosea’s prophecies had been collated. The editor’s message is not directed at Israel but at us, the reader.

We, reading these prophecies now, know that Israel did in fact fall to the Assyrian Empire after Hosea’s prophecies. Was this because they did not repent? Did they repent? We don’t know – the editor doesn’t say. Neither are we told what comes of Hosea and Gomer’s marriage. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Gomer’s name means ‘sudden end’.

As we often experience in life, we are left with an unresolved situation and have to live with the tension of not knowing why something happened. It seems that

the editor is intentional about leaving us with this incomplete ending. Instead, he invites us to continue the narrative – to discern the truth about God’s character from the text and respond to God’s invitation. There is a lot in life that we don’t know, but what we can know is that God is with us in the uncertainty.

‘Who is wise? Let them realise these things. Who is discerning? Let them understand. The ways of the Lord are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.’

Hosea 14:9

RESPOND

Are there situations in your life that feel unresolved? Pray that you would be aware of God with you in the present circumstances.

Whose fool are you?

PREPARE

'This is the day the **Lord** has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it' (Psalm 118:24, ESV). How might you do that now?

READ

Psalm 53

EXPLORE

Our psalm today classes fools as those who say there is no God (v 1). Proverbs 28:26 talks about how a fool trusts in his own understanding. When foolishness pervades one's life, the consequences can be very serious. The Psalmist talks about God putting them to shame (v 5). Was there ever a time when you said 'there is no God'? If there was, what was it that persuaded you otherwise? What might you learn from that, as you think about being witnesses and mission in our context?

Most of us do not enjoy being called or taken for a fool, and playing an April Fool's joke on someone can be met with a very mixed reception.

We cannot always avoid any of these things happening to us; there are sometimes people who will call us a fool for our beliefs, or our kindness, or the way we seem to live out our Christian faith.

But we are wise (v 2), not foolish, in God's eyes, if we seek after him. What does seeking God look like for you at the moment? There may be times when we end up looking foolish to others as we do that but, ultimately, it is God's view that matters.

God looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.

Psalm 53:2

RESPOND

Do you know anyone who categorically believes there is no God? Rather than calling them a fool, how can you be praying for them?

WAY IN

Mark 8:27 – 10:52

The journey of discipleship

Discipleship is an exciting call. Following Jesus, the way Jesus wants us to follow him, is at the same time both a blessed experience and a risky task.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his 1937 classic book *The Cost of Discipleship*, reminds us of the joys and adventures of Christian life. For those who willingly submit to the purpose and plan of God, the yoke they are called to bear can be easy and the burden light (Matthew 11:30).

Even as Jesus prepares his disciples for the exciting journey with him, he makes it very clear that those who follow him will always be in the shadow of the cross. They may be blamed, hated, condemned and called fanatics. There could be temptations to desert the Lord and even risks to life. Yet Jesus, who never forsakes his dear ones, carries their burdens and gives strength and courage to bear the cross. Ultimately it is, however, a story of hope and triumph.

About the writer **Vinod Victor**



Vinod is the chaplain of the Anglican Church in Freiburg and the Area Dean of Germany. He is also chair of CMS-Asia. Before moving to Germany, Vinod served in various congregations in India and Australia, and has a history of ecumenical and missional engagement.

Mark chapters 9 and 10 are about Jesus equipping the disciples to understand the essence of following him. It touches upon key themes like faith, marriage, riches and servanthood and has some wonderful stories of healing. The forewarnings of Jesus about his passion and death are juxtaposed with the disciples' quest for power and authority. The invitation to take a closer look at Jesus, as the life-pattern to emulate, runs through these chapters. We will hear stories that help us on our own journey of discipleship.

Who do you say I am?

PREPARE

Imagine Jesus meets you on your way and asks you a simple question: ‘How about you? Who do you say I am?’ What would be your response?

READ

Mark 8:27–30

EXPLORE

Two young children were having a conversation. One had an orange in his hand, and he asked his friend, ‘How does this orange taste?’ The friend responded, ‘How would I know unless I taste it myself?’

This experience is true in our God encounters too. Unless we taste and see who Jesus is in our lives, it will not be easy to answer the question of who is this Jesus we talk about every day. While it may be easy to say who others say Jesus is, when it becomes a personal question it requires a deep inner search to respond meaningfully.

For others, Jesus could be a prophet, a good human being, the Saviour of humankind, the Alpha and Omega, the Living Stone – but the crucial question is: What about you; who do you say he is?

Peter, when asked this question, had no doubt in his mind when he declared,

‘You are the Messiah’ (v 29). It was his experience, his firm conviction and the realisation he encountered, thanks to the revelation of the Holy Spirit, through his close walk with Jesus.

‘Who do you say I am?’

Mark 8:29

RESPOND

Pray: ‘Help me, O Lord, to boldly declare to the world who you are in my life.’ Who can you share this with this week?

Tuesday 8 September

Mark 8:31 – 9:1

How precious is our soul?

PREPARE

Reflect on your decision or realisation that you wanted to follow Jesus. What difference did it make to your life?

.....

READ

Mark 8:31 – 9:1

EXPLORE

Today's passage begins with Jesus challenging his disciples with the insight that, if they want to be his followers, they need to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him (v 34). Is this a message you heard when you decided to follow Jesus? What do you think gets in the way of people following Jesus today?

Jesus then goes on to ask the disciples what good it is for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul (v 36). Other translations, such as the NRSV, use the word 'life' instead of 'soul', which perhaps makes it clearer that gaining the whole world and losing your life is a foolish endeavour.

Further, Jesus goes on to ask what they can give in return for their life which hints at what his death and resurrection will accomplish – as Christians we have eternal life because of what Jesus has done.

The passage finishes with a warning about being ashamed of Jesus and his words – something that is important to consider as we seek to live out our Christian lives. How do people know that you are a Christian?

'Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?'

Mark 8:37

RESPOND

What does it mean for you, today, to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus? Is there one action you think God is calling you to today?

A mountaintop experience

PREPARE

Reflect on some of your mountaintop experiences with Jesus. Which memory stands out most strongly?

READ

Mark 9:2–13

EXPLORE

I wonder what Peter, James and John were expecting when Jesus led them up a mountain (v 2). I would be surprised if they expected what followed – Jesus transfigured and in conversation with Moses and Elijah (v 4). I wonder how they recognised them. Perhaps they recalled the stories of Moses encountering God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 32–34). Has your journey with Jesus led you to any surprising or unexpected places or encounters? Peter didn't know what to say. He was terrified (v 6, ESV) and suggested building a dwelling for each of them, perhaps echoing the tabernacle in the wilderness where God dwelt. I wonder what you would have done in Peter's place. Then a voice from above announced that Jesus was the beloved Son (v 7, ESV), an echo of God's words at his baptism (Mark 1:11, ESV).

As they descended the mountain, Jesus prohibited them from talking about

their experience and again talked about his death and resurrection (v 9), which the disciples still did not understand (v 10). How hard might it have been not to share such an experience? How do we know whether or not to share with people some of our intimate moments with God? Jesus then confirms the belief that Elijah will return (Malachi 3:1) but also alludes to John the Baptist as a prophet like Elijah (v 13). A thought-provoking experience.

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone.

Mark 9:2

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord Jesus, open our eyes to see you, our ears to hear you and our hearts to behold you.'

Thursday 10 September

Mark 9:14–29

If you can?

PREPARE

Have you ever encountered a situation where you thought it was beyond even God to be able to help? Yet with fumbling words have you dared to say, ‘Lord, if you can...?’

.....

READ

Mark 9:14–29

EXPLORE

A story is told of Jenny, living in a remote village, who was worried that her eyesight was deteriorating each day. Everything was turning blurred for her. When it was time for shoebox gifts at Christmas, the village children were excited. Jenny was praying, ‘Lord, if you can, please restore my sight. I want to see again.’ When the gifts were handed out, surprisingly there was a pair of spectacles in Jenny’s box and she was astonished that, when she wore them, she could see perfectly. Jenny was amazed at God’s provision.

In today’s passage, God’s provision for the father of the boy with seizures comes through the power and authority of Jesus, who is able to free the child from the evil spirit (v 25). There will be a range of different perspectives on this story today, and exorcism can be a controversial and potentially abusive practice. The important thing for us

to focus on is that Jesus responded with compassion to a father who was distressed over his child and was perhaps seeing Jesus as his last resort. The story is another piece in the jigsaw of Jesus demonstrating that he is the Son of God.

Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, ‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’

Mark 9:24

RESPOND

What are you struggling to believe at the moment? Ask God to help you overcome your unbelief.

Greatness of the last

PREPARE

Think back to conversations you have had about who is or was the greatest or the best. What was at the root of them?

READ

Mark 9:30–37

EXPLORE

The king and the queen of the little kingdom were overwhelmed when the prince came back from a visit to a remote village and told his parents that he had found his future queen. The entourage immediately set out to see the would-be bride, but were surprised to find the very humble home of a peasant and a charming young lady. The prince said, ‘I watched the women fetching water at the village well. This girl came first but allowed all the other women to fetch water before her and even helped several of them to do so. After everyone had filled their pitchers, she filled hers and walked home.’

Jesus tells his disciples yet again of his impending dying and rising again, and verse 32 says that the disciples were afraid to ask what he meant. Are there things that you are afraid of asking God about or things that you are struggling to understand?

But on the way back the argument the disciples had was not about what Jesus said but about who was the greatest among them.

Is there anything distracting you from serving God at this time? As Jesus taught, greatness is never in being the first or the best, but instead it is in the willingness to be the last and in the joy one finds in serving others.

‘Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.’

Mark 9:35

RESPOND

Pray: ‘Teach me, O Lord, to understand the mystery of finding joy in serving and satisfaction in allowing others to be first.’

Saturday 12 September

Mark 9:38–50

Losing our saltiness

PREPARE

Have you ever come across salt that has lost its saltiness? Have you imagined that it could be your story too? What might it mean in your life?

.....

READ

Mark 9:38–50

EXPLORE

When the disciples tried to stop someone from doing miracles in the name of Jesus, he told them that those who are not against us are for us (v 40) and warned everyone not to be stumbling blocks in the way of others (v 42). What have been some of the stumbling blocks you have experienced or you see being put in the way of people following Jesus today?

When the Gospel of Mark was written, salt was a valuable commodity, much more than something that gave food its flavour. It was used as a preservative; important when there were no refrigerators. It acted as a disinfectant too, as it still does today. It was offered as part of some sacrifices and it symbolised a covenant. Imagine if salt lost its properties to do all of these things. That could be very challenging! It helps us see why Jesus used this analogy to warn his disciples not to lose their saltiness – a distinct possibility.

Jesus urges them to always have salt among themselves. The sign of having salt within us is living at peace with each other (v 50).

‘Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.’

Mark 9:50

RESPOND

Pray: ‘Help me, O Lord, never to lose my saltiness and always to live in peace with others.’

God of justice

PREPARE

Recall times in your life where you have experienced God as your helper. Give thanks to God for being with you and sustaining you.

READ

Psalm 54

EXPLORE

When I read aloud a psalm such as this, I often squirm a little as I ask God to destroy my enemies. It feels uncomfortable to be heard asking for something that appears to be at odds with Jesus' teaching to love one's enemies. However, I started to see it differently when I read it through the eyes of a victim of injustice.

I wonder if you have ever been a victim of injustice. It can be a very painful and disorientating experience, in which one can feel powerless or unsure as to how to use what power one has. The words of Psalm 54 can be a helpful prayer in such situations. The structure of this seven-versed psalm intentionally places verse 4 at the centre: 'Surely God is my help; the LORD is the one who sustains me.' The verses surrounding it demonstrate that we can express to God our pain, our frustrations, our anger and our desires for an end to injustice.

We can trust in God our helper and sustainer to enact justice perfectly.

Surely God is my help; the LORD is the one who sustains me.

Psalm 54:4

RESPOND

Where do you see injustice happening today? It might be events happening in other countries or it might be situations that you personally are involved with. Use Psalm 54 as a template to pray to God about them.

Monday 14 September

Mark 10:1-12

Can one plus one still be one?

PREPARE

When two individuals are united in holy matrimony, have you ever considered what it costs for the two to become one?

.....

READ

Mark 10:1-12

EXPLORE

While solemnising a marriage, the minister read from the Bible and told the young couple, 'You are no longer two but one. Do you think that it is possible?' Blinded by love though they were, their eyes did have a look of wonder. The minister said, 'Imagine two wonderful rivers flowing from two directions. At one point the two rivers merge and then flow together. One plus one has now become a bigger one and that is the mystery of marriage. Each of these rivers carries with it all its richness and merges into the richness of the other and together they form an entirely new and beautiful entity.'

Jesus herein gives some wonderful insights about marriage, in response to a question from the Pharisees about divorce (vs 7-9). Why do you think the Pharisees asked this question? Marriage calls for prayerful giving up, thoughtful adjustments and intentional initiatives; not the hardness of heart that led to

Moses permitting divorce (v 5). The affirmation that it is God who joins people together not only adds to the spiritual dimension of marriage but also points at the responsibility of the partners in safeguarding and protecting marriages as sacred. The passage is another example of the disciples seeking clarity in private on something Jesus taught in public (vs 10-12). Does it raise questions for you?

'Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

Mark 10:9

RESPOND

Pray for those who are struggling in their marriages at the moment, as well as those who are feeling the loss of bereavement or divorce, or are experiencing unwanted singleness.

Being like children

PREPARE

Think about what good qualities of being a child we lose with ageing.

READ

Mark 10:13–16

EXPLORE

Children can be much wiser than we think and we sometimes underestimate their spiritual wisdom. A chaplain tells of how they were using nesting dolls with a child and she asked the question ‘Which one is God? Is it the smallest one who lives inside of me or the biggest one who holds all the others?’ What wisdom from a child has surprised you?

When Jesus tells his disciples that anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it, he is, in fact, urging all of them to keep thinking of the child-like qualities that people sometimes lose as they age. These could be qualities that are crucial for the kingdom culture that Jesus is envisaging. The invitation of Jesus has not only been ‘Let the children come’ but is also ‘Come to me as children would’.

The words and actions of Jesus here may have been particularly shocking

to those listening, because of the low status of children. Children were powerless, and it would not have been obvious how the kingdom could come through powerlessness, not more traditional forceful means. But in powerlessness there is only God to depend on.

And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

Mark 10:16

RESPOND

Pray: ‘Help me, Lord, not to stand in the way of our children experiencing the beauty of having Jesus as their friend. Help me, Lord, to come to you as a child would.’

Wednesday 16 September

Mark 10:17–31

Riches in heaven

PREPARE

Where is our investment? Is it here on earth or is it up above?

.....

READ

Mark 10:17–31

EXPLORE

The legend of King Gondoforos, well known in my eastern culture, speaks of how he invited an apostle who was a carpenter to build a castle for him. Instead of building the castle, the apostle distributed the money provided to the poor. When the king summoned him, the apostle answered that the castle for the king is already ready in heaven. The furious king imprisoned the apostle. The same night, the king dreamed that he was at the pearly gates. He was shown a beautiful house and was told, 'This is what you have invested while you lived on earth.' The king woke up from his dream and ordered the immediate release of the apostle and dedicated the rest of his life to the service of the poor and the ordinary.

In asking what he had to do to inherit eternal life (v 17), I wonder what the rich man was expecting Jesus to say. Perhaps he was hoping that his keeping of the

commandments would be enough (v 20). We do not hear whether or not the rich man did do as Jesus told him to do. It is one of the many unanswered questions in the Bible! What do you think?

Jesus says, 'all things are possible with God' (v 27). We may not always know the impact of words spoken and how they may later bear fruit.

'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'

Mark 10:25

RESPOND

Pray: 'Help me, O Lord, to see the riches of the kingdom of God more than the riches of this world.'

The shadow of the cross

PREPARE

What are the risks of discipleship for you today? What is helping or hindering you moving forward?

READ

Mark 10:32–34

EXPLORE

The story of Christianity is also a story of many martyrs, such as Eric Liddell (the film *Chariots of Fire* tells his story). The Olympic athlete and missionary knew he faced an uncertain future in China but still chose to go, in the same way that Jesus, here, chooses to continue to Jerusalem (v 32). Have there been points in your journey where it has been hard to choose to continue?

In every missionary journey there is the constant presence of the shadow of the cross – the knowledge of being called to follow Jesus and that the following is costly and may embrace suffering or even death, as Jesus explains to his disciples in this passage. As Jesus walks up to Jerusalem with his disciples, he is aware of what is awaiting him (vs 33,34). He makes it known to the twelve that tough days are inevitable, but also gives them the larger picture of the salvation narrative. Those who

follow are afraid because it is a known fact that a conspiracy is being hatched to get rid of Jesus.

Here, Jesus is giving them a realistic picture of discipleship. It is going to be costly. Was that clear to you when you began to follow Jesus? There are many places around the world where choosing to follow Jesus is a risky option and the shadow of the cross is apparent.

‘Three days later he will rise.’

Mark 10:34

RESPOND

Pray: ‘Help me, Lord, to constantly see the shadow of the cross in my journey of discipleship.’

Friday 18 September

Mark 10:35–45

Not to be served but to serve

PREPARE

Think about your expectations as you follow Christ. In what ways are they biblically shaped?

.....

READ

Mark 10:35–45

EXPLORE

Bishop Jesudasan was once approached by church leaders. They were debating what image of Christ should be featured on the central stained glass window, which was costing a lot of money. After listening to them, the bishop asked, ‘Why do you want to spend so much when the needs of the last, the least and the lost around you are so great?’ Noticing the silence in the room, he continued: ‘Jesus came to serve and if you want to look at an image that would challenge the people then look at a servant image of Jesus. Why not a simple image of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples with a towel around his waist?’

James and John were surely thinking about a Messianic kingdom ‘here and now’ when they came to Jesus saying, ‘We want you to do for us whatever we ask’ (v 35). What they wanted were the prime positions on the left and the right of Jesus. ‘These places belong to those

for whom they have been prepared’, Jesus told them (v 40), and reminded them again that ‘whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all’ (vs 43,44).

‘For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’

Mark 10:45

RESPOND

Pray that God will help you to follow the model of Jesus who was ever willing to serve and never wanted to be served.

Jesus' question

PREPARE

What helps us really see? How do we look with more than just our eyes?

READ

Mark 10:46–52

EXPLORE

‘Let every veil that blinds us from seeing the design of God for our lives be lifted so that we can dance the divine choreography,’ the pastor said as he was teaching about prayer. One person quipped, ‘But I am not blind; I can see.’ The pastor smiled and asked him, ‘Are you sure? Can you really see? Do not forget that sometimes people with vision challenges can see with their hearts more clearly than those who think they can see. A wise thing to do is to constantly pray: Lord, I want to see.’

Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was coming to town and so he shouted out to him for mercy. Though the crowd tried to hush him he caught the attention of Jesus who called him near. Throwing aside his cloak, Bartimaeus came to Jesus and Jesus asked him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ That is a very challenging question for Jesus to ask – it does not always have an

obvious answer, although it did in this case. If Jesus asked you that question today, what would your response be? Would you look to respond ‘Lord, I want to see’ with Bartimaeus, or would it be something else? As we ponder this question, do we think there is a difference between what we want and what God sees that we need?

‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Jesus asked him. The blind man said, ‘Rabbi, I want to see.’

Mark 10:51

RESPOND

Pray: ‘Help me, O Lord, to have the right answer when Jesus asks me next time: “What do you want me to do for you?”’

Sunday 20 September

Psalm 55

When friends betray

PREPARE

How do we respond when we realise that close friends are not on the same side as us over an issue?

.....

READ

Psalm 55

EXPLORE

William Shakespeare portrays the assassination of Julius Caesar in a very dramatic manner in his play with the same title. As the conspirators gather around Caesar at the Senate on the Ides of March, he is literally taken aback to see his close friend and associate Brutus to be among them. Caesar's last words, according to Shakespeare, were 'Et tu, Brute?', which literally means 'You too, Brutus?'. An alternative is put forward by Cassius Dio, who suggests the words may have been 'You too, son?' When family or close friends betray us, it is indeed heartbreakingly.

The pain of the psalmist is seen in verses 12 to 15, as he laments over his close friend. In 2 Samuel 15:31, David is being told, 'Ahithophel is among the conspirators with Absalom.' This could be the context in which David writes this psalm. The anguish of the heart is not only about the fear of death and the

horror that was overwhelming, but also from the fact that his opponents are those David would have never imagined to be betrayers. He, however, trusts the Lord will give him strength to face such difficult situations (v 22), and this trust in God's saving and sustaining power is threaded through the last eight verses.

**Cast your cares on the Lord
and he will sustain you; he
will never let the righteous be
shaken.**

Psalm 55:22

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord, help me to never be a betrayer. When I experience betrayal, help me to trust in you for the strength I need to sustain me.'

Life-changing true stories

Storytelling: what a gift, for those who skilfully tell stories and for those of us who excitedly hear them! Just now, I'm reading Dickens' *Great Expectations*, and I'm absolutely loving being immersed in the first half of the nineteenth century. Some personalities and motivations don't change!

About the writer
Terry Clutterham



Having been on the staff of SU England and Wales for nearly 30 years, Terry now lives with his wife Sue in Norfolk. They both help train children's leaders in their local church, but at other times Terry enjoys reading, writing, visiting historical sites and entertaining their young grandsons, and has recently got back to playing the recorder for the first time in 35 years – Terry and Sue are currently on pretty good terms with their neighbours!

