

**John 18–21**

This quarter, John will conclude his gospel, recording the fulfillment of prophecy. We will read about the events that led to Jesus' crucifixion and burial. His tomb will be discovered empty, and Jesus will then minister to his disciples. John tells us that he has written "so that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." (20:31)

**Matthew 9–10**

Through life-changing miracles, Jesus will demonstrate his power and authority over the kingdom about which he has been teaching. He will call people to follow him, to radical change and obedience. In sending out his twelve disciples, he will give them—and us—instruction and assurance for fearlessly proclaiming the gospel.

**Song of Solomon**

Traditionally attributed to Solomon, we will see a love story that illustrates God's loving, intimate, and committed relationship with his people, as well as the foreshadowing of Christ's love for the church and his desires for his bride.

**2 Chronicles 28–36**

As we read the final chapters of 2 Chronicles, the reigns of Judah's evil kings will eventually lead to the fall of the southern kingdom. The exceptions—Hezekiah, a repentant Manasseh, and Josiah — will please God, bringing about temporary reform. Ultimately, however, the apostasy of the last four kings will lead to the Babylonian exile.

**Romans 9–16**

Having previously addressed the doctrine of salvation, Paul will turn to God's sovereignty in Israel's election, and their rejection of the gospel that resulted in his grafting in of the gentiles for salvation. He will then focus on how to live out the gospel by being loving, humble, and merciful, both to those who would believe and those within the church—to live in ways that glorify God.

**Joel**

The prophet will tell of the strike of a devastating plague of locusts that struck Israel, foreshadowing God's impending wrath and judgment, the "Day of the Lord." He will also prophesy concerning the outpouring of God's Spirit, which was fulfilled at Pentecost.

**Genesis 1–11**

We will read of God's creation of a good and beautiful world and humanity's rebellion that led to brokenness and separation from God. Sin will increase, and God will respond with judgment, finally bringing a devastating flood and ultimately scattering humankind throughout the world. God will not abandon them or his world, however; a wounded victor will come to rescue and redeem them.

**Matthew 11–12**

In these chapters, Jesus reveals much about who he is. He sends assurance to the imprisoned John the Baptist and then speaks to a crowd, honoring him and stating that John was the Elijah who was prophesied to come. He will answer the Pharisees' criticism, identifying himself as Lord of the Sabbath and condemning unbelief. Using parables, Jesus will teach about the kingdom of God. Despite his grief over John's death, Jesus will have compassion on thousands and continue to teach his disciples.

**Scripture Union's Bible Reading Method**

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

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

REFLECT on what you've read.

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

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

## JOHN 18–21

### THE HOUR HAS COME

We dare not let our knowledge of the Easter story blunt its sharpness, our familiarity diminish its power. This drives me as I write my final set of reflections, after 37 years of writing for *Encounter with God*. What a privilege to conclude with John's narrative of what Jesus called his 'hour'! John's whole gospel strains toward it, with Jesus' repeated but cryptic phrase, 'my hour has not yet come.' Film, literature, and tradition lead us to concentrate on 'The Passion of Christ'—Jesus' suffering—but, for John, Jesus' hour embraces his resurrection and ascension. The Jesus whom our writer wants us to know went to his death willingly, not as a tortured victim but in control of his destiny. Jesus' hour, as John understood it, included not only his suffering and death but also his exaltation and glorification.

Modern Bible scholars avoid being dogmatic about John's identity. Still, one thing is certain—his gospel contains hardly anything about Jesus' Galilean ministry, concentrating instead on what he did in and around Jerusalem. It is reasonable to conclude that this is the gospel of the Jerusalem church, the 'we' of the first and last chapters. The twelve disciples are not relevant to John's gospel, in which the word 'disciple' embraces all who follow Jesus. Nathanael is a disciple, and so are Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and unnamed 'other disciples,' including the enigmatic 'beloved disciple.' Their eyewitness reports of the Jerusalem events were the trustworthy source for John's account of Jesus' 'hour,' his dreadful and glorious hour through which we were redeemed and gain eternal life. These disciples lived in and around Jerusalem until they were exiled after the Romans destroyed the city in 70 AD. For forty years, they had been constantly reminded of Jesus' trial, execution, and resurrection as they daily walked past the Garden of Gethsemane, Calvary, or the empty tomb. In exile, they still safeguarded the story. Through John, they have bequeathed their deep understanding to us.

