

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered why SU-USA Bible Guide prayers don't end with Amen? This is intentional; we don't end the prayers in any of our children's publications either. As I write prayers for the Bible guides, I ask God for his inspiration and that he would use each one as a stepping stone for your personal praises, petitions, confessions, and commitments. It is for you, then, to add the Amen.

In *Discovery* this quarter, we will begin by reading the final chapters in **Mark's gospel** that detail Jesus' final week, from his anointing in Bethany through his resurrection and sending out the disciples into the world.

Proverbs will continue to offer instruction on choosing to live our lives following God in accordance with his wisdom and on the consequences of failing to do so.

We will return to the **Gospel of Mark** and reflect on Jesus' ministry as he appoints the twelve to be with him and prepare them to carry out his work. He will teach with parables, heal many, and demonstrate his kingdom power.

The book of **Exodus** will continue following the Israelites' journey through the wilderness, and God will establish them as his people through a covenant at Mount Sinai. Through Moses, he will give them the Ten Commandments and laws for the covenant.

The letter to the **Hebrews** will focus on the preeminence of Jesus, the Son of God, the One to whom we should pay close attention. Only through faith in him is God's promised rest found.

The prophet **Joel** will warn sinners that judgment is coming, but there is hope for the future. Those who bring him heartfelt repentance will receive his love and mercy, and a day will come when God will bring restoration and renewal to all creation.

Isaiah will also speak of judgment and hope, not just for Israel but for the world. He will foretell the coming of the Messiah, who alone will bring justice to the nations.

In the chapters we read in **Romans**, Paul will speak of the present and future hope of the gospel, in which new life in Christ offers freedom from sin and life in the Spirit. Paul will also relate to God's plan for Israel and the inclusion of the gentiles.

2 Samuel will begin with the reign of David, anointed first as the king of Judah, then of Israel, mourning significant losses and winning strategic battles. God will make a covenant with David: his throne will be established forever.

There is a great deal to cover this quarter, many things to reflect on and apply. There is much about which to respond in prayer as the Holy Spirit speaks to your heart.

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

Scripture Union's Bible Reading Method

PRAY that God would speak to you from the Bible passage.

READ the Bible passage slowly and thoughtfully, perhaps more than once.

REFLECT on what you've read.

APPLY what you learn from the Bible to the situations in your life.

PRAY again, using your discoveries from the Bible to guide your prayers.

TRUE STORY

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 for taking 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 to be 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 significant 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.

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 live in Bath with her husband and their two daughters.

WISDOM FOR LIFE

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. Still, with imagination, it is possible 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).

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

WHY FOLLOW JESUS?

Sometimes, reading the Gospels, I find myself glossing over the words because I know them so well. In writing about the following passages, 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 'REFLECT' 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. Still, in a culture where the head of the house would determine the religion of all his family, many had become members of the church without understanding who Jesus was or what it meant to follow him. Mark wanted to clarify that Jesus was the Son of God and that following him meant leaving behind all other religious practices and allegiances.

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—the verse immediately previous to the section we will read this week states that two different religio-political parties had joined forces to plot Jesus' death (Mark 3:6)—but he had power over all the forces arrayed against him, and he offers that power to his followers.

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

JOURNEY OF DISCOVERIES

The Israelites have been enslaved in Egypt for more years than any of them can remember. After about 400 years of exposure 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?

We move from nail-biting travelers' 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 what their lives will need to look like as they approach their future destination. Justice is a big deal for God, and some passages make hard reading, particularly those containing laws that seem very strange to us. But there is still so much to learn through God's instructions to his chosen ones. Although the leader of a vast people, Moses is only a man. His frustrations and need for 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 Moses spending a glorious 40 days and nights with God. How we long for that quality time with God, and what an encouragement to keep us on our own journey.

LIZ PACEY runs her local charity Knitwits group. She enjoys regular speaking engagements, talking about knitting, books, old age – or anything really.

LADDERS AND BRANCHES

Is equality essential? Definitely, yes! Inequality in opportunities and rights has created imbalances in society and has caused 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 hierarchical systems. Ranks and positions are not just decorations; they are essential rungs on the organizational ladder. However, we often see exploitation and imbalance when a system operates 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 toward harmony. As we read the first six chapters of the book, let us observe how God has ordained the framework of relationships among the many players in his divine drama. Let us also be mindful of how humanity's rebellion and sin can mar the beauty of relationships. More than anything, let's discover afresh the salvation ministry of Jesus Christ, which establishes a right relationship with God the Father and helps us all move on until we reach the rest he has prepared for us.

JACOB KUNNATH is a member of the Church of South India. He was brought up in the missionary and Anglican roots of the church, which helped him develop Bible-based perspectives regarding faith and life. At college, Jacob accepted Jesus as his Savior and he is glad to be in service to the Lord through his calling as a teacher for the past 30 years.

BEYOND DISASTEROUS

In December 2023, three academics—Benjamin Toff, Ruth Palmer, and Rasmus K. Nielsen—wrote a book titled *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 disasters, 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).

STEVE SILVESTER is Rector of St Nic's Nottingham, a thriving international city-center 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.

THIS IS OUR GOD

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 God's comfort for his people, his proclamation of his sovereignty in the world, and the revelation of his glory to come.

Some of what Isaiah writes specifically predicts events that would happen in, or not far from, the time it was written; other parts point to Jesus and his life on earth (see John 12:41). However, we too need these truths today in our ever-changing world. Isaiah 40:8 says that 'the word of our God endures forever.' May God's Word show you his sovereignty and faithfulness in the next few days as you explore it.

LOUISA KING lives in Sheffield with her young family. She loves being part of her church family and likes meeting people, journaling, and reading in cafes.

GRACE TRUMPS RULES

Like most schools, mine had a set of rules. More than fifty years ago, 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 [sic] against common sense is an offence [sic] 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 57 AD, probably from Corinth—he emphasizes that grace (God’s unmerited favor 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 greatest 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.

EMLYN WILLIAMS worked for 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 speaking ministries, and are involved in a local Anglican church.

SEQUELS

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 so to somewhat 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 were 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...

NIGEL ROBERTS has worked in Christian theological education, youth work with Youth for Christ, and chaplaincy with the Saltey Trust for many years. He writes and directs Red River Theater Company, a professional collective of actors in the midlands, and is chair of governors in a Church of England infants' school.