The book of 2 Samuel may have been compiled during the exile of God's people but written earlier, as the events unfolded. It tells the true story of the nation of Israel around 1,000 BC and especially, in this series of readings, of the life events and person of King David.

Try reading or listening to chapters 8 to 20 in one sitting. We may not enjoy all we hear, but it will give us a much better grasp of all that's going on.

The exquisite storytelling draws us deeply in to thinking about some of the big themes that are as relevant to our own lives as they were to David's. Through our readings, we'll reflect on God's story (What is he planning? What has he promised? What is he doing? What does he want?) and David's story. (To what extent does his life reflect God's nature?) We'll also have a go at telling our own story (What is God doing with us now? Where might he want to take us next?), bringing it to the Lord in prayer.

Ready for some life-changing true story-hearing and -telling?

Monday 21 September

2 Samuel 8:1-18

Devoted

PREPARE

Reflect: 'You are not your own; you were bought at a price' (1 Corinthians 6:19,20). The price was Jesus' blood. Thank him who gave everything for you.

.....

READ

2 Samuel 8:1-18

EXPLORE

Maybe we'll struggle with this part of David's story. We want to love and applaud him, because we know he's a 'good guy', 'a man after my own heart', says God (Acts 13:22), but here we find him slaughtering tens of thousands of soldiers (including some through what seems like a cruel kind of Russian roulette, v 2), crippling horses (v 4) and carrying off tons of his enemies' gold, silver and bronze (vs 7-10). To us, these actions seem abhorrent.

However, if we look more closely, we see that somehow God is right at the heart of everything. God's story is that he wants security for his people (2 Samuel 7:10,11), and David ensures this happens. The Lord is behind his success (vs 6,14), and David dedicates his spoils of war to the Lord (vs 7,11,12). Externally securing Israel's borders, he's God's man for the job (v 14); internally he further strengthens the nation with

good, structured government (vs 16-18). However it looks, David is 'doing what was just and right for all his people' (v 15).

However tough and messy the events, challenges and relationships of our daily lives, Jesus' devotion to us inspires us to stay devoted to finding the 'just and right', Jesus-glorifying way through it all.

The Lord gave David victory wherever he went.

2 Samuel 8:6b

RESPOND

Try telling God your own story now, letting him know just how much you love him and reflecting on your attempt to live with him right at the heart of everything. What might he be saying to you in response?

Distracted

PREPARE

'I will listen to what God the **LORD** says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants – but let them not turn to folly' (Psalm 85:8). Relax, knowing that you're at peace with the Lord as you come to listen to his Word.

READ

2 Samuel 11:1-27

EXPLORE

With peace and success can come complacency, a belief in our own invincibility. In this moment of David's story he wants what he wants, and why not? Doesn't he deserve it? It all starts with a distracted glance from the palace roof (v 2), but it leads to David forgetting other people, God and the holiness in his people that the Lord desires (v 27).

A constant theme in God's true story has been that his people should reflect who he is to those around them who don't know him. God identifies so fully with his people that their reputation becomes his. (He still does this with the church today.) I wonder how safe God's reputation is with us. God even gave special instructions that the king shouldn't 'turn from the law to the right or to the left' (Deuteronomy 17:20). No wonder David wants to keep his sin quiet!

Most of us keep quiet about our sins too. Generally we don't post, stream or chat about them. But of course 'Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight' (Hebrews 4:13). So this frees us up amazingly to tell him all about them.

But the thing David had done displeased the **LORD.**

2 Samuel 11:27b

RESPOND

'Be holy because I, the **LORD** your God, am holy' (Leviticus 19:2). Hear God say these words to you and examine your life story before him. Thank him that 'we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all' (Hebrews 10:10).

Wednesday 23 September

2 Samuel 12:1-25

Devastated

PREPARE

Thank God for all the great people, things and experiences he has given you, and especially for forgiveness and new life in Jesus.

.....

READ

2 Samuel 12:1-25

EXPLORE

Story is powerful! Nathan's story from God hits home with David. Can you remember a time when words from God stopped you in your tracks?

Initially outraged at the horrific injustice the rich man perpetrates (vs 5,6), David is devastated, then contrite, when God points out that the real guilty party is David himself (v 7). His acts of adultery, murder and therefore unbelievable meanness, in spite of God's overwhelming generosity (v 8), are abhorrent to God. From here on, David's story will be one of strife and heartache (v 11). An epidemic of sinfulness will spread through David's family and nation, the consequence of his abuse of power and string of poor choices.

In God's story sin is always taken very seriously. Here God calls what David does 'despising' him and his word (vs 9,10). So, it's not just a casual

slip-up then! Of the 'six things the **LORD** hates, seven that are detestable to him' (Proverbs 6:16-19), it seems to me that David commits them all! So how amazing it is that through Nathan God still tells him, 'The **LORD** has taken away your sin' (v 13), and even more so, that Jesus 'takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29).

Nathan replied, 'The **LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.'**

2 Samuel 12:13b

RESPOND

Tell God your own story of struggle with sin. Confess and hear him say he forgives you.

Diminished

PREPARE

‘The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears; I have not been rebellious, I have not turned away’ (Isaiah 50:5). Pray for attentiveness to what he has to say to you today.

READ

2 Samuel 15:1-12

EXPLORE

Handsome Absalom, David’s third son, aims for popularity with the ordinary people. One day, he hopes, he’ll lead them in an uprising against his father and grab the crown for himself. For now, he’s letting everyone know he’s ‘royal’ (vs 1,6) and builds his reputation by getting down to the people’s level (v 2), by applauding their claims to justice (v 3) and by massaging their egos (v 5). Absalom being a very slick operator, the people simply fall in line behind him (v 6). Gradually, subtly and for a very long time (v 7), Absalom diminishes David’s role and credibility in his people’s eyes.

In God’s story, he has chosen David as king: ‘I have chosen David to rule my people Israel’ (1 Kings 8:16). David is God’s man. By undermining his role, Absalom is working against God’s plans. While the words of Psalm 2:1-3

ring true for the surrounding nations bent on doing Israel harm, Absalom is also playing his part in plotting from within ‘against the LORD and against his anointed’ (Psalm 2:2).

Whoever walks in integrity walks securely.

Proverbs 10:9a

RESPOND

As part of your own story, share with God how your heart aches when you see his glory on the earth diminished by people’s selfish ambition. What are you thinking of in particular? And what from scripture does God want to say to you in response?

Friday 25 September

2 Samuel 15:13–29

Determined

PREPARE

‘Take my moments and my days; let them flow in endless praise.’* Will you praise endlessly? Do at least a bit of it now!

.....

READ

2 Samuel 15:13–29

EXPLORE

After resting on his laurels and inadvertently letting Absalom make a bid for the crown, David wakes up to what's actually happening (v 13). Suddenly he's on the case again with his role and with God. David's story isn't over yet, although the country folk watching him think it may be (v 23). No, David emerges with fresh determination. Wise call follows wise call. Did you spot them in today's verses? If not, take another look.

David recognises and acts on the Lord's sovereignty, knowing he's at work. This is primarily God's story. First, with his loyal supporters and soldiers, he strategically and compassionately leaves Jerusalem, so the city isn't trashed and the people slaughtered (though, horribly, the ten concubines are left to their fate, v 16). Next, he generously gives permission for the Gittites to leave (though they don't – it's not their battle, after all (vs 19–22).

And David refuses to use the Ark as a kind of personal protection device (v 25) because he knows God is with him everywhere he goes – it's all in the Lord's hands (v 26).

When it looks as if he's finished too, Jesus makes right call after right call... all the way to the cross. Knowledge of God's sovereignty makes the hardest path possible. It's when Jesus knows it's time for him to 'leave this world and go to the Father' (John 13:1) that he picks up a towel and washes feet.

‘Let him do to me whatever seems good to him.’

2 Samuel 15:26b

RESPOND

Reflect on Psalm 71:5. Tell the Lord your own story of times when you did all you could but in the end just had to rely on his knowing best. How did things turn out?

*‘Take My Life and Let It Be’, Frances Ridley Havergal, 1836–79

.....

Disobeyed

PREPARE

Read Psalm 131:1, and come to your Bible time today in humility, waiting on the Lord.

READ

2 Samuel 18:1-18

EXPLORE

Some Bible passages leave us with more questions than answers. For me, this is one of them. I understand all the words and can follow the storyline, but it's with the motivations of people that I struggle, and with trying to see God's story in it all. How was the reading for you?

The first five verses are fine – Absalom is trying to kill David, so his troops advise the king to stay in the city (v 3). Complete sense. And David, being a loving father in spite of his son's desire to murder him, wants his army commanders to treat Absalom gently – that is, not kill him (v 5). But they disobey and do kill Absalom, and that's where my questions begin.

If Joab is so loyal to David, why doesn't he do as the king asks and treat Absalom gently (v 14)? Since David's order is made very publicly (v 5), why does Joab risk his position and possibly his life by disobeying it? Does he think

that he knows better than the king, that killing Absalom is the only sure way of making sure he doesn't cause more trouble? And what sort of commander would drop one of his troops right in it (v 13)? And why treat the king's son's body so disrespectfully (v 17)?

However much *isn't* clear, what *is* clear is that, with Absalom gone, David now has no obvious heir. So has God's plan for the house of David fallen in a heap? And not just the plan for the next king in line, but what about God's promise to 'establish the throne of his kingdom for ever' (2 Samuel 7:13)? Well, come on – what do you think?

Israel, put your hope in the LORD both now and for evermore.

Psalm 131:3

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord, today I'm puzzled, but thank you for your Word.'

Sunday 27 September

Psalm 56

God who knows our tears

PREPARE

When the going gets tough, how does God show his love and care for you?

READ

Psalm 56

EXPLORE

The psalmist was having a tough patch in his life. The Philistines had successfully pursued and perhaps reached him (v 1). Despite this, there is a positive note of hope that fills this psalm, best seen in the final section where the psalmist affirms that he will present his thank-offerings to God (v 12). How easy do you find it to praise God in times of persecution or challenge? I wonder if this is one of the psalms Jesus reflected on as he talked and thought about the way he was being pursued by enemies who wanted to kill him. Have you ever had to keep going despite the opposition? How did you handle that?

Such persecution and opposition still happen today. A missionary had been through tough times. In a brutal attack her husband and two sons were killed. Though she pronounced forgiveness to the perpetrators, life was not easy. Haunting memories and questions kept

coming back to her. When her faith was tossed like a roller coaster, she would always return to the promise in Psalm 56:11 – ‘in God I trust and am not afraid’. She drew strength from knowing that God does not overlook our misery and he keeps count of our tears (v 8).

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise – in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?

Psalm 56:3,4

RESPOND

Pray: ‘Help me, Lord, to be aware that when I shed tears you are there by my side and I can trust in you.’

Distraught

PREPARE

Lay before the Lord anything in your or your family's life that is preoccupying you and perhaps weighing heavily. Remember, 'my help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth' (Psalm 121:2).

READ

2 Samuel 18:19–21,31–33; 19:1–8

EXPLORE

Cushite messenger: 'You're free of threat!' David: 'But what about Absalom?' Messenger: 'Erm...' Result? Even though Absalom has been trying to kill him (17:12), David is naturally distraught at the loss of his son (18:33). Another bitter moment in David's story. In fact he gets so caught up in his own grief that he neglects his royal, God-given duties... That is, until, shrewdly, Joab jolts him out of it (19:5–7). Then suddenly he's back being the king God anointed him to be (19:8). We can't just abandon who God has made us and what he has given us to do.

In God's story, there's no 'slumber nor sleep' for him (Psalm 121:4), nor the relinquishing of his responsibilities as the 'LORD your God' (2 Samuel 18:28). 'If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself' (2 Timothy 2:13) – he is our good and faithful God, always.

As we discover in Psalm 89:3,4, there's a lot of 'forever-ness', including around King David, that God has to work on!

'The LORD has vindicated you today by delivering you from the hand of all who rose up against you.'

2 Samuel 18:31b

RESPOND

Tell God your own story of times when you were so in need yourself that you almost felt like giving up on faith. Be thankful that he never fails or forgets – he 'will watch over your coming and going both now and for evermore' (Psalm 121:8).

Tuesday 29 September

2 Samuel 19:9–18,39–43; 20:1,2

Decisive

PREPARE

Enjoy quiet, if you can. In God's story you and the Lord are at peace, together for ever. What do you want to say to him before setting off with today's reading?

.....

READ

2 Samuel 19:9–18,39–43; 20:1,2

EXPLORE

This part of David's story sees him attempting to regain people's support after their loyalty transferred to Absalom. David must return to Jerusalem now, the people demand, and take control of things again. But with all David has been through, notice his extraordinary generosity of spirit. Rather than punishing Amasa, Absalom's general, he makes him commander of his own army (19:13). Shimei seeks forgiveness for pelting David and his officials with rocks when they were escaping from Jerusalem earlier (16:6–8; 19:19,20). David responds to Shimei's plea – 'May the king put it out of his mind' (19:19). There's no recrimination of any sort by the king (19:23), and of Joab and his murder of the king's son there's not a word. Despite Israel's and Judah's bickering about which of them has the strongest case for the privilege of bringing David back (19:40–43), there's no response recorded from David.

The decisive, peaceful way in which David deals with Absalom's rebellion and its consequences is remarkable. Even if it's tactical, to reintroduce peace and calm to troubled times, the powerful king could have chosen another way.

And what peace another King so generously and decisively brought into our lives: '... since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ...' (Romans 5:1).

Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Colossians 3:13b

RESPOND

Thank God that, in your own story and through Jesus, you have known his forgiveness for far more than you have ever forgiven other people.

The most important thing

This series takes us through three books of the Bible (1, 2 and 3 John). With the same author and common themes, it can feel like reading chapters of the same book. Not only that, but many believe they form the follow-up of John's Gospel, where he too focused on the same themes.

What happened after the day of Pentecost and the book of Acts? A lot! But we only have glimpses of it through the letters in the New Testament. Clearly, there has been incredible growth in the number of people calling themselves Christians and forming churches. However, there have also been divisions and conflicting theologies.

John represents a unique perspective of someone who met Jesus and was part of his inner circle. He is one of only four Gospel-writers recording first-hand accounts and now we have his letters to continue the story. In sticking close to the words and heart of Jesus, John is as near as we can get. So his words are relevant and instructive for us too. What he challenges should also challenge us. What he calls us to remember, we should make every effort to remember.

So join the journey to discover how John is still leading people to follow Jesus and how his words lead us too. Discover how loving God and loving others is at the heart of the gospel message and how it can transform our lives.

About the writer **Dani Knox**



Dani balances family life as a wife and mother with her calling to love God through serving the local community as a lay reader and the wider church through fundraising. Her passion for empowering others works itself out through church leadership and as a Christian fundraising consultant.

Wednesday 30 September

1 John 1:1 – 2:2

God is light

PREPARE

At the beginning of this series, still yourself to be ready to hear from God. It's a new beginning and a new chance to come before God.

READ

1 John 1:1 – 2:2

EXPLORE

If you've ever been out driving at night when there are no street lights, you'll know it's dark! Lights coming towards you light up the road for a moment but then blind you the next. However, cars just ahead provide that extra light to help you see the way.

Lights ahead and before you are powerful. This is why the analogy of light in this reading is compelling.

God is light (v 5) and in the beginning he created light (Genesis 1:3). He has always been the source of light and wants us to walk in the light he gives (v 7). His light is from the beginning and goes ahead of us to show the way ahead.

This light is not to blind us, but to guide us to walk in truth, to shine a light on dangers and to lead us to fellowship with one another (v 7). If we confess our sins, the light purifies us and makes atonement for our sins, cleansing us (v 7),

so we can journey in the light and arrive at our destination. Jesus calls us to walk in the light so we can walk with him.

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

1 John 1:7

RESPOND

As we explore the books of 1, 2 and 3 John together, ask for God's light to help you to continue to walk in the light, asking for forgiveness where this is not the case.

Love in action

PREPARE

Call to mind a time when you felt loved by God and remember how you felt.

READ

1 John 2:3-14

EXPLORE

Have you ever heard of the 'five love languages'?* This is the idea that we feel loved and communicate our love in five main ways: touch, time, words, gifts or acts of service. We all have a stronger leaning towards one or two of these and so, typically, it's how we show our love to others. However, it's important to show love to others through all these methods as their love languages may differ from our own. Not surprisingly, we see these ways of showing love in the Bible too and through the ministry of Jesus.

In today's verses, we see the call to show love through our actions. This is not saying with our mouths that we know and love Jesus. This is showing love through the things that we do. The writer is urging his listeners to put words and faith into action. He challenges that we cannot truly know God unless we do as he commands (v 4), we live like Jesus did (v 6) and we love our brothers and

sisters (vs 9-11). If we do not do these things, we are living in darkness and deceiving ourselves. If we want to know God, we must live as Jesus did through obeying God and loving others.

Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

1 John 2:6

RESPOND

Take a moment to consider how you can love God today through your actions.

*G Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts*, Moody Press, 2009

Friday 2 October

1 John 2:15–27

Remain in me

PREPARE

Take a moment to ask God to come and be with you. Be still in his presence.

.....

READ

1 John 2:15–27

EXPLORE

Many times in my life I have asked someone to stay where they are. Sometimes because of some danger, to get a surprise for them or to tidy the kitchen before they come in! But I know that if I'm told to stay there's a temptation to sneak a look or convince myself that a few steps won't hurt. Surprisingly, staying still, or remaining where you are, takes more effort than you'd think.

In today's verses, some form of the word 'remain' is used five times (vs 19,24,27). It appears that some others have not 'remained' within the church and so the reminder to 'remain' is repeated several times. Staying close to God requires time and effort. Remaining in God includes remembering what we heard from the beginning (v 24). What are the early truths about God that you still treasure? Remaining also involves us receiving teaching from the anointing

we have (v 27), some would say the Holy Spirit. What are you learning now? Remaining in God requires effort, but the reward is that, in return, he will remain in you. One day we will be with him for eternity, but we can know his presence today if we choose to remain in him.

As for you, see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father.

1 John 2:24

RESPOND

Consider what you are doing to remain close to God. What are the things that are trying to lead you astray that you need to avoid?

.....

Bible in a year: Isaiah 63,64; Hebrews 13

Children of God

PREPARE

Consider the different names and ways that God refers to his people in the Bible. How does it change you knowing he says these things about you?

READ

1 John 2:28 – 3:10

EXPLORE

Throughout the Bible, we find many different names and ways to refer to God, such as Father, Provider, Comforter, Judge and so on. In turn, God and the writers of the Bible refer to God's people in many ways too. And many of these are connected to names around family.

Here in 1 John 3:1 (and other places in the Bible), we are referred to as children of God. It is a description we may recall from the first chapter of John's Gospel: 'Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God' (John 1:12). How amazing it is to know that we are saved and redeemed, but to also know that God considers us his family and loves us in that way.

The remainder of the passage returns to the topic of sin and righteousness (vs 4–10), and contrasts the lawless and the righteous (v 4). John sees sin

as a transgression of God's Law, and emphasises how transformative faith in God can be. If we are born of God (v 9), we will display God's character. How do you recognise those who are God's children?

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

1 John 3:1

RESPOND

Thank God that you are part of his family and that you are his beloved child. What difference does that make in your life?

Sunday 4 October

Psalm 57

Delivered

PREPARE

If you plotted your life of faith on a graph, would you say you're living at a high point (joyful and praising) or a low point (sorrowful and crying out for help)? Tell the Lord why.

READ

Psalm 57

EXPLORE

The title of the psalm tells us David, in an earlier period of his life, is hiding from Saul 'in a cave'. However, if we glance through the verses again, we'll see just how appropriate they sound for David's later situation with Absalom.

Psalms being songs, this one seems to start softly but with dark undertones, growing louder and more confident. It suddenly dips again at verse 4, before the crescendo of praise in verse 5. The cycle restarts, first low and mysterious (v 6), then rising to the final crashing climax in verse 11. The Lord will deliver him. When David remembers all the Lord is and all he does, gradually he raises his voice and we can imagine him lifting his head: O God, all glory to you, everywhere!

The Lord draws me out of myself too so that I realise it's all about him – he has 'mercy' (v 1), is my 'refuge' (v 1), is the 'Most

High' (v 2), 'saves me' (v 3) and showers me with 'his love and his faithfulness' (v 3). I've started here to list the good news about the Lord in this psalm, but can you go from verse 4 and draw out the rest?

And suppose 'those who hotly pursue me', the 'lions', 'ravenous beasts' and horrendous, spear-toothed 'men' (vs 3,4) could represent all 'the devil's schemes' to defeat Christians (Ephesians 6:11,12)? Enjoy reading the psalm again in the light of the extraordinary rescue Jesus brought us by his death.

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth.

Psalm 57:5

RESPOND

Now turn your discoveries into a time of praise to the Lord.

Remember God's words

PREPARE

Ask yourself honestly: are you good at remembering things or do you need help from lists, a diary, other people or other ways to help you?

READ

1 John 3:11-24

EXPLORE

Have you ever found yourself using the words, 'How many times do I have to tell you...?' Whether you've said those words as a tired parent, a frustrated spouse, an exasperated boss, a weary teacher or a discouraged friend, you know the irritation of having to repeat yourself. So often, it's not done to hurt or annoy us, but we're forgetful and we make mistakes.

John exhorts us to love one another (v 11) but reminds us also that we don't always do this. From the beginning of the Bible, we see people falling out with one another. Adam tries to blame Eve for disobeying God (Genesis 3:12) and one of their sons, Cain, murdered his brother, Abel (v 12; Genesis 4:8). There is a sharp contrast between Jesus who lays down his life for us and Cain who murdered his brother, not laying down his life for him as verse 16 encourages.