### FOR FURTHER READING

I found helpful: Gail O'Day, *John, The New Interpreter's Bible* (Abingdon Press, 1994).

## MATTHEW 9–10

### HEALINGS AND HOSTILITIES

In the middle of Jesus' ministry, a great crowd of people is following him wherever he goes. He has just finished a long teaching session in Galilee (Chpts. 5–7), which has provoked amazement (7:28) among them. Astonished by his authority and his vision for life in the kingdom of God, they are keen to hear more. The Jewish leaders, however, especially the Pharisees, find Jesus' authority threatening. He doesn't fit their idea of a Messiah, so the opposition to Jesus has started to grow. That is the situation at the beginning of Chapter 8.

Matthew's gospel portrays Jesus as the king of the kingdom of heaven. Chapters 8–10 focus on the immensity and range of the King's power. Nine healing miracles described in Chapters 8 and 9 involve some very different people, including a gentile, a child, women, demoniacs, and several people with physical disabilities. Among them are the 'poor in spirit', 'those who mourn', 'the meek', etc. —and Jesus blesses them all. Thus, these miracles act as visual aids to the beatitudes.<sup>1</sup> A tenth miracle is the calming of the storm. All the miracles are signs announcing the coming kingdom of God. All of them point to Jesus' identity as the long-expected Jewish Messiah. All illustrate and emphasize the need for faith in him.

Chapter 9 includes the calling of Matthew himself. When the Pharisees question Jesus' eating 'with tax collectors and sinners', Jesus is recorded as saying, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill'.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Matthew presents his own calling and conversion, and that of other sinners, as yet another healing. Chapter 10 records the sending of the twelve on their first mission and Jesus' teaching in preparation for that. Just as Jesus is facing growing opposition, so his disciples will face opposition as they preach the gospel. Jesus presents them both with challenges and assurances, developing the theme of 5:9–12.

<sup>1</sup> Matt 5:3–10 <sup>2</sup> Matt 9:11, 12.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

RT France, *Matthew*, Tyndale NT Commentary, (IVP, 2015).

## SONG OF SOLOMON

### A HEBREW LOVE POEM

Song of Solomon is unique. It does not naturally fit into our understanding of Scripture, since it is a romantic love poem between a man and woman. Solomon appears in the title and is identified as the man. There are two additional voices: the unnamed woman, sometimes referred to as the Shulamite (possibly related to the Hebrew word *shalom*, meaning “peace”), and a chorus of friends or onlookers. English translations give headings to denote who is speaking. They are not in the original text but are deduced from changes in gender and number (singular and plural) in the original Hebrew.

This is not a narrative (although there are small pieces of action), and God does not appear. Nor is it a theological treatise or instruction manual, giving advice on how to live. It would more naturally fit into a poetry collection. Its presence within Scripture reminds us of the value of romantic love and that sexual intimacy in the right context is something that is good and blessed by God. In poetic style, it also provides a metaphor for the intimacy between God and his people, of the church being the bride and God in Christ being the Bridegroom.

The attribution to Solomon means that it is characterized as a ‘wisdom’ book, like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. However, wisdom is not a significant theme of the book: the central theme is love. The English word ‘love’ has several meanings: romantic love, familial love, lustful attraction, friendship love, the love of objects or things, and unconditional godly love. Song of Solomon uses two different Hebrew words: *Ahav*, a generic word for love, and *Daud*, the word for ‘beloved’ (the Hebrew word from which we get the name David). Its use of these two words rather than *Hesed* and *Racham* identifies the book as being about romantic intimacy. By focusing on this intimacy, the book reveals to us the different characteristics of love, reminding us how much we are loved by God.

## 2 CHRONICLES 28–36

### DECLINE AND FALL

Solomon was the third king of Israel, following King Saul and his father, King David. When he died in the year 931 BC,<sup>1</sup> the country was divided into two: the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Twenty kings reigned in Judah until the exile in 686 BC. Starting with King Ahaz in 735 BC and ending with Zedekiah nearly 150 years later, our studies for the next two weeks cover the last nine of them.

