

# INTRODUCTION

The SU national staff was given six weeks to vacate our Valley Forge office. The task of moving workspaces (in addition to copy and postage machines, mailing supplies, etc.) and substantial inventory felt insurmountable, but that was the least of our challenges. We had no place to go, and finding a suitable new office seemed impossible in such a short time.

The readings for this quarter of the new year address difficulties that we all face. We will see our God of the impossible faithful at every turn, answering his people's needs. He will keep his promises and carry out his plan for the building of his kingdom.

In **Genesis**, our journey with Abraham will continue. He will falter, but God will be merciful; he will trust God and find him faithful; he will seek God's help and be answered in ways he could never imagine. No doubt we will identify with Jacob and Esau as we see God at work, despite who they are.

We will move on in **1 Samuel** to see the worst of Saul and the best of David as one man strays from God, and the other seeks to honor him. The king and the country he rules will fail. God will respond with favor to David's loyalty, giving him a treasured and strategic friendship with Jonathan, enabling him to escape Saul repeatedly, and giving him victory in battle. Things will not always be easy for David, but God will prove himself faithful at every turn.

**Isaiah** will continue to prophesy about God's authority over ungodly nations, pronouncing judgment and predicting ruin, but also offering the hope of restoration and peace. He will warn of the impending fall of disobedient and indifferent Jerusalem, whose only hope lies in repentance. Finally, he will speak of the earth's utter desolation, but of God's triumphant reign. The message is timeless—our peace, even when there are trials, comes from a genuine faith, steadfast obedience, and reliance on God and his Word.

The **gospel of Mark** recounts Jesus' ministry, including his miracles and teachings. He will be shown to be the Christ, the Son of God, and Lord of the Sabbath. We jump to later chapters where Jesus will share the Passover meal with his disciples, then take unwavering steps toward crucifixion.

Reading further in **Acts**, Luke gives an account of Paul and Barnabas, detailing their unshakable commitment to proclaim the gospel. On their missionary journeys, despite adversity, trials, and even disagreements, they will obey the Holy Spirit, who gives them power as they preach to the gentiles and build the church.

Paul wrote **Romans** at the end of his third missionary journey. Although he did not find it, he wanted to establish the church in the gospel and unify the Greek-speaking gentile and Jewish believers. In the early chapters, he will address humanity's universal need for righteousness, never achieved through the law, but only through faith in the risen Christ.

**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.

## 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 declaration: '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!

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## A MAN OF FAITH

For the next two weeks, we'll be studying part of the life of Abraham and his family. There is a lot 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 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, regardless of the circumstances. Because Abraham said yes to him, we can too!

**SUE CLUTTERHAM** is a former local Mission Partner with Scripture Union who 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 favorite place in the world is a deserted beach.

# 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 (Chpts. 1-11) and practical wisdom (Chpts. 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.

Apart from his imprisonment there, Paul had never visited Rome, but he knew many people there (see Chapter 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 arguing over unessential matters; rather, they should offer one another the same grace that they had all freely received (Chpts. 14, 15).

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

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

## DAVID ON THE RUN

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 time 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 easily we can 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.

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## GOD'S PLAN

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 midpoint. He has told how Jewish leaders at every level rejected Jesus, refused to recognize him as God's chosen Savior, 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 (Chpts. 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 broad 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.

CATH BUTLER enjoys working as a peripatetic music tutor, and she has just qualified as a spiritual director. 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.

## 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, which is often referred to as 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 contain 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 the ages to worship God in the New Jerusalem. These promises are for us; this hope is ours.

**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.

## 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 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 to be close to the action, enabling us 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 us pray that as we read, the Holy Spirit will give us ears to hear, soft hearts to understand, and the ability to 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.