How do we love with actions and in truth (v 18), not just with words? What acts of kindness that people have done for us have we appreciated? What helps us to obey God's commands and to love one another? Having our hearts at rest in God's presence (v 19) is something to cherish, and we can attain that through the way we love, with actions and in truth (v 18).

And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.

1 John 3:23

RESPOND

In what ways can you demonstrate your love with actions and in truth this week?

Tuesday 6 October

1 John 4:1-21

God so loved us

PREPARE

Think about a time when someone unexpectedly acted in a loving way towards you. Thank God for that person and for his love.

READ

1 John 4:1-21

EXPLORE

The passage begins by emphasising the importance of testing the spirits in a context where there are a variety of spirits, not just the Spirit of God (v 1). What ways have you found helpful in trying to discern if something is from God or not? Ensuring that something is consistent with God's Word can be one way to do this. Which voices is it unhelpful to listen to (v 5)? Do you need to act on this?

The second half of the passage is like a novel or film that ties everything together at the end of the story and suddenly the plot makes sense. And this is what John is doing here as he tells us of God's love. John has been telling us to love God and love others. Why? Here comes the part where it's tied together to make sense: because God loved us first (v 19). Why do we love others? Because God showed his love to us by sending his one and only Son into the

world (v 14). We love because we are loved. Since God loved us, we also ought to love one another (v 21). What was it that first drew you to God's love? What in verses 7-21 are you most grateful for?

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

1 John 4:11

RESPOND

Consider for a moment how much God loves you. Ask for his help to show that love to others today.

God's testimony

PREPARE

Can you think of times when God spoke audibly in the Bible? Why did he do this?

.....

READ

1 John 5:1-12

EXPLORE

In this final chapter of 1 John, he draws together the threads of what he has been saying in previous chapters and summarises who Jesus is and what is expected of those who follow him (v 3). In verse 5, we are encouraged in that faith: 'Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.'

There are three times when the voice of God is heard audibly in the New Testament: Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22), Jesus' transfiguration (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35) and just before the Last Supper when Jesus predicts his death (John 12:28,29). Each time God speaks, it's to assert Jesus' authority of being his Son, giving testimony to who Jesus is.

John reminds us of those moments when God speaks to the crowds at large at Jesus' baptism, which involves water,

and his prediction of his death, which involves blood (v 6). These are instances where God himself testifies to who Jesus is and they are all in agreement. God's testimony is greater than any human testimony and so all the proof you need that Jesus is the Son of God is given through God's audible voice. John intends to leave the reader in no doubt that Jesus is God's Son, as God the Father, the Spirit, Jesus' baptism in water, and death through blood testify (vs 6-12).

The Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.

1 John 5:8

RESPOND

Pray and ask forgiveness for moments when you have not fully believed or trusted in God.

Thursday 8 October

1 John 5:13–21

According to his will

PREPARE

Reflect on times when God has answered your prayers with either a yes or a no.

.....

READ

1 John 5:13–21

EXPLORE

As a parent, I am often asked for things by my children. Sometimes I delight in saying yes, but there are other times when it's a no. No matter the pleading, convincing or puppy-dog eyes, there are times when I stick to my answer. This is not to be cruel or a power play. This is because I say yes to things that are good for them and sometimes I know that what they are asking for is not ultimately for their good. If I love my children, sometimes it's good to say no to their requests.

This is why John tells us to pray for anything according to God's will and it will be given. If it is within what the Father wills, he will hear us and we shall receive what we ask (v 14).

The book concludes by returning to talking about sin, particularly that we should pray for our brother or sister who is sinning (v 16). Is this something we do?

The final verse entreats God's children to keep ourselves from idols, having issued a warning that the world is under the power of the evil one (v 19) but that we can know the true God (v 20).

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

1 John 5:14

RESPOND

Is there something on your heart to pray for? Ask God how to pray for that situation. Spend time listening to him and being led by him.

Love one another

PREPARE

Can you recall the last sermon or talk you heard? What was the main message?

.....

READ

2 John

EXPLORE

What are you known for among your family and friends? What was it that John was known for?

It is not known who John is writing to in this letter, possibly a local congregation, maybe a spiritual mother, elder or prophetess, but the theme of love continues. John is constantly writing about love. This theme comes through in his Gospel, his first letter and now this second one too. John most likely wrote other letters and I wonder if they follow this repeated theme of loving God and loving others (vs 5,6). When the hoped for visit happened (v12), it is quite possible that love would be a key topic!

But John is right to press the point. It's a fundamental command of Jesus' to love God and love one another. If we are doing these two things, everything else falls into place. If we are loving others, they will experience the love of

God through us. If we are loving others, we are becoming more like God and therefore better able to love him. The letter, however, contains a warning against those who deceive (v 7), and not welcoming those who do not believe Christ's teaching (v 9). How aware are we of this danger and how might we avoid false teaching (v 11)?

And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another.

2 John 5

RESPOND

Where have you lacked love for other people this week? How could you show greater love in the week ahead?

Saturday 10 October

3 John

Investing in friendship

PREPARE

Consider for a moment all the people you are investing in, whether by friendship or in more of a mentoring way.

READ

3 John

EXPLORE

Many of the New Testament letters were written to be read aloud to a whole Church. With this letter, you get the sense that this is for one set of eyes only; Gaius'. Four times in 14 verses, John calls him his 'dear friend'. He prays that his health is good and all will go well for him (v 2). He writes sentiments of being proud of him (v 5). He gives helpful advice (vs 8,11). He looks forward to seeing him face-to-face (v 14a). And he shares greetings from shared friends (v 14b).

But there is a purpose to this personal letter. Gaius is commended for his hospitality (vs 6,7) and his support of those who are most likely travelling preachers (v 8). This, in a setting where there would not always be safe places to stay for strangers. Thus Demetrius, most likely a travelling missionary, is being commended to Gaius in order for him to be offered hospitality, because another church leader, Diotrephes, will

not. Diotrephes is spreading 'malicious nonsense' about John and doesn't recognise his followers (v 10).

How do you or your church support those who are sharing God's word with the world?

Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, just as you are progressing spiritually.

3 John 2

RESPOND

Who is God calling you to befriend or invest in? Who needs your encouragement, friendship and support? Perhaps there is an organisation as well as an individual that would benefit from your support.

Justice is God's

PREPARE

Today we think about when we've been hurt. Take a moment to ask for God's peace and gentleness.

READ

Psalm 58

EXPLORE

The probable context of this psalm is that David is in hiding, fleeing from Saul and his followers because he fears for his life. He begins with his expectation of how leaders should act (v 1), but then his frustration with Saul and those who surround him becomes clear (v 2). If you are left in any doubt, be assured that David is angry with them. His language is graphic and gruesome (vs 3-9). It is heartfelt and full of hurt. It is honest yet hopeful. And whatever they have done, not only has David been affected but others too will delight when the rulers are punished (v 10).

We too feel angry, hurt and frustrated, but we can learn from David. He is not going to seek revenge himself (v 6). Nor is he inciting others to act. He is asking God to intervene, to act justly. This psalm can be hard to read in our current context, where vengeance is not always seen as the right response. But

when David was writing, such displays of evil required God's justice and this was a cause for celebration (vs 10,11). It takes courage to leave justice to God, as David did, when it is not ours to mete out. It takes strength not to stir up discontent and lead others to do something about it too.

Then people will say, 'Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth.'

Psalm 58:11

RESPOND

If you are hurt by anyone or know others who are, ask God to heal the pain and ask only for God's justice to be done.

God of all faithfulness

It's important at the end of a long journey to take time to reflect and learn. What worked well? What twists and turns were we able to avoid? What would we do differently next time?

In these final chapters of the books of Samuel, we see King David reflecting on his life. He remembers God's faithfulness amid all the challenges and trials.

There is a clear structure to these final chapters of 2 Samuel, reminding us of Hannah's song at the beginning of 1 Samuel. Just as Hannah looked back at God's gracious intervention in her life ('He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap', 1 Samuel 2:8), so David looks back at his own life. He recognises that it was God who lifted him up to become the king of Israel. God had been working out his purposes for good. Despite all this, these chapters offer no minimising of David's weaknesses. They conclude with a sombre reflection on his humanness: decisions he made which he bitterly regretted.

As you read these chapters, be open to God speaking into your life. Do so knowing that Jesus, 'great David's greater Son',* always stands ready to offer us grace, love and forgiveness, no matter the twists and turns of circumstance. He is indeed the God of all faithfulness.

About the writer **Richard Trist**



Richard served for many years in parish ministry in Australia and the UK. In his retirement, he enjoys travelling as well as a coaching and reflective supervision ministry with younger church leaders. He is married to Glenda, a hospital pastoral care worker.

*J Montgomery, 'Hail to the Lord's Anointed', 1821

Our mighty God

PREPARE

Consider a time when you were at your lowest, and God miraculously intervened. Give thanks for his kindness.

READ

2 Samuel 22:1-16

EXPLORE

My family has recently been challenged with two bereavements within the space of a month. At such a time it has been hard to lift our eyes above the sadness and grief. Life has felt flat.

In this song (also found in Psalm 18), David looks back on times of utter despair. He had been on Saul's most wanted list (1 Samuel 19). Others had tried to overthrow him (2 Samuel 2). No wonder he describes death as swirling all about him and speaks of being overwhelmed (vs 5-7).

Yet note the way the song begins. God is personal: 'my rock, my fortress and my deliverer' (v 2, emphasis added). God had heard David's cry for help and did not stay aloof but acted decisively (v 7). How graphic the description of the heavens quaking as God leaves his temple (vs 8,9). God is harnessing all the forces of nature to rescue David from his enemies (vs 14,15).

Here is a reminder of the power and mercy of God. He is not immune to our troubles but hears our prayers and comes down to do something about them (v 10). What can we say about such a God? If he is for us, then who or what circumstance can be against us (Romans 8:31)?

'I called to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and have been saved from my enemies.'

2 Samuel 22:4

RESPOND

Which aspect of God's character resonates most with you from our reading today? God as rock, fortress, deliverer, warrior? Pray to God using this image.

Tuesday 13 October

2 Samuel 22:17-30

Climbing walls with God

PREPARE

‘Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.* Praise God for his grace and mercy despite our sinfulness. Maybe even sing the hymn!

.....

READ

2 Samuel 22:17-30

EXPLORE

Today’s passage is not easy. It commences with David describing God’s rescue from his enemies (vs 17–20). Just like Moses, he was drawn out of challenging waters (v 17; Exodus 2:10). From tight places of hiding, God had rescued him (v 20).

Yet verses 21–30 are puzzling. Is David saying that his rescue was a reward for his righteousness (vs 21,25)? That God owed him for his blamelessness (v 24)? What about his sin with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11)? We need to dig deeper.

This song, placed at the end of 2 Samuel, recognises all that has gone before it. David’s life has not been perfect. Yet he has confessed his sin and asked God to ‘create in me a pure heart’ (Psalm 51:10). God forgave him, not because of his commitment to God but because of God’s commitment to him. Amazing grace indeed!

No wonder that David is now full of confidence in God. God had enabled him to turn his life around and follow God’s ways (v 23), even scale impossible walls (v 30)! What impossible walls do you need to climb today?

‘With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall.’

2 Samuel 22:30

RESPOND

Reflect on some challenges that seem too much to manage. Draw strength by turning the words of this passage into a prayer.

*J Newton, ‘Amazing Grace’, 1772

.....

The God of the nations

PREPARE

How easy do you find it with people who are different from you? Do you have any inward biases? Bring them to God today.

READ

2 Samuel 22:31–51

EXPLORE

As I write these notes, wars are raging in Europe, the Middle East and parts of Africa. Military tensions are rising in Asia. Resolving such conflicts seems impossible. Human efforts seem transitory.

As David concludes his song, his mind moves from the God of deliverance to the God who has a global dominion. Notice how every verb in verses 34–37 has God as its subject! It is God who has made David a great king and has established his kingdom (v 33).

David's enemies were no match for God. The strongest foes were humbled in battle. Unlike David, when they cried for help, their cries went unheard (v 42). They were on the wrong side! What a turnaround. The once shepherd boy was now king of the nations (v 44). Israel was no longer a vassal state but acknowledged as powerful (v 48). God's

anointed king was not for Israel alone but for all the nations (v 51).

As we read these verses in the light of God's ultimate anointed King, be encouraged in the face of international tensions and wars. For one day every war and human conflict will cease. Why? All nations will acknowledge Jesus as Lord of all. Every knee will bow down to him (Philippians 2:9–11).

‘I will praise you, LORD, among the nations; I will sing the praises of your name.’

2 Samuel 22:50

RESPOND

Give to God nations and conflict zones that are on your heart. Pray that human differences that make for war will be overruled and peace will reign.

Thursday 15 October

2 Samuel 23:1-7

The last word on David

PREPARE

Reflect on leaders that you know. Which qualities do you most admire in them? What is most important?

READ

2 Samuel 23:1-7

EXPLORE

Much of my ministry has involved training people for Christian leadership. Although skills and competencies are vital, much more important has been encouraging them to develop a godly character. Ultimately it is this that matters the most.

We see this in these last words of David. The Spirit of God speaks to him about what true leadership looks like for God's people (vs 1,2). Just as God is righteous and just (Psalm 11:7), so God's king must display such character. Godly leadership is based on the fear not of men but of God (v 3).

I love the rich metaphors found in verse 4. What does godly leadership bring to the world? Light where there is darkness, warmth like sunrise on a cold morning, renewal and refreshment like rain to a thirsty land. Have you experienced leadership like this in your own church? In the nation?

David concludes by reflecting on the covenant God had made with him (v 5; 2 Samuel 7). God's promises had been solid and secure. The Lord honours the righteous leader. Those, however, who endanger God's people are like useless thorns. The day will come when they will be cast out (vs 6,7).

'The Spirit of the LORD spoke through me; his word was on my tongue.'

2 Samuel 23:2

RESPOND

Paul calls us to pray for those in authority over us (1 Timothy 2:1,2). Name your leaders before God, that they may lead with righteousness.

The problem with numbers

PREPARE

Confess your sins before the Lord. Read out loud the promise of 1 John 1:9 and be thankful.

READ

2 Samuel 24:1-17

EXPLORE

There were times when the Lord had been angry with the nation (2 Samuel 6:7; 21:1,2), but on this occasion no reason is given. All we are told is that David will be used by the Lord as the instrument of his judgement, by inciting David ‘against them’ by means of a census.

David commands Joab to conduct the counting, yet Joab challenges the king’s motivations (v 3). Surely such an exercise was pointless. The Lord could easily multiply Israel’s troops to win any battle. I wonder if Joab is remembering the lesson of Gideon. What ultimately counts is not numerical strength but the power of the Lord to save (Judges 7:2,3).

The story does not end well. David overrules his general and 9 months later the census is complete. Yet, despite David’s recognition of his arrogant pride (v 10), he cannot save his people. The Lord’s judgement against his people is enacted through a terrible plague.

Take note, however, that God’s mercy has the final word. Jerusalem will be spared (v 16). The Lord’s command is decisive and the location carefully observed. This will be the future location for Solomon’s Temple (1 Chronicles 22:1). Despite human sin, the Lord is indeed ‘compassionate and gracious, slow to anger’ (Psalm 103:8).

David ... said to the LORD, ‘I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, LORD, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing.’

2 Samuel 24:10

RESPOND

‘Enough! Withdraw your hand’ (v 16). Praise God for his mercy and grace. Who else needs to hear this today?

Saturday 17 October

2 Samuel 24:18–25

True worship

PREPARE

Quieten your heart as you come to this devotional time. Ask God to centre your thoughts on him.

.....

READ

2 Samuel 24:18–25

EXPLORE

Here we see a very different David from yesterday. The arrogance has gone. Now there is genuine humility. David obeys the prophet's command to build an altar so the plague may be stopped. How intriguing that the site is a threshing floor (v 18). John the Baptist will later use this symbol in his preaching: God the judge is sifting the chaff from the wheat (Matthew 3:12).

David refuses Araunah's offer of the place as a gift (v 24). He realises that, while God's mercy and grace are free, true worship can never be cheap (v 24).

Observe the final verse (v 25) and the way it bookends the whole of 1 and 2 Samuel. 1 Samuel begins with a woman at a temple begging God for a child, and God answers her prayer (1 Samuel 1:27,28). 2 Samuel concludes with a king at a place soon to be a temple begging God for his people,

and God answers his prayer. What an encouragement to pray. What a powerful and gracious God we serve!

**The king replied to Araunah,
'No, I insist on paying you for
it. I will not sacrifice to the
Lord my God burnt offerings
that cost me nothing.'**

2 Samuel 24:24

RESPOND

In Romans 12:1,2, Paul writes, '... offer your bodies as a living sacrifice ... this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.' What will this look like for you over the coming week?

.....

Bible in a year: Jeremiah 27,28; John 11

Reliance on God

PREPARE

Where do you put your trust? What do you rely on to get you through the day?

READ

Psalm 59

EXPLORE

Today's psalm follows a similar theme to last week's Psalm 58 (in fact, they are both sung to the same tune). The situation David is facing continues (v 1,2). Not only are his enemies doing wicked things, but they are lying in wait for him (v 3). What must have been frustrating is that he has not transgressed or sinned, yet he is drawing their aggression (v 4). How do you respond when you are experiencing attacks through no fault of your own?

Yet, for David, there is peace and strength (v 9), and it comes from God and his steadfast love (v 10). While everything around David is falling apart and there's no place or people he can rely on, he can turn to God who is his fortress and whom he can completely depend on and rely on.

When life is relentless, when we're emotionally drained from being on our

guard all the time, when people let us down and when we can find little peace even at home, we can rely on God to be our fortress and our strength (v 16). Amid the pain, he is there for us and will not let us down, in the same way he did not let David down (vs 16,17).

**You are my strength, I sing
praise to you; you, God, are
my fortress, my God on whom
I can rely.**

Psalm 59:17

RESPOND

Bring your worries and concerns to God, asking for his peace and strength to fill you. Ask for his help to keep your eyes fixed on him amid hardships.

Better by far

About the writer **Penny Boshoff**



Penny is married to Andrew. They have a daughter and two sons, all now in their twenties. Penny is a teacher and a writer, currently teaching English as a Second Language. She also serves as President of SU Council (England and Wales).

Hebrews was most likely written to Jewish believers who, though they had started well trusting Jesus, were beginning to lose heart and turn back to the ingrained patterns and rituals of the Old Testament Law.

Our passages this fortnight come in the middle of the writer's reasoned argument about how Jesus is the culmination of God's revelation which began under the Old Covenant (Old Testament). The writer does not denigrate what God had established through Moses but shows that the Old Covenant was a necessary but limited revelation until God's full plan was revealed in Jesus.

If you are able, read chapters 2-6, which will help you get the flow of the writer's reasoning. Chapters 7-10 circle round and build on the writer's main point that Jesus is the ultimate High Priest, better by far than those who served in the earthly tabernacle.

If you find that our readings cover the same ground, it is for good reason. The writer is using every means possible to make his point that there is only one sure way to God – through Jesus.

Each day we will be contemplating the sacrifice of Jesus. Let's savour these passages, drinking in the wonder of all that Jesus did for us on the cross. These next two weeks give all those who are weary and laden the space to come to Jesus and rest in the salvation he has won for us.

Our eternal High Priest

PREPARE

Focus on Jesus as you sing or listen to the hymn ‘Before the throne of God above’.*

READ

Hebrews 7:1-10

EXPLORE

The writer to the Hebrews has been warning his Jewish readers not to return to the obsolete Jewish sacrificial system because God has provided Jesus, their true High Priest, to mediate for them in the presence of God (6:19,20).

But there's a sticking point. How can Jesus be a priest since he was not from the priestly tribe of Levi but from the royal tribe of Judah? Psalm 110:4 holds the key. This psalm speaks of a king whom God would appoint as a priest, like the king-priest Melchizedek.

The mysterious Melchizedek showed up very briefly to bless and receive a plunder tithe from Abraham (Genesis 14:17-20). Melchizedek was a different order of priest from those descended from Levi. Unlike the Levitical priests whose family lines were carefully recorded, there is no record of Melchizedek's ancestors or descendants. It is as though he is an eternal priest – without beginning or end.

The writer to the Hebrews argues that Jesus is our king-priest. He is the eternal High Priest, the king of righteousness who mediates between us and God. Jesus is our king of peace, restoring the relationship between us and God, blessing all who revere him.

... Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, the name Melchizedek means ‘king of righteousness’; then also, ‘king of Salem’ means ‘king of peace’.

Hebrews 7:2

RESPOND

Jesus, the High Priest, has entered the heavenly temple and beckons you in. You are in the presence of Almighty God who is ready to listen to you. Bring him your praise and petitions.

*Sovereign Grace Music, 2003

Tuesday 20 October

Hebrews 7:11-22

Our permanent High Priest

PREPARE

Pray: 'Open my eyes today, Lord, that I may see wonderful things in your law. Amen' (based on Psalm 119:18).

READ

Hebrews 7:11-22

EXPLORE

When a new speed limit is brought in, you must follow the new law. You can't make a case in court that you were following the old rules!

In today's passage, the writer explains how Psalm 110 proves that God had brought in a new rule, making the old law about priests obsolete (vs 17,20). In Old Testament Law, priests came from one tribe (Levi) and kings came from another (Judah). Yet in Psalm 110, verses 2 and 4, God changed the law by declaring on oath that he was making a king a priest – someone like the king-priest Melchizedek.