The most weighty matters, according to the Book of the Law, required the testimony of two or three witnesses.<sup>2</sup> These historical narratives qualify, as they are also recorded, in different forms, in 2 Kings and in Jeremiah. Besides, as attested in archaeological findings (some of which we can see for ourselves in such places as the British Museum in London), they were also recorded in the chronicles of the conquering powers of Assyria and Babylon. Indeed, the manuscripts from which these and other records of the Bible derive constitute the most reliable ancient documents known.<sup>3</sup> It is normal for ancient kings to document their victories. The Jews, however, recorded not only victories but also their ignominious defeats. This is especially true of 1 and 2 Chronicles, because the writers were keen to demonstrate that the fortunes of the nation were directly related to its faithfulness or unfaithfulness to God.

Unlike in the northern kingdom, where all the kings were either simply bad or utterly atrocious, there were a few very good kings in Judah. The overall trajectory, however, was downward, as kings and their people failed to learn the lessons of history or listen to the prophets God sent among them. The inevitable result was the dissolution of the kingdom and exile to Babylon. There are lessons galore for our generation. Unless we turn to the Lord, who alone can save us, we are on course for our own decline and fall.

<sup>1</sup> See 2 Chr 9:29–31 <sup>2</sup> Deut 19:15 <sup>3</sup> [www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/are-biblical-manuscripts-reliable/](http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/are-biblical-manuscripts-reliable/).

## ROMANS 9–16

### A MANIFESTO OF LOVE

I recently taught Romans to a group in the church by using Scot McKnight's book, *Reading Romans Backwards*:<sup>1</sup> an invigorating experience, challenging and rewarding. The 'backwards' in the title is there because McKnight begins by looking at Chapter 16 and all the names, working his way backward through the book. The church at Rome included people from all stations of life, slave and free, who would never have come together as equals under any other circumstances. The names make it clear that this letter is written to a church that comprised Jews and gentiles, with an influx of Jews when Claudius' decree expelling them from Rome in 49 AD was revoked five years later. The thesis of the whole of Romans is the need for them to appreciate and support one another. A subsidiary theme in Chapters 14 and 15 is the importance of 'weak' and 'strong' Christians working together in love. It has struck me on rereading this letter how consistent Paul's emphasis is on mutual spiritual growth and how relevant this is for today's church. For it to happen, each of us must submit our whole selves to Jesus Christ and adopt his attitude of humility and service.

Because of its length and complexity, we often study Romans in sections, bracketing off the difficult chapters 9–11, enjoying the practicality of Chapter 12, not sure what to do with the instructions in chapters 13, 14, and 15, and skipping Chapter 16 altogether because 'it's all names.' We treat Chapters 1–8 as if they were a stand-alone theological treatise.

I have tried to read Chapters 9–16 as a sustained argument flowing out of Chapters 1–8 and designed to bring together rival factions in the church at Rome. Many of the issues today are different, but Paul's wisdom is absolutely contemporary.

<sup>1</sup> Scot McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the Midst of Empire* (Baylor University Press, 2019).

## JOEL

### THE DAY OF THE LORD

The books of Hosea and Joel may be seen as a two-part introduction to the minor prophets (or the twelve). Hosea stresses God's intimate relationship with Israel, whereas Joel focuses on 'the day of the Lord,' two major concepts that run through this loose collection, linked by themes and catchphrases.<sup>1</sup> Remembered mostly for its prophecy about the outpouring of God's Spirit (2:28–32),<sup>2</sup> the historic context of the book of Joel and the identity of the prophet are unknown. It is also debated by some scholars whether the initial locust plague described in Chapter 1 was real or a metaphor for an enemy invasion.