God's 'king-priest' would be a new kind of priest with an immortal life, in the same way that Melchizedek appeared to have an immortal life because there was no record of his birth or death (vs 15,16).

The Jews could only meet with God through their high priest once a year and only when numerous blood sacrifices had been made. God changed the priesthood so that his people would have better access to him (v 19). Jesus was the king-priest offering a new covenant with God that is better in every way (vs 18,22; see Luke 22:20). He became the sacrifice that covers our sin. His resurrection proved he had an immortal life and his ascension means he is our permanent mediator before God.

Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.

Hebrews 7:22

RESPOND

Praise God for his new covenant in Jesus which is better by far.

Our effective High Priest

PREPARE

Romans 8:31 tells us that 'God is for us'. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you a 'head and heart' understanding of this truth today.

READ

Hebrews 7:23-28

EXPLORE

Once again, the writer of the Hebrews is asking us to compare the Levite priests to Jesus, making the point that Jesus' priesthood is different from and far superior to the priesthood established under Moses.

In the Old Testament, the high priest was the mediator between the people and God. He made daily offerings of incense and food, regular animal sacrifices for the people's unintentional sin and the yearly atonement sacrifices to deal with his own sin and the people's sin. These animal sacrifices never fully dealt with sin, which is why the high priest had to offer them again and again. Jesus' offering of himself was the final, definitive and perfect sacrifice since he was 'holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners' (v 26). No more animal sacrifices need to be made. Our guilt and our sin have been dealt with.

The Levite priests all abandoned their priestly role when they died. Not so Jesus. His resurrection and ascension mean that he continually mediates for us (v 25) and this means that he saves us 'completely', or in Raymond Brown's words, 'We have been saved, we are being saved and we shall be saved.*

Such a high priest truly meets our need – one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

Hebrews 7:26

RESPOND

Come to Jesus today, confident that he has dealt with your sin, he is making you holy and ultimately he will bring you into the presence of God (Jude 24).

*R Brown, *The Message of Hebrews* (Bible Speaks Today), IVP, 2021

Thursday 22 October

Hebrews 8:1–6

Our active mediator

PREPARE

Begin by praising God, for he has ‘blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ’ (Ephesians 1:3).

READ

Hebrews 8:1–6

EXPLORE

We find it very difficult to grasp something that we cannot see. Maybe that was why God chose to give the Israelites the tabernacle – the tent in the middle of their camp – as they travelled through the desert. This tabernacle, and the Temple built by Solomon that replaced it, were designed to remind them of God’s presence with them. But these earthly structures were only ever faint ‘models’ (v 5) pointing to the true dwelling place of God: the heavenly court and sanctuary (vs 1,2).

The writer to the Hebrews invites us to see through the veil of this transitory earthly life to the great truth that Jesus, our king-priest, is serving as Priest in God’s heavenly throne room right now. Notice that Jesus has ‘sat down’, which means that his priestly work of offering sacrifices for sin is complete. The gift Jesus presented (v 3) was his own life, which he offered as the ultimate and definitive

sacrifice to cover our sin (v 3). But the priest’s role was also to be a mediator: praying for the people and teaching them God’s ways. This is the priestly work Jesus is doing for you and me, right now.

But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises.

Hebrews 8:6

RESPOND

Because Jesus is our High Priest in the presence of the ‘Majesty’, we can approach God’s throne of grace with confidence (Hebrews 4:16). Whatever grace or help you need today, ask Jesus.

The improved version

PREPARE

Pray: ‘Holy Spirit, please write your truth in my mind and on my heart today. Amen.’

READ

Hebrews 8:7–13

EXPLORE

I am reminded daily to upgrade my gadgets or update apps. If I don’t, I miss out on the improvements the software engineers or manufacturers have made.

Through Jeremiah’s prophecies (vs 7–12; Jeremiah 31:31–34), God told his people of a covenant ‘update’ that would make the old covenant obsolete. God’s old covenant was good but limited in its effectiveness. God’s new covenant would achieve everything the old one could not.

Under the old covenant, God’s people were called to be holy, set apart in relationship to their holy God. They failed. That is why sacrifices were required to cover their sin. Yet animal sacrifices did not do the job effectively because the high priest had to offer them day after day, year after year. God’s new covenant, sealed by Jesus’ blood (7:22; see Luke 22:20) offers us a complete amnesty of our sin (v 12).

Now there is no hierarchy, with some closer to God than others (v 11). Everyone who trusts Jesus is welcomed into the presence of God to know him as he knows us (v 10). And now God works by his Spirit to make us holy from the inside out, transforming our minds and hearts into the likeness of Christ (v 10; Romans 12:2).

They will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

Hebrews 8:11

RESPOND

How is God using your current circumstances to make you aware of his presence and grow you in holiness?

Saturday 24 October

Hebrews 9:1-10

Built into the fabric

PREPARE

Thank God for the way he has revealed his purposes throughout history and for how he continues to speak through his Word.

READ

Hebrews 9:1-10

EXPLORE

The earthly tabernacle, built to God's precise instructions (8:5), gave a clear message: God intended to live among his people. The artefacts within it (v 4) pointed to God's protection, compassion and provision for his people. Aaron's staff symbolised God's defeat of Egypt; the manna represented God's provision for his people in the desert; the stone tablets of God's laws gave the people a blueprint for a just society in the Promised Land.

However, entry into the Most Holy Place, the inner sanctuary where God promised to meet the representative of the people (Exodus 25:8,22) was restricted. Look again at the conditions for entry (v 7). Even then the sacrifices were limited in both scope and effectiveness: deliberate sin was not covered (v 7) and sin's internal destructiveness was not dealt with meaningfully or decisively (v 9).

Through the layout of the tabernacle the Holy Spirit had revealed a stark spiritual truth: sin-drenched humans could not approach a holy God on their own (vs 8,9). The only way to enjoy God's presence permanently was through an effective High Priest. Surely this is what Jesus meant when he said: 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6).

The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed.

Hebrews 9:8

RESPOND

Praise God that he made it possible for us to come into his presence through our perfect High Priest, Jesus.

Our victorious God

PREPARE

Consider any situations in life where you feel stuck and overwhelmed. Be honest with God about your feelings and ask for his help.

READ

Psalm 60

EXPLORE

How hard it is to keep on going when things don't go as planned! We can feel as though everything is against us. Maybe even God?

This psalm of lament describes David's cry to God after an enemy has defeated Israel in battle. David pulls no punches. He realises God has been angry with his people and rejected them (v 1). They have been made to drink from his cup of judgement (v 3). Yet there is hope! A banner of victory to inspire God's people when they are down. A call to them to trust and to pray (vs 4,5). What banners of hope might you need to unfurl in this current season of life?

David remembers an oracle spoken from the sanctuary. From top to bottom, Israel is God's precious possession (vs 6,7). They are the ones he loves and will deliver (v 5). As for Israel's enemies, a day will come when they will be

defeated. God's sandal of scorn will be tossed upon them (v 8).

David's final cry recognises his need for God (vs 9,10). For only God can defeat well-fortified cities (v 9). Human power alone cannot overcome our enemies (vs 11,12). As Paul reminds us, 'Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power' (Ephesians 6:10).

**But for those who fear you,
you have raised a banner to
be unfurled against the bow.**

Psalm 60:4

RESPOND

What verse speaks to you the most from this psalm? Read it aloud. How will you remember it when times are hard?

Monday 26 October

Hebrews 9:11–22

Feel the benefit

PREPARE

1 Corinthians 2:9 suggests that God has prepared wonderful things for us, things we could not even dream of! Ask him to help you glimpse a little of those things.

.....

READ

Hebrews 9:11–22

EXPLORE

This passage is packed with references to concepts laid out in the books of the Old Testament and specifically God's covenants with Abraham and with Moses (vs 19–22). Both these covenants and the new covenant in Jesus Christ were ratified by the shedding of blood (Genesis 17:10,11; Exodus 24:4–8; Hebrews 9:18). But only one covenant was able to redeem God's people definitively (vs 12,15), purify them completely (vs 13,14) and give them access to an eternal inheritance (v 15).

An inheritance is only passed on to the beneficiary once someone has died. When Jesus mediated the new covenant between God and humans by offering his own blood (v 12), his death brought eternal benefits to those whom God had called under the old covenant (v 15) and those who have believed and obeyed Jesus' words since (Matthew 26:27,28). The moment we trust what Jesus has done for us, we enjoy our inheritance

as children of God: freedom from the consequences of sin (judgement, guilt and shame) as well as freedom to draw close to God and serve him (v 14).

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

Hebrews 9:14

RESPOND

How will you enjoy the benefits of your inheritance today? Maybe the Lord is reminding you to trust his full forgiveness. Maybe he is calling you to serve him wholeheartedly.

Once is enough

PREPARE

Psalm 111:9 tells us God ‘provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant for ever – holy and awesome is his name’. Come, listen to your holy and awesome Lord.

READ

Hebrews 9:23–28

EXPLORE

The writer gives this glimpse into the heavenly reality of Christ’s better and superior sacrifice (vs 23–25) to help us face the future. We will all die and face judgement (v 27), but those who put their hope in Christ are purified and saved by him. How is this possible? How does one man’s death save us?

First, we need to understand how sin separates each of us from our holy God. God revealed this uncomfortable truth through the Old Testament covenant rituals (v 23). Forgiveness of sin required a blood sacrifice which covered the sin and purified everything it touched (v 22).

Jesus’ death was no accident. It was part of God’s plan (v 26; Matthew 26:38,39). With extravagant love, Jesus Christ, our High Priest mediator, became our purifying sacrifice (vs 25,26).

When he ascended to heaven, he entered the heavenly sanctuary only once. What a significant word! ‘Once’ means his sacrifice was enough. ‘Once’ means Jesus’ death was effective in dealing decisively with sin (vs 26,28). When we trust what Christ has done, we receive the benefits: forgiveness of sin and cleansing, now and on the day of judgement.

But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Hebrews 9:26b

RESPOND

Thank God for the benefits you have because of Christ’s sacrifice.

Wednesday 28 October

Hebrews 10:1–10

My perfect sacrifice

PREPARE

Pray: ‘Lord God, many are the wonders you have done, the things you have planned for us. Help me to understand them more deeply today.’

.....

READ

Hebrews 10:1–10

EXPLORE

The Jewish recipients of Hebrews had grown up with temple sacrifices being central to their relationship with God. The patterns and rituals were ingrained. Now they are urged to view the Law of Moses from a different perspective. Just as a portrait painting is clearly not the real thing, and a shadow is just the outline of a more solid reality, so the Old Testament tabernacle, sacrifices and laws were outlines intended to help earthbound humans perceive spiritual reality.

Animal sacrifices drove home an uncomfortable truth: humans could not approach their holy God unless their rebellion was covered and purified by blood. But animal substitutes could never wipe out sin and guilt nor purify the conscience (v 4) because their effect was only temporary, not permanent as is the case with Jesus.

Through the Old Testament Law, God set out our spiritual problem and

mapped out the solution. Through David’s prophetic psalm (vs 5–7; Psalm 40:6–8) God reveals his broader plan. Jesus fits the psalm’s description. He was totally committed to God’s law and submitted to God’s will by offering his own life. In this one act he made many people holy (Romans 5:18,19).

Then he said, ‘Here I am, I have come to do your will.’ He sets aside the first to establish the second.

Hebrews 10:9

RESPOND

Jesus was the perfect and acceptable substitute for your sin and my sin. If we desire it, nothing can prevent us from having a close relationship with God. Share what is on your heart with your heavenly Father.

.....

Bible in a year: Jeremiah 51,52; Psalm 119:73–96

Once for all time

PREPARE

You come into God's presence now because of Jesus' sacrifice. Listen to (or sing!) the song, 'Once Again'.*

READ

Hebrews 10:11–18

EXPLORE

The writer to the Hebrews has made it clear that the endless sacrifices required by the law could not deal with sin. But Jesus, with the one act of offering himself, has dealt with sins decisively. Look back through chapters 7–10 to see how often the writer uses 'one', 'once for all'. He hammers the point home.

The Old Testament priests stood, working continually (v 11). Christ sits (v 12). His one sacrifice means the job is done. And the work he has done is breathtaking in its scope and effectiveness. Christ's death 2,000 years ago is an offering 'for all time' (v 12). It stretches back to cover past sins and stretches forward to cover the sins to come.

Its potency never wears out: Christ's one sacrifice continues to cover sin – your sin and my sin – every day (vs 14,17). We don't need to offer sacrifices any longer. Nor do we need to do anything to win God's approval. Christ has done it all!

Not only that but God's Holy Spirit now transforms God's people from the inside out, purifying our thoughts and transforming our desires (v 16), so that we can enjoy our relationship with God.

For by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy.

Hebrews 10:14

RESPOND

Consider what Jesus has done. Reflect on how his Holy Spirit is transforming you. See how much God loves you! Rest in his love!

*M Redman, Capitol CMG Publishing, 1997

Friday 30 October

Hebrews 10:19–25

Everybody, come near!

PREPARE

Draw near to God. Nothing stands in your way. Christ has removed every obstacle. God is delighted you are here.

READ

Hebrews 10:19–25

EXPLORE

When you pray or open your Bible, how do you approach God? Here, we are invited to draw near to God confidently (v 22). Not confident in our own worth or moral rectitude but confident in every benefit Jesus has won for us through his sacrificial death (vs 19,20,22). Since God has done everything to bring us back to himself, we can trust his love and care for us. We do not need to pretend. We come as we are (v 22).

No more ritual or sacrifice is necessary. All that is left is to serve God wholeheartedly until the day of judgement. That means holding to the truth about Jesus and keeping going through thick and thin. It means following Jesus in loving and doing good wherever we are. It means not being a 'lone Christian' (v 24). If we say we love God then we will love his other children too. Meeting face to face with other believers is not chiefly for our benefit: it is an act of love towards fellow

believers. We can love those who are flagging in their faith by encouraging them to hold on to Jesus.

Let us draw near to God.

Hebrews 10:22

RESPOND

Do you need to reconnect with your local church fellowship? Or maybe there is a believer you know who is isolated, maybe due to illness or family circumstances. How might you encourage them this week?

Hold on

PREPARE

‘On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.’* Pray: ‘Lord, may my eyes be fixed on you and my heart trust you completely today.’

READ

Hebrews 10:26–39

EXPLORE

The Jewish believers had been through all manner of persecution and suffering (vs 32–34), yet they were now tempted to return to the Jewish rituals and sacrifices. They receive a strong warning: anyone who rejects what Jesus has done is rebelling against God (vs 26,29). The only way to be cleansed from sin and spared judgement is by trusting Jesus’ sacrifice.

Most Christians are unlikely to return to Jewish rituals, but we may slip into ways of thinking that belittle Jesus’ sacrifice for us. When we think we gain God’s approval through service and good works, we are saying that Jesus’ death was not enough. When we think we can’t approach God because we have sinned terribly, we are saying that Jesus’ sacrifice was not sufficient to cover that sin. Both are so far from the truth.

Jesus’ death for us was enough and is enough and will be enough. If we continue to hold firmly to Jesus, our ‘new and living way’ into the presence of our loving, forgiving, generous God (vs 20,35), then we will be ready when Jesus returns.

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

Hebrews 10:36

RESPOND

When do you find yourself drifting away from God? During times of suffering, or maybe the quiet, uneventful seasons of life? Ask your generous heavenly Father to keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

*E Mote, ‘My Hope is Built on Nothing Less’, 1834

Sunday 1 November

Psalm 61

When my heart is faint

PREPARE

Since Jesus has opened the Way, know that you enter God's presence bringing your jumble of emotions and expectations, knowing you are welcomed. Reflect on this as you come to today's reading.

READ

Psalm 61

EXPLORE

The psalm is a beautiful depiction of prayer as a journey into God's presence. David probably wrote this psalm in exile after his son Absalom had usurped his throne. We sense his desperation and alienation (v 2), his longing to be safe in God's tabernacle tent in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6), where the 'wings' of the cherubim curved around the Ark of the Covenant.

We, like David, come to God with thoughts and emotions whirling around the difficulties we are facing. We too have our 'end of the earth' moments when we are at the end of our resources. The moment we call to God (v 1), our focus shifts. Prayer is an act of humility as we acknowledge our need for someone stronger, someone higher than ourselves (v 2).

In prayer we review and reflect on how God has met us in past events. David had sought refuge from his enemies in literal rocky mountains and fortresses. Here he recognises that God had been his true protector and place of safety (v 3).

David's request for long life and restored kingship were based on God's promise to him (2 Samuel 7:11-16). In prayer we give thanks for current blessings (v 5) and we remind God of his promises.

I long to dwell in your tent for ever and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.

Psalm 61:4

RESPOND

Use the pattern of prayer in Psalm 61 as you bring your needs to the Lord.

A pilgrim people

About the writer
David Bruce

David is a retired Presbyterian minister, living near Belfast in Northern Ireland. He is married to Zoe, and they are proud parents, and now also, grandparents. In the past, David was Director of SU in Northern Ireland, and also Regional Director for Britain and Ireland.



The book of Exodus concludes as the people, under Moses' leadership, launch out on their long period of desert wandering towards the Promised Land in Canaan. We focus on the few months after Moses' journey to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments.

Much of the narrative centres on Aaron, who almost destroys the entire Exodus project by foolishly acceding to the demands of the people to sculpt a golden calf as a god they can see and touch and follow. The chapters which follow are a succession of reactions to this catastrophe. Will God forgive the people for their sin? How does Aaron explain his actions? Will God remain faithful to his covenant to be with the people? Can Moses succeed in holding it all together while everything around him is in disarray?

Through it all, we see the seriousness of sin – a theme not popular today, but central to our understanding of the character of God, and indeed his reason for sending Jesus as our Redeemer. God is outraged at the sin of idolatry and won't have competitors. 'Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God' (Exodus 34:14).

In the end there is a tender moment as Aaron, who in his folly was responsible for the crisis, is ordained as the priest for the people. God works his purposes out through flawed people and takes the long view!

Monday 2 November

Exodus 31:1–18

Gifted to serve

PREPARE

Think of some of the things you do regularly, such as working, resting, child-minding, shopping, watching TV, going to church or drinking coffee. These activities may be done selfishly or become acts of worship, ‘as unto God’ (Colossians 3:23).

READ

Exodus 31:1–18

EXPLORE

In the 11 preceding chapters, Moses has been on Mount Sinai talking with God. God has given him the Ten Commandments and an emerging vision of what God’s people should be like as they continue their journey towards the Promised Land.

These were desert days, and desert rules applied. The priority was a portable tent for worship, where God would meet with Moses and the people on the road.

God chooses the people who will make this tent – and gifts them for the task (vs 2,3). These gifts are diverse, including artistic, creative, practical, technical and specialised skills (vs 4,5). God rejoices in, and uses, every part of our personhood. See how he draws together both natural talents and spiritual gifting (v 6) to accomplish his mission.

Desert days require desert law, and Sabbath rest will set these people apart from all others. Today, we thank God that Christ died so that we might enter the fullness of his Sabbath rest (Hebrews 4:9–11) free from the constraints of the law.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.

1 Corinthians 12:4,5

RESPOND

Pray: ‘I thank you, Lord, that you have made me as I am. Help me to think again about how and where I might serve you. May all I do be “as unto God”’.

What matters most to God?

PREPARE

How do we know what God is like? ‘The heavens declare the glory of God’ (Psalm 19:1). ‘Your word is truth’ (John 17:17). By observing the natural order and reading God’s Word we are helped to know him.

READ

Exodus 32:1-14

EXPLORE

This sad story begins with impatience (v 1). Moses was away for almost 6 weeks (Exodus 24:18) and the people wanted action. They wanted to worship gods they could see and touch, made from their most precious things (v 4). It seems likely that the bull-calf image was based on Baal – a fertility cult present in Egypt where the people had lived. It’s easy to worship what we think of as precious to us, rather than God himself.

Aaron was complicit by leading the people to worship God himself, but in a false way (v 5). Unknowingly, both he and the people would break the first two commandments they were about to receive from Moses. Who we worship, and how we worship, matters to God.

When we pray to God ‘if it is your will’, we are seeking to do what Moses did having learned of this disaster. God’s

promises are conditional upon human responses, so at this moment the people were in grave danger. But God’s grace was mirrored in Moses’ brave prayer, averting their complete destruction. Sin matters to God.

Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.

Exodus 34:14

RESPOND

Pray: ‘May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer’ (Psalm 19:14).

Wednesday 4 November

Exodus 32:15–24

Lame excuses

PREPARE

Why do we blush? Embarrassment, shame or distress? We read of a family argument between two brothers today. One is angry. The other is blushing. God is working. What causes you to blush?

READ

Exodus 32:15–24

EXPLORE

I wonder how Moses was feeling as he descended the mountain. How disappointed might he have been on arriving back? The sound of singing in the camp said it all for Moses (v 18). The language suggests something deeply immoral, probably connected with the worship of the Baal bull-calf. What we believe shapes how we behave.

Moses' reaction seems extreme (vs 19,20) but the entire future of the covenant relationship between God and the children of Abraham is at stake. The shattered tablets of stone on the ground say as much. The entire story of redemption, including the coming of Christ through Israel, hangs by a thread.

Aaron's excuses for his behaviour (v 24) are facile and he knows it. But despite his childish explanations and inability to take responsibility for his own actions,

God will do something wonderful through him, even at great cost. With God, no experiences are wasted, even the embarrassing ones when we are at fault and are made to look foolish. The Holy Spirit takes the long view.

‘All you need to say is simply “Yes,” or “No”; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.’

Matthew 5:37

RESPOND

Pray: ‘May I develop the gift of holy anger today, not with violent intent, but reflecting the heart of God as he looks upon our sinful world, and like Jesus looking over Jerusalem, weeps’ (Luke 19:41).

Holy leadership

PREPARE

Actions have consequences – you reap what you sow. The solemn seriousness with which sin against God is taken in Moses' world may shock us. Do we take personal and societal sin as seriously?

READ

Exodus 32:25 – 33:6

EXPLORE

God was minded to destroy the people and start again with Moses (32:9), and Moses' prayer had its effect. But God is not soft. With few exceptions, this entire generation of people would die in the desert and fail to enter the land of promise (Deuteronomy 1:35). But before their end comes, they will gradually learn and tentatively model God's utter abhorrence of idolatry.

We struggle with the story of the killing of 3,000 in verses 27–29, but compared to the death of all the people, this was measured. Out of love, Moses uses the shock of it to place his own life on the line in their place (v 32). In this he points to Jesus, who died in place of the many, and inspired Paul to say something similar in Romans 9:3. This is grace: love, in face of heart-attitudes which deserve the opposite.

As a postscript, the Israelites abandoned ornaments (33:4–6) which became a long-standing tradition for centuries. A lesson partly learned. God will have no rivals.

'But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.'

Exodus 32:32

RESPOND

Pray using these song words:
'The dearest idol I have known,/ Whate'er that idol be,/ Help me tear it from Thy throne,/ And worship only Thee.*'

*W Cowper (1731–1800), 'O for a Closer Walk with God'

Friday 6 November

Exodus 33:7-11

A cloudy day

PREPARE

When the Royal Standard flies above Buckingham Palace, passers-by know the king is in residence. The pillar of cloud at the entrance to the tent of meeting assured the people that God was present. What signs of God's presence do you recognise?

.....

READ

Exodus 33:7-11

EXPLORE

The tent of meeting was some distance outside the camp (v 7). The damage done in the golden bull-calf episode lingers because God is no longer among the people. He accompanies them at arm's length. Moses and anyone who wants to meet with God now has to go outside the camp (v 7).

Moses' relationship with God is close – perhaps uniquely so in the Exodus story. The cloud descends over the entrance to the tent when he is there, and like Aaron's later blessing (Numbers 6:24-26), the Lord turns his face towards him. Clouds often speak of God's presence in scripture, sometimes also pointing to his glory, which we cannot bear unshielded (Exodus 16:10). Peter, James and John experienced something similar with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:5). Yet in the tent and under the cloud,

Moses could speak with God 'as one speaks to a friend' (v 11).

There would come a time when God would walk with the people – indeed would become one of them. When we pray in Jesus' name, we come as his friends (John 15:14).

**As Moses went into the tent,
the pillar of cloud would
come down and stay at the
entrance, while the LORD spoke
with Moses.**

Exodus 33:9

RESPOND

Reflect on these words and what they mean to you: 'A voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"' (Matthew 17:5).

Show me your glory!

PREPARE

What can you never get enough of? When have you felt like this about God's presence?

READ

Exodus 33:12-23

EXPLORE

God longs to be with us. This is the core of his covenant and was a promise he renewed to generations of his people through history. It is summed up in the final vision of heaven in Revelation 21:3:

'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.' The tent of meeting being located outside the camp, separated from the people, is a terrible indictment of their sin and God's grief at their behaviour.

For this reason, Moses takes comfort that God intends to stay with the people (v 14). This 'with-ness' was their unique characteristic among all other nations. So it is with us as followers of Jesus in the world today. He is not just our teacher, but our intimate friend and Lord.

Being 'with' God does not, however, imply familiarity. Moses' almost reckless request to God to 'show me your glory' (v 18) is

hedged around with health and safety warnings, since, in those times, 'no one may see [God] and live' (v 20).

The LORD replied, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'

Exodus 33:14

RESPOND

Pray: 'Lord, as I look at your back from the cleft in the rock, after you have passed by (vs 21-23), help me to see the trail you have left: people healed, relationships restored, forgiveness given, grace upon grace. Thank you for the glimpse. Help me to see your glory more clearly.'

Sunday 8 November

Psalm 62

Rest

PREPARE

In prayer, David preached to himself: ‘Yes, my soul, find rest in God’ (v 5). What will you preach to yourself as you come to God?

.....

READ

Psalm 62

EXPLORE

Where do we turn when we face difficulties? Who do we talk to when we feel weak and overwhelmed (v 3)? David turned to God. In fact, when faced with liars and ‘frenemies’ (those people who pretend to be your friend but aren’t! See v 4), David ‘found rest in God’. That phrase suggests that, instead of striving to justify himself or fix things in his own strength, David was leaning back on God. God was his foundation (vs 2,6).

As we rest in God, prayer becomes a moment of gaining God’s perspective on our situation. Notice David’s reflections on life’s fragility and human motivation (vs 9,10). David does not ask God for specific outcomes. Instead his song exudes trust. He leaves his safety, his honour and reward (vs 1,7,12) in God’s hands because he trusts God’s character (vs 11,12). When God does not overturn a problem when we expect him to, it means that in his love for us

he is working a different way to bring us good.

How might remembering God’s endless love and immense power change what you pray for and how you pray?

**Truly my soul finds rest in God;
my salvation comes from him.**

Psalm 62:1

RESPOND

‘Power belongs to you, God, and with you, Lord, is unfailing love’ (vs 11,12). Repeat these verses several times before ‘pouring out your heart to God’ in prayer.

Renewed covenant

PREPARE

How did you feel as a child when you did something wrong? Has that affected how you feel when you think you have done something God might not like? How do you ensure your relationship with God is restored?

READ

Exodus 34:1-14

EXPLORE

The shattered tablets of stone are replaced (v 1). This is a holy and private moment between God and Moses. God, though ready to forgive, will not ignore guilt (v 7). Sin spreads its influence across generations, long after the people originally responsible are gone. A bad law or a poor policy decision will echo over decades.

Moses' prayer (v 9) revisits his fear that God will distance himself from the people. Nothing could be worse than that! 'Let the Lord go with us,' he cries.

The renewal of the covenant (v 10) is a high point in Moses' life and the history of Israel. Complete disaster has been averted. But the story will be difficult as the land of promise is populated by hostile peoples who will not welcome the new arrivals. Firm action will be needed but will only be legitimate if accompanied

by the wholehearted worship of the living God (v 14). Such a land would later cradle King Jesus, the saviour of all nations.

... 'I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the LORD, will do for you.'

Exodus 34:10

RESPOND

Is anything holding you back in your relationship with God at the moment? Spend time wholeheartedly worshipping God.

Tuesday 10 November

Exodus 34:27–35

Shining faces

PREPARE

Today's reading is about an extraordinary event. Most of life is not extraordinary. When God meets us in the ordinary things, even the dullest parts of our day can become radiant. Think now about such a time.

READ

Exodus 34:27–35

EXPLORE

Sometime before this, Moses had boldly asked God, 'Now show me your glory' (33:18). While we cannot know precisely what happened on the mountaintop while the second tablets were completed, being in the presence of God had a profound and even physical effect on him. His face was radiant and the people were afraid to approach him (v 30).

Centuries later, Paul reflected on this story, saying that God is transforming us 'into his image with ever-increasing glory' (2 Corinthians 3:18). It shouldn't surprise us that being in the presence of a holy God will change us. God is transforming us, and is patient with us, even if the pace of change is much slower than we can see.

Moses didn't know that his appearance had changed at first (v 29). It was a surprise to him. It seems likely that he introduced the veil as a covering

because he wanted the attention to move from him to God. The greatest leaders do not crave celebrity. John the Baptist said, 'He must become greater; I must become less' (John 3:30).

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD.

Exodus 34:29

RESPOND

Pray for Christian leaders, that they may resist making the story about themselves, rather than Jesus.

Working together

PREPARE

Parts of today's reading will seem familiar as some of Exodus 26 and 31 is repeated. But the people have learned a lot about themselves and God in the interim. Can you see God's hand in changing you for today's tasks?

READ

Exodus 35:1-29

EXPLORE

The covenant has been renewed and the way ahead is now clearer than ever before. Moses recognises that this is a God-appointed moment (v 1) and seeks to pull all the people together (v 4) for the great task of making the tabernacle.

His first principle is that the materials and skills needed ought to come from the people directly. Their offerings for the task are to be given by their own free will (v 29). Moses agrees that a legitimate offering can be gifts in kind, or the use of skills. Some wealthy leaders donated precious stones (v 27), while others, probably with less money, were able to spin thread (v 25). Both kinds of offering were valued and legitimate. Moses also recognised that these offerings must be voluntarily given (vs 21,22). It became the people's project.

In imagining what the church should be like, Paul used an image of a body (Ephesians 4:16) acting in mutual support and collaboration. Our differences matter less when we serve a common cause.

'All who are skilled among you are to come and make everything the LORD has commanded.'

Exodus 35:10

RESPOND

Pray for your own church family today. Ask God to help its leaders develop Paul's vision of a body acting together in mutual support under Christ's headship.

Thursday 12 November

Exodus 35:30 – 36:7

Generous giving

PREPARE

‘Oh, you shouldn’t have! It’s far too much!’ A generous gift, freely given out of love, can seem overwhelming. Jesus gave the greatest gift of all to us and he calls us to pass it on. Praise and thank him for it.

READ

Exodus 35:30 – 36:7

EXPLORE

Constructing the sanctuary and its tabernacle was no small job. Bezalel and Oholiab have already been nominated as project managers for good reasons. They have the required skills and they have been filled with the Spirit (35:31). But they each have an additional gift, which will prove to be essential. They can ‘teach others’ (35:34). This means their effectiveness is multiplied many times over, as they pass on their insights.

In John’s Gospel (12:1–8), we see Mary of Bethany’s gratitude to Jesus overflowing in an extravagant way, as she anoints Jesus with an expensive jar of nard perfume. Judas complained that it was too much. Jesus accepted it as an act of worship.

Giving, in a right attitude of heart, ought to be an act of praise, and therefore a

great privilege. The freewill offerings brought to do the work on the sanctuary (36:3) were so generous that Moses asked the people to stop bringing them (36:6). When are extravagance and generosity part of our response to God?

And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:19

RESPOND

Think of your own background, skills and abilities. How have these personal gifts been used in the service of God during the past year? Is God asking you to stop something so that you can start something new?

A holy place

PREPARE

Organised ritual is sometimes frowned upon in an era of spontaneity when the Spirit leads people in worship. But godly ritual can be like a beautiful painting, drawing the eye and opening fresh understanding. What worship rituals do you follow?

READ

Exodus 40:1-16

EXPLORE

Like the Temple that would follow it, the tabernacle is carefully structured to tell a story. The Hebrew people had a strong sense of the holiness of space – so at the physical centre of the structure is the most holy space of all, where the Ark of the Covenant was placed (v 3). Everything else in the tabernacle points to this.

As a symbol of its specialness to God, the entire tent is anointed (v 9). What follows is a remarkable telling of the story of grace. Aaron is brought to the entrance and washed with water. The very man who, by his terrible error with the golden calf, risked jeopardising the existence of the people as God's chosen nation, is now ordained its priest. The detail of this ordination ceremony is described in Exodus 29. It includes the anointing of his ears, hands and feet, and its repetition for seven days – mirroring creation. With God, failure is never final.

'Take the anointing oil and anoint the tabernacle and everything in it; consecrate it and all its furnishings, and it will be holy.'

Exodus 40:9

RESPOND

Thank God that, even though we make serious mistakes, such that we wince with embarrassment on thinking about them, God will patiently take us on to the next day and the next thing. He sees the end from the beginning.

Saturday 14 November

Exodus 40:17–38

Glorious guidance

PREPARE

‘Are we there yet?’ A long car journey for a child can seem like an eternity. The people are not yet at their destination of the Promised Land, but the journey has now properly begun. Where are you on your journey?

READ

Exodus 40:17–38

EXPLORE

It is around a year after the Exodus from Egypt (v 17). It has been a year of fear, drama and false starts, but a time of deep learning, with much more to come. The tabernacle is portable, meaning that the people are on a journey with a destination.

Missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin said this of the church: ‘The Church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move – hastening to the ends of the earth to beseech all men to be reconciled to God, and hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord.* In this, Christians continue what Moses began, only our journey ends at the gates of heaven.

For Moses, even though he would not enter the land of promise himself, he knows that the way is now marked out. The glory of God descends upon the tabernacle in a cloud, such that even

Moses can not enter. He must have been delighted! He can die knowing that God’s promise to be with the people is secure.

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

Exodus 40:34

RESPOND

‘Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age’ (Matthew 28:20). Thank God for Jesus’ great commission, and for his promise to be with us throughout.

*L Newbigin, *The Household of God*, Friendship Press, 1954, p18

Sunday 15 November

Psalm 63

Family anguish

PREPARE

Have you ever been betrayed? How did it make you feel? Perhaps you felt disappointed, angry or even vengeful. As you read this psalm, look out for the signs of both emotional distress and deep faith. Often they go together.

READ

Psalm 63

EXPLORE

It is thought this psalm was written in the context of King David's son Absalom betraying him, gathering an army to depose him from his throne (2 Samuel 15–18). David has fled to the desert, and watches as the conspiracy unfolds. He is deeply saddened by this: 'My son, my own flesh and blood, is trying to kill me' (2 Samuel 16:11).

On a gravestone recently, I read the inscription, 'What matters most?' It was a question the deceased person often asked his children when they were facing difficult decisions. David, in this psalm, is asking himself the same question in this awful moment. He concludes that his love for God matters more than life itself (v 3), but this doesn't stop his sleepless nights (v 6) spent tossing and turning with tormented thoughts. Ultimately, he concludes that, no matter what happens, he is safe in God's arms, as a

vulnerable chick would be beneath the wings of the mother hen (v 7).

The terrible story in 2 Samuel ends with Absalom's death and David's immense grief. The mouths of liars were indeed silenced, at a great cost, but David rejoices in God (v 11).

Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.

Psalm 63:3

RESPOND

How do you respond in hardship?
Where do you find comfort in God?



The Bible and me – an SU council member's experience of the Bible



In this Spotlight article, we asked **Kay Morgan Gurr** to tell us a little about what the Bible means to

her. Kay is married to Steve and is co-founder of the Additional Needs Alliance, disability and additional advisor to Keswick Ministries and part of Scripture Union's council.

What was your early experience of the Bible?

My mum was a new Christian, and my dad went along with it for an easy life. Mum tried to get into a rhythm of reading the Bible with us, but often gave up due to her poor mental health. I was thankful for an aunt and other unofficial aunties who stepped in where my mum couldn't and gave me a love for the Bible that has continued to today.

How did your appreciation of the Bible grow as you got older?

The church I went to did very little to help with this. There were rules to follow that I couldn't keep, and the whole process felt like scoring points

towards heaven – not reading out of love for Father God.

It was a struggle for me because I was dyslexic and the visual impairment I now have was beginning to show itself. Also, my mum's mental health was getting worse and I was coping with trauma and emotional abuse in the home. Reading the Bible was hard physically, mentally and emotionally.

But amid the difficulties there were two shining lights: the WEC Young Warriors' club, whose purpose was to get children into the Bible, and the leader of a church-based girls' club, who took me under her wing, signed me up for the Post Box Bible Notes and worked with me as I used those notes. Both of these, unknowingly, used materials that worked for my dyslexia and visual impairment, and I am so grateful for that!

Head and heart

I think I'm unusual in that 'heart' came first. I was always aware of the love of Father God. The 'aunties' in my life would tell stories from the Bible and tales of those who

took the stories of God to places all over the world – Amy Carmichael (a missionary in India) being my favourite! I learned that God's story didn't end with the Bible and I could be part of that story. I was sent to our church's afternoon Sunday school, which I found quite boring, even being made to colour in pictures in my teens! In the upstairs hall was a biblical timeline painted on the length of the wall, and the main church had a montage of simple line-drawn pictures of the stories in the Bible – all in order with the Old Testament on one side of the pulpit and the New Testament on the other. These things inspired me to know more, and my love of the Bible and theology grew from there.

For better, for worse

As I grew, I found fewer devotional books or Bibles I could physically read. Digital didn't exist until I was in my 30s and, even then, it was hard to find accessible things I could read. The dawn of the Kindle opened the world for me – but it took Christian publishing a long time to utilise the e-book system. By the time a lot of Christian books were making their way onto Kindle and other e-book formats, I was needing things read to me. Audio books were the next big thing to help me access Bible study resources.

So, as much as I love the Bible, accessing it has been a long journey. I now have a digital Bible app on my devices that has large font settings and can read to me, and I have Bible study resources too. It's been a long time coming. I'm also thankful for the work of Torch Trust in making the Bible and devotions accessible to many people like me – with books transcribed and printed in the appropriate size text.

Rhythms of life

My rhythms of Bible reading look different each day. For me, because of the combination of dyslexia, visual impairment and other disabilities, reading or listening to a book takes lots of energy. Therefore, what I read or listen to one day could be small, but other days will be more. I have undated devotions that are short but teach well for the bad days and more in-depth studies, also undated, for the better days. But every day will start with a verse to meditate on, sent to me by my Bible app.

With a busy ministry, I have to keep rooted. But I am thankful that God understands completely how my rhythm of faith works with my disability. He doesn't condemn me when rest has to take priority over study.

Kay Morgan Gurr

These ‘in between’ times

This series on Mark 11–13 commences with Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem – riding on a colt, to the accompaniment of welcome shouts (11:7–11), at the start of the week that changed the course of human history. It concludes with the announcement of his second coming in glory – riding on the clouds, to

About the writer

Tanya Ferdinandusz



Tanya and her husband Roshan have been married for 30 years and have two adult sons – Daniel and Joshua. Tanya is both a freelance writer and freelance editor, who has been writing Bible reading notes, articles and devotionals for over 25 years. She is a Bible study leader and also works with couples who are preparing for marriage. She is the author of *Marriage Matters*, a book for Christian couples.

the accompaniment of cosmic signs (13:24–26), at the end of history as we know it. God’s inbreaking into history created an ‘in between’ space of overlap between the old and new ages, and we now live between the bookends of these two comings. The remainder of Mark 11–13 focuses on some practicalities of being wakeful and watchful (13:32–36) while living in these ‘in between’ times: What attitudes are we to adopt or avoid? What actions must we pursue or put aside? What does God expect of us? What can we expect of him?

The various Jesus encounters in these passages – with their stories, signs, symbolic actions and question-and-answer sessions – offer instructions and insights about how to live in this present age in the light of the future age that has already begun but not yet come in its fullness. In one sense, we are to live like there’s no tomorrow – living each day, and indeed each hour, fully, faithfully, fruitfully and generously. At the same time, this kind of trusting, living and giving is only possible when we embrace the truth of God’s eternal tomorrow.

More than a conqueror

PREPARE

‘In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33). Talk to Jesus about what troubles you most today.

READ

Mark 11:1–11

EXPLORE

In 47 BC, Julius Caesar declared, ‘I came, I saw, I conquered’, describing his swift and decisive victory over Pharnaces II that restored Roman dominance over Pontus. Around AD 33, Jesus comes to Roman-occupied Jerusalem and sees ‘everything’ going on in the Temple, but then, instead of swooping in to conquer, quietly retreats to Bethany (v 11). His dramatic entry to Jerusalem (vs 8–10) is followed by an unobtrusive exit.

Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem was a wordless – though not silent! – fulfilment of prophecy: ‘See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt’ (Zechariah 9:9). The spreading of cloaks and branches and the shouts of acclamation constitutes a welcome fit for a king. (Compare King Jehu’s welcome in 2 Kings 9:13 and the words of Psalm 118:25–27.) The people’s cries of ‘Hosanna’ (a Hebrew expression meaning

‘save us’) represents a plea for liberation from their Roman conquerors. But the jubilant crowds miss the subtle nuances of the symbolism – Jesus rides a colt, not a war horse, signalling his coming in peace. This king is nothing like the Caesars of this world. He is more than a conqueror, and his conquest – marked by self-sacrificial love rather than military might – will culminate on a Roman cross.

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

Mark 11:11

RESPOND

Pray: ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’

Tuesday 17 November

Mark 11:12–25

Holy hunger, holy anger

PREPARE

Ask God to create in you the kind of hunger that declares, ‘My food ... is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work’ (John 4:34).

.....

READ

Mark 11:12–25

EXPLORE

Jesus is hungry and angry. Both the tree-cursing (vs 12–14, 20, 21) and the Temple-cleansing (vs 15–17) are acted-out parables pointing to the heart-condition of God’s people.

A fig tree in leaf is an implicit promise of fruitfulness. While the comment ‘it was not the season for figs’ (v 13) makes Jesus appear unreasonable, commentators explain that before figs appear, fig trees produce *taqsh* – small knob-like fruits that, though edible, soon fall off, making way for mature figs. Since this tree has produced no *taqsh*, its abundance of leaves represents a false promise of fruitfulness, prefiguring the action-packed scene in the Temple. With its impressive appearance and abundance of rituals, the Temple looks good but is actually *no* good. Like the fig tree, Jerusalem’s religious establishment is guilty of a false profession of faith.

The word ‘hangry’ – added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2018 – is defined as ‘bad-tempered or irritable as a result of hunger’. The Temple authorities are power-hungry, the Temple traders are money-hungry, but Jesus is hungry for holiness! The lack of holiness in the very place that should have embodied it makes Jesus ‘hangry’ – not for figs but for spiritual fruitfulness.