While I am persuaded by the former option, the key to Joel's prophecies is that they operate on two levels: the current crisis (whatever it might be) in the prophet's day is a foretaste of a climactic future time. Thus, the devastating locust plague becomes a precursor for 'the day of the Lord' (1:15, 2:1, 11, 31, 3:14). In popular expectation, such a day was simply a time of Israel's vindication and deliverance from enemies, but Joel, like others,<sup>3</sup> warns that God will judge evil and sin not only among the nations but in his own people too. Nevertheless, if Israel repents and wholeheartedly turns to the Lord in the present, not only does he make up for the wasted years now, but he will bring ultimate restoration, renewal, and justice on that final day.

Thus, Joel teaches that the present is the prelude to what is to come. How we live in the here and now will affect the ultimate ending for good or ill. The key is not a sinless life but a willingness to turn back to God and renew our relationship with him. The book is a forceful reminder that the Lord's defining character is compassion and grace and that he cares deeply for the good of his people.

<sup>1</sup> E.g., Joel 2:13, 14; cf. Jonah 3:9, 4:2 <sup>2</sup> See Acts 2:16–21 <sup>3</sup> Amos 5:18–20; Zeph 2:1–3.

## GENESIS 1–11

### LET'S START AT THE VERY BEGINNING

The Bible would be incomprehensible without the book of Genesis, which sets the stage for the drama of redemption that develops in the pages that follow. As we read these first 11 chapters, we'll delve into the rich tapestry of narratives encompassing creation, humanity, and glimpses into the nature of God. At the heart of this account lies the historic act where God breathes life into Adam. Within a few days, we'll also consider the momentous act of God breathing life into his people on the day of Pentecost, in fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel covered in Thursday's reading. As we explore the breath of God infusing Adam with life, we are reminded of the Holy Spirit's transformative power at Pentecost.

The triune nature of God is woven intricately into these chapters. From the opening verse where God speaks, suggesting the Word, to later references of the Spirit hovering over the waters, Genesis subtly introduces us to a complexity and unity within the nature of God. While embarking on this consideration of the divine nature, we'll also have many opportunities to ponder the nature of humanity. Characters will enter the scene whose flawed natures will become evident, contrasting intensely with the astonishing grace extended to them by their Creator.

Amid the account of creation and the fall, the story of Noah emerges as a pivotal moment in the biblical narrative. This man, chosen by God to preserve life on the flooded earth, exemplifies faithfulness and obedience within a world dominated by chaos and corruption. For many of us, these chapters will contain familiar stories. As you approach each passage and consider key characters, be encouraged to ask God to breathe new life into the verses that you read and to breathe his Spirit afresh into your being.

## MATTHEW 11–12

### TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED

My first step in preparing these notes was to read the four chapters in one sitting, trying to adopt the mindset of someone coming to them for the first time. As I did this, I became increasingly aware of how surprising Jesus' words and actions must have been to those who first encountered him. Hence, my title for these chapters is the lens through which I have looked at each passage.

Commentaries inform us that three key themes in Matthew's gospel are, first, 'Who Jesus is' (i.e., Christology), second, 'Living in the kingdom of heaven,' and thirdly, 'Jesus and the Jewish Law.' All these are present in our readings, but with surprising twists in how each one is portrayed. Frequently, Jesus is not the kind of Messiah expected by his Jewish contemporaries, nor does he conform to our expectations: for example, his apparent harshness toward his mother and brothers in Chapter 12 makes us uncomfortable. His words about the kingdom, especially in the parables of Chapter 13, leave us with some untidy, troubling questions rather than neatly tying up everything. After 2,000 years of Christian history, we may be surprised by Jesus' attitude toward the law. Still, there are challenging and perhaps surprising questions raised when we consider our own cherished traditions and what might be our Lord's view of some of them.

This year, we have grown a small quantity of fruit and vegetables in our garden. This home-grown produce is far more flavorful than the processed and pre-packed stuff from a supermarket. There is a danger that we become accustomed to a Jesus who is 'pre-packed' by our traditional images, 'processed' by what we have heard from others, and so we miss the surprising flavor of the real Jesus. Let's open our minds and hearts to encounter the 'unexpected' Lord in these familiar passages.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

RT France, *Matthew*, Tyndale NT Commentary (IVP, 1985).

Paula Gooder, *The Parables* (Canterbury Press, 2020).

Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1* (SPCK, 2004).