The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry.

Mark 11:12

RESPOND

Does your life produce an abundance of leaves but fail to bear fruit, or is your profession of faith well-supported by fruitfulness? Reflect on this now.

.....

Bible in a year: Ezekiel 34,35; 2 Peter 2

Questions that attack

PREPARE

Do you have any burning questions for Jesus today? Ask them!

READ

Mark 11:27–33

EXPLORE

Teachers understand that questioners have different agendas. Truth-seekers want to know more. Devil's advocates aim to deepen their convictions and understanding. Troublemakers' questions constitute an attack on the teacher!

As he continues teaching in the Temple courts, Jesus is interrogated by a high-powered delegation comprising chief priests, teachers of the law and elders (vs 27,28) – the very people Jesus predicted would reject him and, ultimately, authorise his execution (8:31; 10:33). 'These things' (v 28) point back to the Temple-cleansing incident, where some of these religious leaders were undoubtedly among those 'looking for a way to kill him' (vs 15–18). These people are neither seeking truth nor playing devil's advocate but have become pawns in the devil's own schemes against Jesus.

With a skilful counter-question about the source of John's authority, Jesus

compels his questioners to confront the implications of their own question (vs 29,30). Their hurried discussion about how to answer Jesus demonstrates that these leaders have no interest in truth and a vested interest in their own political and physical safety and well-being (vs 31,32). In the end, they dodge the question and Jesus terminates the discussion (v 33). However, Jesus will not let their challenge go unanswered – his response will come in the form of a parable (Mark 12:1–12).

So they answered Jesus, 'We don't know.' Jesus said, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.'

Mark 11:33

RESPOND

Amid the questions you have for Jesus, are you leaving space to listen to *his* questions to you?

Thursday 19 November

Mark 12:1–12

True story

PREPARE

Before reading God's Word, ask the Holy Spirit to bring it to life for you in life-giving, life-transforming ways.

READ

Mark 12:1–12

EXPLORE

In many cultures, stories are a popular and effective means of conveying truth. In confronting King David's sin, the prophet Nathan did not resort to a hard-hitting sermon but used a simple story (2 Samuel 12:1–14), illustrating that 'story' does not necessarily equate 'fiction'. Jesus tells a parable adapted from an Old Testament prophetic-poem (Isaiah 5) and placed in the landowner-tenant setting of first-century Galilee in order to speak truth into the real-life situation of the religious leaders who have denied his identity and rejected his authority.

'There are two kinds of stories, the ones you live and the ones you make up.'* Jesus' parable, although in one sense a made-up story, is also the true and lived story of a God who so loved the world that he kept reaching out despite repeated rejection (vs 3–5) and, ultimately, sent his beloved Son to a certain death (vs 6–8; John 3:16).

At Nathan's pronouncement, 'You are the man!', David humbly confessed his sin (2 Samuel 12:7,13). Here, Jesus does not have to utter a word. The religious leaders immediately recognise themselves in the story (v 12), rightly interpreting its dire warning (v 9). But, although guilty as charged, they refuse to repent.

... the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them.

Mark 12:12a

RESPOND

The Bible is the ultimate true story. God invites us to see ourselves in its situations and characters and to fulfil our role in his ongoing story that goes beyond the written word.

*Attributed to Ernest Hemingway

A taxing question

PREPARE

‘Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering’ (Romans 12:1,2, *The Message*).

READ

Mark 12:13–17

EXPLORE

Today’s encounter is not so much a tale about taxes as one that addresses the more fundamental issue of allegiance.

Under Roman rule, all subject peoples were liable to a poll tax. The Jews resented this tax, not just because it was burdensome but because it was a shameful reminder of their subjugation. The Pharisees and Herodians pose a tricky tax question, designed to trap Jesus into making a response that would brand him either a traitor in the eyes of nationalistic Jews or a rebel before the Roman authorities (vs 13–15).

Even many non-Christians are familiar with Jesus’ masterful reply that upholds duty to the state as citizens without undermining loyalty to God as Christians (v 17). Since we need only give Caesar what ‘belongs’ to him, there are clear limits and boundaries to state authority. But Jesus challenges us to dig deeper: What is involved in giving God what

‘belongs to God’? The coin imprinted with Caesar’s image (v 16) was to be returned to Caesar. As people who bear God’s image, we owe him not just taxes but our whole selves, which includes our adoration, allegiance, attention and accountability in every sphere of life.

Then Jesus said to them, ‘Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’ And they were amazed at him.

Mark 12:17

RESPOND

Do you diligently pay taxes and fulfil other obligations to the state? Do you wholeheartedly give God the glory due to him? In what ways might you be giving to modern-day Caesars what rightly belongs to God?

Saturday 21 November

Mark 12:18–27

Ridiculing resurrection

PREPARE

‘I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand.* Pray for an ever-deepening faith, leading to greater understanding.

.....

READ

Mark 12:18–27

EXPLORE

The Pharisees and Herodians had posed a political question to trap Jesus (vs 13–17). Now he faces a theological ‘trick question’ from the Sadducees, the priestly party who only accepted as authoritative the ‘Book of Moses’ (v 26) – the first five books of the Old Testament.

When confronted with questions of this nature, examine the questioner’s worldview: ‘... Sadducees ... say there is no resurrection ...’ (v 18). Their question is ostensibly about marriage (vs 19–23), but their real agenda is to ridicule the resurrection, using a hypothetical, highly exaggerated illustration based on the practice of levirate marriage (see Deuteronomy 25:5,6).

Jesus boldly calls them out. First, they are ignorant of God’s power that effects resurrection life (v 24). Their earthbound horizon simply cannot accommodate the concept that eternal life is not merely an endless quantity of life but a whole

different quality of life and that earthly realities such as marriage are temporary arrangements that will ultimately give way to bigger, better, more beautiful eternal realities (vs 24,25). Second, they ignore what has already been revealed in the very Scriptures they profess to believe (vs 26,27). Are we sometimes guilty of ignoring what scripture clearly spells out?

Jesus replied, ‘Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?’

Mark 12:24

RESPOND

Without denying the resurrection with your lips, do you sometimes live as if this life is all there is? Does an ‘eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die’ philosophy drive your thinking and decision-making?

*Attributed to Anselm of Canterbury

.....

Be careful who you slander

PREPARE

Have you ever complained about an item you bought? Chances are a complaints department will deal with your call. In this psalm, God is at the complaints desk, ready to hear your tale of woe. What complaint might you bring to him today?

READ

Psalm 64

EXPLORE

The complaint from David is devastating: threats to his life, plotting, slander, ambushes, ganging up (vs 1–5). This persecution is so extreme that the perpetrators imagine no one knows or cares about their actions. ‘Who will see it?’ they ask (v 5).

Sometimes on social media a deeply harsh culture can develop where anonymous bullies can damage their victims, undermining confidence and even worse. It might seem to those affected that such people operate with impunity.

David takes a step back and reassures himself that even if his persecutors think they are acting invisibly, God sees. Their own weapons will be used against them (v 7), such that their slander will recoil to become their accuser (v 8).

If God sees all this, then ultimately, so will everyone. Nothing will be hidden. ‘What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs’ (Luke 12:3).

The righteous will rejoice in the Lord and take refuge in him; all the upright in heart will glory in him!

Psalm 64:10

RESPOND

Pray: ‘Lord, may my words today be encouraging, my advice be constructive and my motivation be loving in all my interactions with people, whether I see them face to face or by any other means. Amen.’

Monday 23 November

Mark 12:28–34

Not close enough

PREPARE

Reflect on the difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus. How significant is this distinction for you?

.....

READ

Mark 12:28–34

EXPLORE

For the fourth time in this series, a religious leader questions Jesus. But, unlike his fellow questioners, this teacher of the law is appreciative of Jesus' good answers and asks a good question of his own (v 28). Jesus' response is a simple yet profound summation of all God's laws, underscoring the all-encompassing heart-soul-mind-body commitment necessary to be 'all in' with God (vs 29–31).

Despite its positive tone, this encounter concludes on an inconclusive note. While appreciative of the man's wisdom, Jesus does not give an unqualified commendation – 'You are not far from the kingdom' (v 34) is a far cry from 'Welcome to the kingdom!' Good students ask good questions and give good answers. But a right answer (v 33) does not always translate into a right response. Jesus came proclaiming that God's kingdom was near and extending an invitation to enter this kingdom (1:15).

But the only way in to this kingdom is to be 'all in' through allegiance to its King. Despite hailing Jesus as a good teacher (v 32), we are not told whether this man ever turned to Jesus as Saviour and submitted to him as King.

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.'

Mark 12:34a

RESPOND

On a map, the teacher of the law's location pin lay at some point 'not far from the kingdom'. But this distance was still too great. To enter the kingdom required drawing close to the King! In relation to Jesus, where is your location pin?

David's Son, David's Lord

PREPARE

Lord, as I dig deeper into your word, help me be attentive and receptive to your truths.

READ

Mark 12:35–37

EXPLORE

The tables have turned! After facing challenging questions from various groups – Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, chief priests, scribes – Jesus now poses a tough question of his own. This took place in a ‘teaching’ context (v 35), suggesting that Jesus’ aim was not to trap his hearers but to provoke thought.

Jesus’ question challenges the conventional understanding of the Messiah as just ‘the son of David’ (v 35) – a title packed with expectations of a warrior-king like David, who will restore Israel’s glory and usher in another golden age. But ‘this view of messiahship lent itself to a revolutionary view of the kingdom’,* as evident in the crowd’s welcome of Jesus to Jerusalem: ‘Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!’ (Mark 11:10). Citing a Messianic psalm, Jesus challenges them to consider how this Messiah is not merely David’s descendant but also David’s

‘Lord’ (vs 36,37; Psalm 110:1) – thus outranking David – who would usher in a different kind of kingdom.

Previously, Jesus refused to answer questions about the source of his authority (Mark 11:33). Yet, had the religious leaders honestly pondered his question, they could have uncovered clues to Jesus’ divine identity and authority. But they are closed-minded and hard-hearted. Although Mark makes no comment, Matthew notes, ‘No one could say a word in reply’ (Matthew 22:46).

**‘David himself calls him “Lord”.
How then can he be his son?’**

Mark 12:37a

RESPOND

Invite the Holy Spirit to reveal any misconceptions you have about who God is and to deepen your understanding of his ways.

*C Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, IVP: 1993 (printed by New Life Literature, Sri Lanka, 2000), p169

Wednesday 25 November

Mark 12:38–44

A study in contrasts

PREPARE

‘The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it’ (Psalm 24:1). Consider this thought: God owns everything. I owe him everything!

READ

Mark 12:38–44

EXPLORE

Today’s passage is a compelling study in contrasts. First, Jesus issues a warning to watch out for the teachers of the law (vs 38–40) – a negative role model. Then he invites us to watch the widow (vs 41–44) – a positive role model.

As trustees of God’s law, the teachers of the law are entrusted with teaching God’s people. Instead, many of them take advantage of their position to feed their greed for power, positions and possessions, exploiting vulnerable people like widows (vs 38–40). While sternly condemning these powerful teachers (v 40), Jesus warmly commends a poor widow (v 43). In Bible times, a widow was not just someone who had lost her ‘significant other’; she was also an insignificant figure, frequently exploited by people who were significant in society (v 40). Yet, despite having no power, no status and very little money, this widow is an incredibly generous giver,

demonstrating absolute trust in God by giving ‘all she had to live on’ (v 44). Contemplate the contrast: the teachers of the law grabbed everything they could but she gave everything she had!

‘They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on.’

Mark 12:44

RESPOND

While the rich dutifully paid their tithes (v 41), this widow’s giving was an expression of deep trust in God. How does your giving – of money but also time, talents and other treasures – measure up?

Look through a Jesus-lens

PREPARE

Ponder: ‘For we live by faith, not by sight’ (2 Corinthians 5:7).

READ

Mark 13:1–13

EXPLORE

The disciples gaze at the Temple, admiring its ‘massive stones’ and ‘magnificent buildings’ (v 1). Herod the Great spared no expense in his extravagant renovations of this architectural wonder of the ancient world. But Jesus wants his followers to cultivate an eternal perspective. The glory of this magnificent structure will be relatively short-lived. In AD 70, Roman armies will invade Jerusalem and raze the Temple to the ground, fulfilling Jesus’ prediction that ‘not one stone here will be left on another’ (v 2).

So many things in life – wealth, positions, achievements, accolades, even relationships – may seem strong, solid, stable. Too often, trials and troubles also seem like they’re here to stay. In fact, Jesus warns of relentless persecution by powerful authorities and heart-breaking betrayals by loved ones (vs 9,12). But as his followers inhabit these ‘in between’ times,

Jesus encourages them with promises for both the present and the future. First, they will be empowered in every trial by the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit (v 11). Second, ‘the one who stands firm to the end’ (v 13) will enjoy the enduring and eternal glory of ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory’ (v 26). Jesus wants his followers to be faith-sighted and far-sighted.

... ‘Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!’

Mark 13:1b

RESPOND

What ‘magnificent’ things capture your attention and captivate your heart? What trials leave you feeling utterly defeated? Choose to view all your circumstances – good and bad – through a Jesus-lens.

Friday 27 November

Mark 13:14–31

Signs of the times

PREPARE

In today's passage Jesus talks about signs of the times. What are some of the signs of God's presence and action in the world that you have noticed recently?

.....

READ

Mark 13:14–31

EXPLORE

When Jesus foretold the destruction of the Temple, his disciples had two questions: 'When?' and 'What signs?' (vs 2–4). As teachers sometimes do, Jesus provided more information than they bargained for – not just what they wanted to know but what he knew they needed to know!

'Old Testament prophecies blended together events according to the kind of event rather than the time they would occur.* That's pretty much the case in Mark 13. Prophecies and signs relating to the imminent destruction of Jerusalem dovetail with ultimate prophecies and signs associated with the 'end of the world' and Jesus' return. While cosmic signs are specific to the ultimate 'end' (vs 24–27), other signs – natural and human-instigated disasters (vs 7,8), persecution and betrayal (vs 9–12), 'false messiahs and false prophets' (v 22) – form a recurring pattern throughout

human history. Such signs do not signal the end (v 7) but are only the 'beginning of birth-pains' (v 8). This will be a long labour because these 'end times' span the entire period between Jesus' first and second comings. Reading the signs has nothing to do with predicting dates and everything to do with living rightly.

'At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.'

Mark 13:26

RESPOND

'You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.' (2 Peter 3:12). Let these challenging words transform how you live in these 'in between' times.

*C Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, IVP, 1993, p172

.....

Our watchword is ‘Watch!’

PREPARE

Make this your prayer today: ‘I want to sign your name to the end of this day/
Knowing that my heart was true/ Let my lifesong sing to you.’*

READ

Mark 13:32–37

EXPLORE

Jesus has just assured his disciples of his glorious return, conveying a strong sense of certainty through repeated uses of ‘will’: ‘will see’, ‘will send’ (vs 26,27).

Now he emphasises the uncertainty surrounding the timing of this return – ‘you do not know’ (vs 33,35) and, in fact, ‘no one knows’ (v 32), which makes speculations or calculations about the date of the second coming both futile and an act of disobedience.

In his discourse in Mark 13, Jesus’ aim was not to outline a precise timetable of end-time events but to urge right living. The repeated references to not knowing are paired with commands to remain on high alert, actively keep watch and keep working (vs 33–35). End-time theories may generate a high level of excitement and energy! In contrast, the call to watch, wait and work might feel dull, difficult and draining. Does keeping watch make me

sleepy? Does indeterminate waiting make me impatient? Does diligent work weary me? Jesus’ words both warn and encourage, rousing us from lethargy, rekindling a sense of urgency and re-energising us to faithfully carry out his work.

‘What I say to you, I say to everyone: “Watch!”’

Mark 13:37

RESPOND

Our watchword is ‘Watch!’ ‘Watch your step. Use your head. Make the most of every chance you get. These are desperate times! Don’t live carelessly, unthinkingly. Make sure you understand what the Master wants’ (Ephesians 5:16,17, *The Message*). How can you watch your step this week?

*JM Hall, ‘Lifesong’, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, 2005

Sunday 29 November

Psalm 65

Pour out praises!

PREPARE

‘For all Your goodness I will keep on singing/ Ten thousand reasons for my heart to find.*’ Write down ten things to praise God for today.

READ

Psalm 65

EXPLORE

Having declared that praise ‘awaits’ or ‘befits’ God (v 1), the rest of this psalm is an outpouring of praise focusing on God’s grace and mercy (vs 2–4), his great and mighty deeds (vs 5–8) and generous provision (vs 9–13). David’s praises overflow from a heart that is forgiven and put right through God’s grace. From a state of being ‘overwhelmed by sins’ (v 3), God has brought David to a blessed place where he is ‘filled with the good things’ of God’s house (v 4). To borrow Paul’s words, ‘But where sin increased, grace increased all the more’ (Romans 5:20).

The experience of undeserved grace prompts an outpouring of unreserved praise! Moving outward from the sacred precincts of the ‘holy temple’ (v 4), David’s horizons broaden to encompass ‘the ends of the earth’ as he affirms God as the supreme and sovereign ruler over all creation (vs 5–8) and the

faithful sustainer and generous provider to whom everything and everyone owe their existence and flourishing (vs 9–13). As CS Lewis notes, ‘Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible.’** The inner healing and wholeness that David experiences in God are given expression in his joyful songs of praise.

**The whole earth is filled
with awe at your wonders;
where morning dawns, where
evening fades, you call forth
songs of joy.**

Psalm 65:8

RESPOND

‘For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of’ (Matthew 12:34)! What is your heart full of? What will your mouth say to God today?

*M Redman, ‘10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord)’, Capitol CMG Publishing, 2013

**CS Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, Harcourt, Brace & World, p94

Encouragement from the past

I have a collection of newspapers from the 1990s, beginning with Margaret Thatcher's resignation and ending with the attacks of 9/11. They are brown and fragile now and I look at them now only to remind myself of what the world was like 30 years ago. The world has moved on and old news becomes consigned to history books.

About the writer
Toby Hole

Toby is Director of Mission and Ministry in the Diocese of Sheffield, where he lives with his wife Amy, his three children and two tortoises. He previously worked in a church in London and before ordination was a solicitor. When he isn't working, he can usually be found in a cinema or walking in the nearby Peak District.



Reading the prophets Habakkuk and Obadiah, both of whom are part of the collection of writings that we know as the minor prophets, can feel like reading very old news, urgent at the time but rather obscure to us now. Habakkuk writes some 20 years before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, and foresees the terrible conquest of the Jewish people, ending with a stirring song of praise and hope. Obadiah wrote some time after these events. He prophesies against a people called the Edomites, an ancient tribe who lived on Israel's south-eastern border, crying out for justice for their treachery and failure to support the Jews. It almost feels like a scrap of history that has drifted down the ages to us.

What then can modern readers make of these two books? Paul tells Timothy that all scripture is inspired by God and useful for our instruction. Reading Habakkuk and Obadiah challenges us to see through the murk of thousands of years to the gleaming, ever-fresh truth that God is with us and loves us through the toughest of circumstances.

Monday 30 November

Habakkuk 1:1–11

How long, O Lord?

PREPARE

Is there a prayer that you have been praying for many years without seeing an answer? If you feel frustrated, use Habakkuk 1:2 as a way of expressing your longing to God.

READ

Habakkuk 1:1–11

EXPLORE

As I write, a major fire is blazing in a block of flats in East London. Thankfully, there seem to be no fatalities, but I remember the terrible fire at Grenfell Tower in 2017 in which 72 people died and for which justice seems very slow coming. Tragedies, especially concerning the poorest in society, seem to repeat themselves and justice can be slow.

Habakkuk looks at his society and feels a similar sense of anger. There is destruction, violence and conflict (v 3). The law is paralysed and perverted (v 4). The righteous are hemmed in and the wicked get away with murder. But things are about to get even worse. The Lord answers not with words of comfort but with a terrifying promise. He is raising up a ruthless and invincible army who will sweep all before them (v 6). Israel faces utter destruction at the hands of the Babylonian hordes. Where is the

place of prayer and hope against such bad news?

The prophecy goes on to provide some answers to this most difficult question, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. Now seems a good place to acknowledge the terrible things happening in our world. We too can cry out, 'How long, Lord?'

How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save?

Habakkuk 1:2

RESPOND

Pick an item from today's news that saddens you. Hold up those who are suffering before God and pray that for them justice will not be paralysed.

Watching and waiting

PREPARE

Are you good at waiting, or do you find that you quickly become impatient? Think back to a time when you were waiting to hear some important news. Were you able to place your expectations or anxieties in God's hand?

READ

Habakkuk 1:12 – 2:1

EXPLORE

You are probably familiar with Jesus calling his disciples to be fishers of people, but in this passage we have a more terrible image. Habakkuk describes the fearsome Babylonians as deep-sea fishermen who drag their net through the ocean, scooping up all the peoples in their nets (1:15). I am reminded of scenes from the David Attenborough television series *Blue Planet* where shoals of mackerel are systematically devoured by the dolphins, sharks and whales. The vision feels a pretty bleak one. The peoples are like helpless and scattered fish, powerless against the organised destruction and pillage of the invading army.

And yet Habakkuk is not going to give up. He imagines himself as a watchman on the towers of the city looking into the distance (2:1). What will he see on the horizon? Will it be the dust clouds of the advancing Babylonians, or will it

be a messenger bringing news of God's salvation? Whatever the outcome, Habakkuk knows that his responsibility is not to run but to watch and wait. In this season of Advent, as we look to the long-expected coming of Jesus, this feels like a particularly appropriate passage to meditate upon.

**I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts;
I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint.**

Habakkuk 2:1

RESPOND

Where do you need to ask for patience today? Is God calling you to stand and watch, trusting him to act in his own time?

Wednesday 2 December

Habakkuk 2:2–20

Oceans of glory

PREPARE

Imagine a rocky shore and an incoming tide. As the water rises, each rock becomes covered until eventually all you can see are the waves stretching into the distance. If the sea represents God's love, how does this make you feel?

READ

Habakkuk 2:2–20

EXPLORE

Bishop Desmond Tutu once preached a famous sermon in Cape Town Cathedral, where, surrounded by armed guards ready to arrest the worshippers, he taunted them as a power that had already lost and, dancing with joy, invited them to join the winning side.

God's response to Habakkuk is similar, and perhaps you can imagine Habakkuk preaching it to the terrified people of Jerusalem. The Babylonians are arrogant and greedy (v 4). They think that they are unstoppable and can enslave every nation (v 5). But a time will come when their empire will crumble, when they will be plundered and when their temples and palaces will topple down (v 11). God promises this because the tide of the kingdom of God is rising and the time will come when the world will be conquered not by human empires but by the good news of God's love.

This, then, is part of the answer to Habakkuk's cry of 'How long?' No timescale is given by God, but the promise is of a world engulfed by God's goodness and love (v 14). This is a promise carried forward in the New Testament through the hope of Jesus' resurrection.

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Habakkuk 2:14

RESPOND

Think back to that item of news that you brought before God on Monday. How does that look now in the light of the promise of the fullness of God's love?

Rejoicing in calamity

PREPARE

Sing, or listen to, an upbeat hymn or song of praise. You may not feel at all like it but that only makes praise all the more important. Sometimes our mouths need to sing even when our souls seem to sink!

READ

Habakkuk 3:1-19

EXPLORE

In Habakkuk 2:4 God says that a righteous person will live by their faithfulness, and in the final chapter of the prophecy Habakkuk shows what faithful living looks like. To live faithfully amid calamity is to know and trust the eternal character of God, even when everything else seems to be falling apart.

The book of Habakkuk ends with a song of praise, but it is not a naive song believing that everything is going to turn out for the best. Look at verses 16-18. Habakkuk, still acting as a faithful watchman, knows that the day of calamity will come on the nation invading his land. But in the meantime, even if the olives and figs fail, the harvest collapses and the sheep die, even in the middle of this terrible disaster, he will still rejoice in God his Saviour.

The cause for his confidence in God is that he knows that the God whom he worships is the God who made the world, who brought the captive Israelites out of slavery and who has power to overwhelm even the most fearsome enemy. His prayer is that the awesome deeds that God has shown in history will be repeated in his day also (v 2).

**LORD, I have heard of your fame;
I stand in awe of your deeds,
LORD. Repeat them in our day,
in our time make them known;
in wrath remember mercy.**

Habakkuk 3:2

RESPOND

Read Habakkuk 2:20 and remain silent, remembering God's faithfulness.

Friday 4 December

Obadiah 1–14

Righting an ancient wrong

PREPARE

As you confess your sins to God, think especially of those times when you haven't provided the help to others that you might have done and ask for God's forgiveness.

READ

Obadiah 1–14

EXPLORE

The book of Obadiah appears to be a sermon. He takes his text (Jeremiah 49:14–16) and uses it to remind his listeners how the Edomites treated the Israelites as the Babylonians invaded their land and how God will enact justice. It may have been preached at an annual commemoration of the disaster.

According to the Bible (Genesis 36:9), the Edomites were descended from Esau and were therefore distant cousins of the Jews. They should have stood by them when the Babylonians invaded but instead they stood by and gloated as they saw Jerusalem sacked. Worse, they seem to have attacked the Jewish refugees and handed them back to the Babylonians rather than giving them sanctuary.

It is commonly said that the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. Jesus' parable of

the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) tells of two religious Jews who did nothing and a despised Samaritan who decided to act. The Edomites refused to help their neighbours and now will be judged for it. In a world where humanity seems to be retreating into tribalism and a 'me first' mentality, I wonder whether this stark judgement on Edom might say something to us as well.

You should not gloat over your brother in the day of his misfortune ...

Obadiah 12

RESPOND

Pray that those who are refugees today fleeing war, famine and societal breakdown may receive help from their neighbours.

The day of the Lord

PREPARE

Take a small ball (or anything spherical) and hold it in your hand. Imagine that this is the world with all its billions of people, made by God and redeemed by him through Christ. Pray for the peace of the world and for God's kingdom to come.

READ

Obadiah 15–21

EXPLORE

For the Jews, the day of the Lord was the climactic moment in history when God's people would be vindicated against the powers that oppressed them. It was the moment when God's justice would be truly seen and empires like the Babylonians or unfriendly people like the Edomites would receive their final judgement. They will, as verse 15 makes clear, get what they deserve.

For Christians, the language of punishment returning on future generations for the offences of their ancestors can feel quite difficult, although, unless we have been through the kind of trauma that the dispossessed and exiled Jews had been through, we might do better to reserve judgement. It is a reminder to us that history bears scars that are not quickly healed.

Jesus takes the concept of the day of the Lord and reframes it as the kingdom of God, placing it at the heart of the Lord's Prayer. Daily we pray for God's justice to be shown, for wrongs to be righted, for the arrogant to be brought down and for the innocent to be vindicated. This is what the last sentence of Obadiah points to (v 21).

The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head.

Obadiah 15

RESPOND

Slowly say the Lord's Prayer, pausing after each line. Think what it means to pray, 'Your kingdom come'.

Sunday 6 December

Psalm 66

This is my story

PREPARE

Sing gratefully (or listen to): 'Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine ... This is my story, this is my song, praising my Saviour all the day long.*

READ

Psalm 66

EXPLORE

The psalm opens with an encouragement to 'shout for joy' – what a wonderful thing to do! The phrase 'all the earth' (vs 1,4) frames the psalm's first section, which is a universal invitation to glorify God. But since this invitation has neither reached nor been received by everyone, the responsibility to share this invitation both widely and wisely is entrusted to God's people.

The remainder of the psalm offers testimonies of a nation (vs 5–8) and an individual (vs 9–13). As a nation, Israel's call was not simply to enjoy God's blessings but to be an effective conduit of God's blessing to 'all peoples on earth' (Genesis 12:3), both by being a holy nation and by inviting the nations to 'come and see what God has done' (v 5). We, the church, as God's people, must proclaim God's story by the witness of our lips – 'declare the praises of him' – and our lives – 'live such good lives' (1 Peter 2:9,12).

With 17 uses of the first person 'I', 'me' or 'my' (vs 13–20), the final section of this psalm is an individual testimony – the psalmist's story of God's grace and goodness in his own life: 'Come and hear ... let me tell you what he has done for me' (v 16).

Come and hear, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.

Psalm 66:16

RESPOND

This week, to whom will you say, 'Let me tell you what Jesus has done for me'?

*F Crosby, 'Blessed Assurance', 1873

International praise

PREPARE

Write down three things that you are especially thankful to God for. Spend a moment celebrating God's love and goodness.

READ

Psalm 67

EXPLORE

If you just took the first and last verses of this psalm, you might consider it to be rather self-centred. May God bless us! May his face shine upon us! And some of the psalms are very Israel-focused, just as some of our worship can be rather us-focused. But the middle verses of this short psalm are quite remarkable. The psalmist prays that God may bless Israel so that all the nations of the world may join Israel in their praises.

On Wednesday we read of the promise that the world will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, and this psalm utters a similar prayer. May all the peoples (vs 3,5), even the peoples of those enemies of Israel such as the Babylonians and Edomites, be brought to worship the one true God whose love covers the whole world. This is generous and hopeful praise!

I find that this psalm can challenge me to turn from my own small-minded prayers for myself or my church and to hold before God the hope that one day, from east to west and pole to pole, every person of every nation will turn and praise the God of Israel.

**May the peoples praise you,
God; may all the peoples
praise you.**

Psalm 67:3

RESPOND

Choose a country anywhere in the world. Perhaps research the church in that country. Pray that that country will turn to Jesus and join in with Israel's praises.

WAY IN

Isaiah 52–66

A whole new world

Isaiah is one of the longest books in the Bible, boasting 66 chapters. It is also the most quoted Old Testament book in the New, appearing 69 times. Perhaps the most well-known example is in Luke 4:18,19, where Jesus reads from the beginning of Isaiah 61 and tells those listening that the scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing.

About the writer
Gethin Russell-Jones

Gethin is the minister of Ararat Baptist Church, Cardiff. He is also a runner, podcaster, therapist, writer, occasional singer, husband, dad and grandad.



Our starting place is Isaiah 52, from where we get an often sung hymn that begins with the words from verse 7: 'How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news.' You may recognise other familiar words as we read through these chapters.

In our readings, which focus on the final fourteen chapters of the book, we will encounter Isaiah's big themes. These include God's sovereignty, his freedom to act as he pleases to fulfil his purposes; his judgement and restoration of Israel, leading to a universal appeal to all nations. Maybe this is the most surprising part of this long book. As Israel returns to God, a new way opens to their former enemies. God's grace makes room for everyone.

These chapters also contain a series of poems, referred to as Servant Songs. They are uttered in the first person and contain some of the most famous lines in the Bible. But the identity of the servant is a mystery. Who is he? This is never disclosed but these songs express a conviction that a new day is breaking for the world. I have written some of the *Prepare and Respond* sections in the first person – perhaps read them aloud and embrace them for yourself.

What beautiful feet!

PREPARE

'At a time of ongoing international political tension and shifting global loyalties, I come before the God of the nations. I come to hear your still small voice, bringing peace and healing to a broken world. You are here, you are present and I'm listening.'

READ

Isaiah 52:1-12

EXPLORE

As I read this passage, I'm aware of other powerful influences. I think of Handel's *Messiah*, and the sublime aria which begins with verse 7. In his genius, Handel set to music Isaiah's stunning words to be enjoyed by audiences unimagined by Isaiah the prophet. I'm also reminded of the way Paul the apostle quotes these words in Romans 10. He is arguing that through Jesus Christ, Jew and Gentile alike can know the forgiving power of God.

Though very different, Paul and Handel are inspired by a big theme in this reading. God is doing a new thing. Israel's years of exile and shame are over and announced by one of his messengers. But this is bigger than one nation. All the ends of the earth shall see God's work of healing, renewal and justice (v 10). Isaiah's words have the impact of a depth charge, signalling

hope for all peoples everywhere. Israel's suffering is coming to an end, and this is good news for everyone.

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'

Isaiah 52:7

RESPOND

Think of the people and nations with whom you feel little affinity and thank God that his loving purposes are inclusive. The good news of Jesus, which brings peace and wholeness, is available to us all.

Wednesday 9 December

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

The servant who is king

PREPARE

Social media often feeds on the stories of the rich and famous, but I draw near now to one who shares his identity with the poor and forgotten of the earth. He invites me to sit with him and enjoy his still presence.

READ

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

EXPLORE

In this reading, Isaiah introduces his readers to the servant for the last time (v 13). God's anonymous messenger, who represents the suffering of an entire nation, experiences agony (53:5) and ecstasy (53:11). While the powerful of the earth turn away from this broken man, he will be vindicated by God and bring light to nations waiting in darkness. He will dumbfound the powerful but the nations will be refreshed (v 15).

This familiar passage is often used when talking about the crucifixion of Jesus (Luke 22:37), identifying him with the Suffering Servant, the title given to today's passage. While the passage begins in a hopeful way, with the servant being highly exalted (v 13), we quickly get to a description of his appearance (v 14), his rejection (v 3) and the way he was despised (vs 2,3) – very different to what we might expect the

one who will 'justify many' (v 11) to be like. We have a Servant King. What does that mean to you?

So he will sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.

Isaiah 52:15

RESPOND

'Lord Jesus, in the loneliness of your suffering, you bore the weight of a world in pain. In your resurrection, you are revealed as Lord of all, enfolding everyone in the embrace of God. Your sorrow brings me life and hope.'

Everyone needs compassion

PREPARE

'I wait now for an encounter with the God of all grace and love. Amid my thoughts and feelings, I become aware of his presence with me. I reach out to the God of compassion and relax.'

READ

Isaiah 54:1-17

EXPLORE

In this reading, God refers to himself as Israel's loving husband (v 5). There is a recognition of marital difficulties (vs 7,8) but these are temporary and there is promise of a wonderful future (vs 11-14). These may not be easy words, flavoured by our own difficult experiences of broken relationships. The promise is that God's compassion and everlasting kindness will triumph. While human relationships may seem troubled and flawed, the Lord offers us his safe and renewing love.

This is ultimately a hopeful passage, looking to a future for Israel that will be peaceful (v 14) and where they will be vindicated by God (v 17). This chapter was written at a time when Israel was still in exile, experiencing the shame and disgrace of that. The future was hopeful, life would not always be like this. Indeed, expansion was coming (vs 2,3).

The character of God shines out here and can encourage us when we are going through challenging times. Which part of this passage comforts or encourages you?

'For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back.'

Isaiah 54:7

RESPOND

'Lord, I thank you that not only are you my creator but that you draw me back to you when I am unfaithful. You redeem me. You are like a loving husband and I am no longer disgraced or ashamed. Thank you for your mercy.'

Friday 11 December

Isaiah 55:1–13

Good news for losers

PREPARE

‘I imagine myself in Isaiah 55:1, with a parched mouth, weakened by hunger and staring at food and drink I cannot buy. Then I hear the voice of God inviting me to feed on his plenty. Lord, I come to you now.’

READ

Isaiah 55:1–13

EXPLORE

‘Come, all you who are thirsty’ (v 1) is a simple and beautiful invitation, also offered by many churches as they reach out to their communities. No matter who you are or where you’ve been, God’s welcome awaits you. It’s an inclusive call to sit and eat at God’s table. Israel’s separation from God and their exile in a distant land are coming to an end (v 3).

The promises in these readings are overwhelmingly hopeful for a beleaguered people. But they also contain a strange new vocation (v 5). Although they have been captured and humiliated by their enemies, they have a new identity. Through them, the peoples of the earth will come running to God, who will include them in his expanded community (v 5). They are to enlarge their tent and stretch their tent pegs (54:2–4) and make room for the world as they journey to God through them. It’s an

amazing idea, that everyone can now be included in God’s family. How often does God have a different idea to us (v 8)?

‘Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.’

Isaiah 55:1

RESPOND

‘I imagine the nations of the earth and the more than 7 billion people who live on this planet. In a world of wars and injustice, your word, Lord, speaks of countries coming together as they turn to you and find peace. Help me love this world as you do.’

For all nations

PREPARE

God delights in all the nations and has no favourites. His love extends to all peoples. We build walls of division but Jesus tears them all down (Ephesians 2:14) and welcomes us to him. What is our part in tearing down walls?

READ

Isaiah 56:1-8

EXPLORE

I'm always astonished by this reading. It's as though the impetus of this section in Isaiah is towards greater and greater inclusivity. Two broad groups of people who considered themselves to be beyond God's care are specifically mentioned, namely foreigners and eunuchs. As far as the first group is concerned, some scholars think that the writer has the prohibition against Ammonites and Moabites in Deuteronomy 23:3 in mind. They were historical enemies of the Jews and banished from God's presence. Eunuchs, a minority group, were deemed to be unclean before because of their castration, whether this was voluntary or forced upon them. But not any more.

As God restores Israel, so he will restore fellowship with people from all nations who turn to him. Enemies will become friends. There will be no border wall dividing them and us. God is now doing

a new thing. As God's people extend his love to all people, the nations will come running in (Isaiah 55:5). What a message!

'These I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.'

Isaiah 56:7

RESPOND

'Lord, forgive me when I restrict your love to people who are like me in some way. Enable me to grasp your vision of a world changed and ordered by the costly love shown in Jesus.'

Sunday 13 December

Psalm 68

God the Cloud Rider

PREPARE

‘I think about the wildness of God, his “otherness”. I worship him in the words of William Cowper: “God moves in a mysterious way,/ His wonders to perform,/ He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm”’*

READ

Psalm 68

EXPLORE

Many commentators find this psalm difficult to categorise. It contains references to history, liturgy, God’s character and his relationship with the world, but isn’t focused on one thing. It begins with a call for God to arise, a reference to words used when the Ark of the Covenant was moved (Numbers 10:35). And from verse 24 onwards, we are drawn into a procession heading towards the Temple. We can hear the singing, the musical instruments and the roar of the crowd as the great building comes into view.

It’s also a song of remembrance, bringing to mind Israel’s deliverance from Egypt under God’s mighty hand (vs 7-22). There are moments of great tenderness, where God is revealed as a father to the fatherless (v 5) and one who daily bears our burdens (v 19). I am captivated by the poetry, images of One

riding on the clouds (v 4) and the ancient skies (v 33). What image or concept from the psalm most captivates you?

Sing to God, sing in praise of his name, extol him who rides on the clouds; rejoice before him – his name is the LORD.

Psalm 68:4

RESPOND

‘God of glory, God of wonder, God of history, I bring my praises to you. You who ride upon the storm, I am in awe of your energy and power.’

*W Cowper, ‘God Moves in a Mysterious Way’, 1773

Justice for all

PREPARE

‘Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world’ (James 1:27). Let these words speak to you.

READ

Isaiah 59:1–4,9–21

EXPLORE

Above the grand entry to the Old Bailey criminal courts in central London, there stands a prominent statue. You’ll find versions of this sculpture throughout the world: she is Lady Justice. In her right hand she lifts up a sword, representing truth. In her left, she carries weighing scales which stand for justice. These are perfectly balanced, not favouring one side or the other. In other versions, she is blindfolded, symbolising her impartiality towards all who come to court.

In this reading, the nation is likened to someone stumbling without eyes, groping to find their way. And all because there is no justice. Without justice there is no peace, leaving people to wander on crooked paths (v 8). Social justice is a dominant theme among the prophets, calling the nation’s rulers to treat their people fairly. If Israel is to live up to her new calling of bringing

the nations to God’s right ways, then they must commit to showing his justice impartially to everyone who seeks it.

No one calls for justice; no one pleads a case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments, they utter lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil.

Isaiah 59:4

RESPOND

‘But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!’ (Amos 5:24). Pray: ‘Lord, help me be a person of justice, looking out to help those in need and speaking up for people who have no voice.’

Tuesday 15 December

Isaiah 60:1-14

Happily ever after

PREPARE

‘Sometimes things turn out for the best, when evil is vanquished and goodness triumphs, where joy is unmixed with pain. I give thanks to God for those times when life has felt rich and his presence near.’

READ

Isaiah 60:1-14

EXPLORE

Happy endings often seem closer to fiction than to fact. What is your favourite story with a happy ending? Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* is one, where Scrooge eventually sees the folly and emptiness of his life and wakes up a new man, much to the joy of those he used to persecute!

This reading marks a moment of awakening and prosperity for Jerusalem (v 1). Gone are the suffering of former years and the shame of capture. This city is now at the centre of God’s purposes (v 3). Not only is this a place enjoying the lavish favour of God, but its glory is also recognised by the nations of the earth (vs 3-5). While they dwell in the thick darkness of obscurity from God (v 2), they recognise Jerusalem’s light and come towards it (v 11). The bad times are behind this city. Exile and shame are forgotten (v 14). Sons and daughters

will return (v 4), an abundance of gifts will be received (vs 5-7) and justice will prevail over her enemies (v 14). Israel has a merciful and redemptive God.

Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that people may bring you the wealth of the nations – their kings led in triumphal procession.

Isaiah 60:11

RESPOND

‘I bring to mind people and places who need their own happy ending after years of sorrow. I see their faces and pain and ask that your face might shine upon them and be gracious to them.’

Grieving in glory land

PREPARE

‘Lord, I quieten my heart and mind as I come before you. I am aware of world events, national politics and the struggles of many people. In the silence of my breath, I reach out to you.’

READ

Isaiah 61:1-11

EXPLORE

This is another well-known and much-loved passage of scripture. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus’ public ministry begins with him reading these words at the synagogue in Nazareth. He applies them directly to himself (Luke 4:21). These now become his words expressing his vocation.

Some theologians refer to it as the Nazareth manifesto, since it outlines God’s agenda for the world. In its tone and style, this reading is like the Servant Songs found in Isaiah (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13 – 53:12) and some suggest this is the fifth Servant Song, using phrases and words found extensively in Isaiah 40-66. It’s a personal and passionate song, reflecting God’s desire to heal his broken people and draw the nations to himself. We live in a world where these words are still helpful and relevant. Where are the opportunities for

us to minister to God’s broken people? What are the places in the world where we want to pray for God to draw the people to himself?

... and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair ...

Isaiah 61:3

RESPOND

‘I pray for those who have lost hope, feeling that God has passed them by. For church leaders who are despondent and tired. For me as I seek to follow Jesus in hard times.’

Thursday 17 December

Isaiah 63:1-14

Who is this?

PREPARE

‘Jesus comes to me now and asks, “Who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:15). I sit with this question, probing my heart. Lord, you are my friend, rescuer and king. But you are God, unlike me, mighty and mysterious. I bow before you.’

READ

Isaiah 63:1-14

EXPLORE

This chapter opens graphically: a bloodstained warrior emerges from Bozrah, declaring that the day of vengeance has occurred. Mention of the day has already been made, along with the day of the Lord’s favour (61:2), when everyone is made accountable to the Lord. As God does a new thing in creation, there is also a reckoning for nations that have obstructed his purposes.

Bozrah was the capital of Edom, a nation related to the Israelites through Esau (Genesis 36:1) who refused to help their relatives as they made their Exodus from Egypt (Numbers 20:18). A city famed for its grapevines provides colourful imagery for the warrior God and his stained garments.

I’m reminded of an old Welsh carol, which includes this reference to Bozrah. Written by David Hughes, this is my translation

of a part of the first verse: ‘The strong man came from Bozrah/ The lawyer came from Sinai/ Atonement came from Calvary in a babe, in a babe.’*

**Who is this coming from Edom,
from Bozrah, with his garments
stained crimson? Who is this,
robed in splendour, striding
forward in the greatness of his
strength? ‘It is I, proclaiming
victory, mighty to save.’**

Isaiah 63:1

RESPOND

‘Who is this? This is God, in the mystery of his being. He is judge, healer and liberator. Lord, help me to understand you, as best I can, in the fullness of your identity.’

*D Hughes (1792–1862), ‘Ar Gyfer Heddiw’r Bore’

Rend the heavens

PREPARE

‘Sometimes I need to pray this prayer: “Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us for ever” (Psalm 44:23). I hope you don’t mind my boldness, Lord, but come on. It’s time for you to act.’

READ

Isaiah 64:1-12

EXPLORE

In 1931, RB Jones, a Bible Institute Principal, authored a small book, *Rent Heavens*, about the Welsh revival of 1904. As the years went by and a new generation emerged, unfamiliar with these stories, Jones urged Christians to plead with God that he might rend the heavens and show himself again in mighty deeds. This has not yet happened.

Isaiah expresses a similar spiritual longing in physical terms. He calls on God to ‘come down’ (v 1) recalling how he ‘came down’ in the past (v 3), revealing himself in power. This longing can be found throughout the Old Testament (eg Habakkuk 3:2), expressed in periods where God seems remote or even absent.

God’s perceived absence leads to sin and iniquity (vs 5–9) and the writer calls out to God in the desolation of a ruined

Jerusalem, asking for mercy (v 9). The hope is that God will act (v 12). Might we pray for revival again as RB Jones entreated?

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!

Isaiah 64:1

RESPOND

‘Am I looking to God for a new thing in my life and community? Do I find myself looking wistfully back to periods of blessing and feel the poverty of my spiritual experience? Or maybe I feel disillusioned by unfulfilled longing and have given up expecting God to do anything. I still myself before God now.’

Saturday 19 December

Isaiah 65:1-7,17-25

A whole new world

PREPARE

‘I thank God for the gift of imagination. I imagine a world where he will wipe every tear from all eyes. Where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.’

.....

READ

Isaiah 65:1-7,17-25

EXPLORE

‘A Whole New World’ is a song from Disney’s 1992 film, *Aladdin*. Jasmine and Aladdin sing it as they soar high above the world’s nations on a magic carpet. The song exclaims that their vision of reality has shifted and they are seeing things from a new point of view. This feel-good song went on to win numerous global music awards.

As I read these words in Isaiah, I have this tune as my mental soundtrack. Isaiah is showing us a new world (v 17) that’s whole and harmonious, reusing words and ideas we’ve read before (ie Isaiah 11:6-9). And the key sign he offers of this restored planet is an environment where there is no conflict (v 19,20). Predatory animals and prey are able to lie down together in peace (v 25). This longing for cosmic renewal is found throughout the Bible, offering glimpses of a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1).

What are our hopes and dreams for our world? What are the steps that we can take to help make the world the sort of better place that Isaiah talks about here?

‘The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,’ says the LORD.

Isaiah 65:25

RESPOND

‘Thank you, Lord, for creation. For the diversity, beauty and life of all that you have made. I imagine a new world as Isaiah sees it and I meditate on this vision. A whole new world.’

I am in trouble

PREPARE

'I may be going through hard times at the moment and I name these troubles before God, asking for his help and comfort. I bring to mind others who also feel overwhelmed by life's difficulties.'

READ

Psalm 69

EXPLORE

This is not an easy read. Often referred to as a psalm of complaint, it's a sustained reflection on pain, injustice and loss. The psalmist doesn't sugarcoat his feelings as he speaks out his lament. Life is hard and unfair and God feels far away. It expresses an existential honesty with which many of us struggle. We often feel that God expects us to be nice in prayer and we can't be too open with friends and family. Not so here. It's like a masterclass in self-reflection. This is me without pretence and I'm directing my reflections towards God. And while worship songs can sometimes seem beige in their human and theological content, this psalm packs a punch.

It's not surprising that Jesus quotes this psalm on several occasions, using words which express the depths of his difficulties. For example, all four

Gospels report Jesus using verse 21 in his anguish on the cross (Matthew 27:34,48; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:36; John 19:28,29). This is language he understands.

But as for me, afflicted and in pain – may your salvation, God, protect me.

Psalm 69:29

RESPOND

'As I bring my troubles before God, I use some words from a much-loved hymn: "What language shall I borrow, to thank thee, dearest friend, for this thy dying sorrow, thy pity without end?"'*

*P Gerhardt, 'O sacred head, now wounded', in German from medieval poem, 1656, translated by J Alexander, 1829

Monday 21 December

Isaiah 66:1-16

God sees a broken heart

PREPARE

‘I come before you and name my weaknesses and not my strengths. You are not moved by my CV but by my honest assessment of myself. “My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise” (Psalm 51:17).’

READ

Isaiah 66:1-16

EXPLORE

Some scholars see verse 2 as the climax of the last few chapters. It’s a stark declaration of God’s sovereignty. He has made all things, has given life to everything and he is present everywhere. And in this freedom, he chooses whom he will look on favourably. And here’s the rub. God is looking for people who know that they are in need of God’s mercy and forgiveness. This is deep in the core of the Bible’s teaching about God and humanity.

Jesus tells a story of two men in the Temple. One is comfortable in his religion, using the space to inflate his soul before God. The other, unwelcomed and uncomfortable, is deeply aware of his need for God’s mercy. It is this man who sees God and is seen by him. The other is lost in his self-congratulation. Even though he is everywhere all the time, God is drawn to the broken and marginalised.

‘Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?’ declares the LORD. ‘These are the ones I look on with favour: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word.’

Isaiah 66:2

RESPOND

‘Forgive me, Lord, for my religious game-playing, wearing my mask collection and pretending to be someone I’m not. You see me as I am, Lord, and love me all the same. I bring my contrite heart and ask for your healing.’

Who on earth are you?

About the writer
Rachel Hudson

Rachel is a recently early-retired Vicar, ordained late in life, after a long career in teaching and training as a psychotherapist. She is married with two adult adopted children and a collection of grandchildren, ranging from 21 to 2 years of age. She is involved in modern monastic communities, particularly with a Celtic background, having fallen in love with Northumberland as a teenager on the team of a Scripture Union mission in the county.



Encountering somebody who baffles us and causes us to wonder about them is not a new thing. Almost everyone who met Jesus was challenged in their perceptions, caused to question the man they met, and changed by that encounter. It can be easy for us to answer the question 'Who is Jesus?' in the simplest terms that we are familiar with (the Son of God). But even today there are many who might wonder, 'Who on earth is this Jesus?'

All the best Hebrew teachers and professional scholars knew the Scriptures. They knew that the Messiah's coming was promised, and they were clearly looking for God to intervene in their world. They interpreted their Law and prophetic scriptures with authority. Matthew uses many of these texts to show clearly how Jesus did fit the prophecies and promises, though not as expected. Matthew's purpose in writing is not expressed as clearly as in Luke's Gospel (Luke 1) but it is absolutely in line with John 20:31 – for people to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and, even more, to find life in Jesus. Matthew's version of the life of Jesus is written to prove who he is to those who doubted his claims. John 5:39 speaks clearly to the religious leaders: 'You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me.' Knowledge is meaningless without spiritual perception. May we find fresh hope as we encounter the life-giver.

Tuesday 22 December

Matthew 1:1-17

Who are you?

PREPARE

‘Every name is a sound worth saying.’* Listen to yourself saying your own name.

.....

READ

Matthew 1:1-17

EXPLORE

The growth of online genealogical research has become huge, as people seek to find out the stories from the generations before them. My father traced our family line back many generations, long before the internet. What stories did your grandparents tell you? Who were the goodies and baddies? The ones whose lives were less ordinary than perhaps your own?

For each of us, our names will have significance, carefully chosen or at least with a story of how they came to be. Each of us will have both a good heritage and often a poor heritage at different stages. Jesus too is reported as having saints and sinners in his lineage – but God has been at work in and through each. Matthew’s genealogy reminds us of God’s actions and sovereignty through the years, and Jesus’ links to key characters from the story of God’s people.

Read through this list of names again – even if some are hard to pronounce! Notice the ones you recognise as ‘goodies’ and then those you know to be presented as ‘baddies’! And there are probably some you have no idea about. Try a search for any that you don’t know. Each one is worthy to be known. Both good and bad parts of their lives were intertwined, but none disqualified them from being in Jesus’ family line.

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Matthew 1:1

RESPOND

‘I have engraved you on the palms of my hands’ (Isaiah 49:16). Give thanks that God knows you by name, and that your worth to the Lord is personal and deep.

*G Kelly, ‘God sees diamonds’

.....

Kindness – human and divine

PREPARE

Can you think of a time when your carefully considered plan was upset by God asking something different of you? What was that like for you?

READ

Matthew 1:18-25

EXPLORE

Matthew's assurance is that the prophecy that was foretold (vs 22,23), happened (v 18): the birth of Jesus to a virgin (v 23). I am struck by the kindness of Joseph when faced with an impossible situation (v 18). We are told of a man giving careful consideration to his dilemma, protecting the vulnerable Mary and yet open to the voice of God who suggests an even better plan! As always, the command is not to be afraid of the purposes of God (v 20).

In this Christmas season, family often comes to the fore in our attention, for good or perhaps with struggle. As you prepare, you might like to consider how kindness can be the hallmark of your relationships this year, as it was with Joseph. We can never know the full impact of our kindness to others. For Joseph the challenge was of eternal consequence and rippled through the generations to come as the child who

was born became the Saviour of the world (v 21).

As we seek to hear and obey the call of God on our lives, we can continue to share the experience and story of what it means that God is with us, Immanuel (v 23).

Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Matthew 1:19

RESPOND

Give thanks for those whose care and kindness has spoken to you of the goodness of God and assured you that God is with you.

Thursday 24 December

Matthew 2:1–12

Stars and dreams

PREPARE

As many of us are caught up in preparations for Christmas, take time to worship the King of kings and Lord of lords today, in whichever way has authenticity for you at this time.

READ

Matthew 2:1–12

EXPLORE

The idea that the Messiah, the King of the Jews, might have come to earth, might have been born within his territory, was a threat to Herod. Yet it does not seem to have been a mystery to the priests and Pharisees. They already knew that Bethlehem would be the location for the coming one, from their own scriptures, and they saw their role as a protective shepherd. So, the magi's journey to identify and worship the Lord gives us the first clear message that giving worship involves bringing the best we can offer in this life.

This account is a familiar story, but it is seldom told without a fanciful and anachronistic context. Today let us focus on the gift of the child come to earth, identified even from his young days as the Messiah, fulfilling the promises of God made hundreds of years earlier. The elevation of Bethlehem from a small,

unimportant place to be the location of Jesus' birth is just one of many ways in which Matthew shows God turning the world's values upside down.

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Matthew 2:11

RESPOND

Give thanks for the ways in which God honoured his promises to send a Saviour, and what that means for you today.

Earth is a dangerous place!

PREPARE

It's tempting to avoid this passage today – preferring the familiar birth stories of Jesus. Yet scripture brings us face to face with the challenge of pain, suffering and evil intent. Ask God to speak through this tough passage.

READ

Matthew 2:13-23

EXPLORE

For the second time in biblical history we read of the slaughter of young children (v 16). In the days of both Moses and Jesus, a generation is wiped out in a localised area. Imagine the grief, the agony, the refusal of any comfort. Yet we face the reality of genocide in some areas of the world, children's hospitals being bombed, news of appalling horrors we would rather not acknowledge. Parents would do anything to protect and shield their children, and grief in the loss of a child is a terrible thing.

Not the stuff of Christmas Day, we think. Matthew's use of Jeremiah's prophecy about Rachel weeping is stark (v 18), and yet the original is part of a promise of restoration, salvation and hope. In the depths of our human despair, it is the same God who comes alongside us, as the one who comforts and holds us in

everlasting arms. 'Was it always going to be like this?' asked a friend facing the loss of their child.

Perhaps Matthew's account gives us a long-term view that God was working out a salvation plan – enabling links to be made as we look back and wonder.

'A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.'

Matthew 2:18

RESPOND

Pray for those who currently struggle with the agony of human suffering across our world.

Saturday 26 December

Matthew 3:1-12

John the midwife?

PREPARE

Invite God to refresh you today, refilling you with the Holy Spirit. Give thanks that the Spirit of God is within you, to equip and empower you.

.....

READ

Matthew 3:1-12

EXPLORE

It's coming! He's coming! Get ready, change your attitude and your behaviour, inward and outward. John's preaching had something of the midwife about it. There's an inevitability about what is coming and though Jesus is his cousin there is still a deep unknowing about what will follow. John, as we know, ends up in prison, and doesn't get to see all that Jesus does. He doesn't get to follow through witnessing the life that Jesus lives. He even wonders, and perhaps doubts at times, if Jesus was indeed the Saviour, sending his own followers to ask (Matthew 11). Yet John is a critical forerunner, an essential announcer of what God is doing in his day. And he dies without seeing the fulfilment of what he declared.

What role are we called to in sharing the good news this Christmas season? Perhaps we will never see the impact of our words, actions and lives in pointing

to Jesus. Perhaps we have to live this life not knowing the result of our influence and having to trust the results to God.

'I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'

Matthew 3:11

RESPOND

Pray that your life on this earth will continue to reflect the call and love of God to those around you, and ask God to bring others to a life of change and transformation whether you live to see it or not.

Comfort and more comfort!

PREPARE

How has God comforted you in the past? What hope did that bring you?

READ

Isaiah 40:1-5

EXPLORE

It is easy to think that hope relates only to the future. However, it must be built on the past and the present as well. We who hope in the Lord do so based on the one we have known up to now; the one who has already given us reason to rely on his promises (v 5). That is how we can be comforted, with tenderness and gentleness (vs 1,2).

Just as the people in exile had relied upon, and hoped, that God would bring about a new Exodus for them with salvation and restoration, so we can rest in the promise of God's saving grace (v 2). Enabled by Jesus, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, we are able to record the Lord's forgiveness towards us. My daily gratitude journal is filled with this comfort.

And we too are called to prepare the way for the Lord – to share the hope that is within us (1 Peter 3:15) because

one day everyone (all flesh) will see the glory of the Lord. Romans 15:4 reminds us that the purpose of the Scriptures is to bring encouragement and hope.

**Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.**

Isaiah 40:1

RESPOND

Today, shine your own light on the tender promises of God which have comforted you. Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to remember the hope to which you have been called.

Monday 28 December

Matthew 3:13–17

Receiving God's affirmation

PREPARE

God's declarations of love for his children are powerful and personal. How much are you able and willing to receive and delight in the words that speak of God's love for you personally? Invite God's help in this.

READ

Matthew 3:13–17

EXPLORE

Jesus receives the deepest affirmation we all desire: that he is loved and delighted in. It seems he was given it more than once, as the same words and ideas are expressed again at the transfiguration (17:1–9). Was this the basic human need to be affirmed? Perhaps it was also a clear and public declaration for others to begin to grasp just who on earth Jesus actually was.

Genesis 22 also speaks of the 'beloved son' Isaac, so the concept of the beloved son involved a willingness to sacrifice life. That's not such a comforting thought for us! We may want the loving affirmation of God but prefer not to offer the sacrificial commitment that being his child might entail. Baptism in water and the Holy Spirit is a crucial step in leaving behind the old life and taking on our new identities, beloved, called,

equipped and strengthened to face whatever the result of repentance might mean for us. Jesus certainly didn't need this but we certainly do!

From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

Matthew 4:17

RESPOND

Give thanks for your own baptism, however long ago. Recall those who have supported, prayed for and taught you in the years since. Rejoice in your calling to become a beloved child of God.

Using or abusing scripture

PREPARE

Which Bible verses have spoken most powerfully to you? Give thanks for the light you have found in the Word of God over the years.

READ

Matthew 4:1-11

EXPLORE

Quoting scripture seems almost to have become unacceptable in our day, rather than being seen as some beautiful, non-threatening words of encouragement. As supporters of organisations such as Scripture Union, we value the words of all scripture highly, as I believe Jesus did. They bring light to us and direct our steps in life, and so we have committed to follow God's 'righteous laws' (Psalm 119:105,106).

The use of the challenge 'If' from the devil (v 3) is designed to cast doubt in the mind, but Jesus' response is a confident use of the Word of God. 'It is written' (v 4) suggests both a deep respect and a clear knowledge of the Old Testament on Jesus' part. In our world, where challenges to the Scriptures are common, even from within the church, we need to hold fast. We need to know and be able to use the Word of God confidently and with

wisdom. Jesus' example here is not just about handling temptation but also correctly handling the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."

Matthew 4:10

RESPOND

Pray for those who will teach, preach and share the Word of God in your context. Memorise Hebrews 4:12 for yourself: 'For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.'

Wednesday 30 December

Matthew 4:12–17

At home on earth

PREPARE

How many homes have you lived in? What has moving home meant for you in your lifetime? What were the gains and losses? Where do you think of as ‘home’?

READ

Matthew 4:12–17

EXPLORE

The restoration promised by God is coming! Matthew’s use of just a part of the wonderful passage about the coming Saviour in Isaiah 9 indicates the salvation and renewal of land and people in the northern lands. Nazareth and Capernaum are a 55-minute drive, or 10-hour walk, from one another – far enough to involve a leaving behind when moving to a new place.

We might reflect on what this meant for the very human Jesus, moving away from his home, family and occupation, and embracing a new place to call home, new companions and a new message of promise. The beginning of his three-year ministry, after nearly 30 years in Nazareth, must have required a degree of commitment and devotion from Jesus. It is easy for us to forget the very fully human experience that Jesus, as the Son of God and knowing the Father’s salvation plan, faced at

this point, aware too of the dangers of being hunted down like his cousin, John. Calling people to change their ways is never a popular option, but in Christ the promise that the kingdom is near is attractive. And so it begins...

‘The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.’

Matthew 4:16

RESPOND

Read Isaiah 9 and celebrate the promises given there. Which of the titles given to Jesus (v 6) speaks to you today?

Sudden call – rapid response!

PREPARE

When were you first aware of God's call to you personally? Whether an immediate moment or part of a process in following Jesus, give thanks that he did indeed call you.

READ

Matthew 4:18-25

EXPLORE

It was at a Scripture Union Mission house party on New Year's Eve that I recall responding to that call to follow Jesus, over 50 years ago! The challenge for us as young people was that our faith was not dependent upon our family's: not inherited, but personal. Jesus wants you!

The two sets of brothers in today's passage (v 18) seem to have seen an authority in Jesus which set them apart from their family and which was so powerfully attractive that their response was not just rapid but immediate (v 22). However, it led all of them into dangerous situations, into opposition, and ultimately to martyrdom. The call of Jesus is a dangerous one for many.

As we enter a new year, the world may seem like a dangerous place to be a Christian. May we be people who

respond to the daily call to 'follow me'; trusting in the character and authority of the one who calls us.

How exciting must the early days have been for Peter, Andrew, James and John as they listened to the teaching of Jesus (vs 23-25) and saw God at work through him (vs 23,24). Where are we seeing signs of God's Kingdom today?

'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.'

Matthew 4:19

RESPOND

The one who calls you is faithful. Praise God for each new day and new year's opportunity to follow and obey.

Index to reflections from the Psalms

Psalm	Title	Page	Psalm	Title	Page
20	A matter of perspective	10	62	Rest	350
21	The unfailing love of God	17	63	Family anguish	357
22	Prophetic words	25	64	Be careful who you slander	367
23	Our faithful God	32			
24	God of all	40	65	Pour out praises!	374
25	Praise and pain	47	66	This is my story	382
26	On level ground	57	67	International praise	383
27	A contemplative's psalm	64	68	God the Cloud Rider	390
28	A heart after God's	72	69	I am in trouble	397
29	Loud and clear	79			
30	Praising in faith	87			
31	Seeking abundant blessings	94			
32	The joy of being forgiven	102			
33	Unfailing love	117			
34	Reality check	125			
35	Cries from the heart	133			
36	God is our refuge	140			
37	Who are you talking to?	155			
38	Being in pain	173			
39	God who hears our cries	180			
40	God who rescues	188			
41	Thought for the weak	195			
42, 43	Thirsting for God	203			
44	A desperate cry	211			
45	For a royal wedding	218			
46	The eye of the storm	226			
47	Celebrate!	234			
48	City view	241			
49	God, death and wealth	249			
50	True worship	256			
51: 1 - 19	Forgiven praise	266			
52	A green olive tree	273			
53	Whose fool are you?	281			
54	God of justice	289			
55	When friends betray	296			
56	God who knows our tears	304			
57	Delivered	312			
58	Justice is God's	319			
59	Reliance on God	327			
60	Our victorious God	335			
61	When my heart is faint	342			