

Matthew 3–9

In our Matthew readings, John the Baptist will prepare the way for Jesus. Following his baptism, the heavens are opened, Jesus is declared God's Son, and the ministry for which he came begins. After his testing in the wilderness, Jesus will be a teacher for the disciples he has called, as well as for the multitudes that follow him. He will announce the arrival of God's Kingdom and call people to radical change, where hearts are transformed to fulfill the law and reflect the love and mercy of God as they pursue his righteousness. Jesus will show compassion, especially to the helpless and marginalized, while also demonstrating his power over both the physical and spiritual realms, as well as his authority to forgive sins.

2 Chronicles 1–27

The Book of 2 Chronicles records a focused spiritual history of the Southern Kingdom of Judah from the reign of Solomon to the beginning of the Babylonian captivity. The chapters we will read describe Solomon's construction and dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, as well as God's gifts of wisdom, wealth, military power, and diplomatic influence, which provide prosperity and security for his people.

The Davidic line will continue through generations, with kings and the nation blessed for their obedience to God or punished for their recalcitrance. The Chronicler's emphasis is on those who zealously seek to turn the people back to God, and where there is repentance, God responds with love and mercy, offering forgiveness and blessing.

Romans 1–8

Paul wrote this heartfelt epistle to establish the churches in Rome with the gospel. It explores the foundational Christian doctrines of sin, justification by faith, and the Holy Spirit's transformative power in the life of believers. The chapters in this quarter will address humanity's universal need for righteousness, impossible to achieve through the Mosaic Law. Only through faith in Jesus' atoning sacrifice is God's wrath appeased and one is justified, having peace with God and experiencing his abundant grace. With new life in the Spirit, there is freedom from sin and death and the assurance of future glory.

John 18

Continuing in John's gospel, an adulterous woman will be used by religious leaders to trap Jesus. He will expose their hypocrisy; they, too, are sinners, having no right to judge her. The Savior refuses to condemn the woman, showing her compassion and mercy; he offers redemption and a new beginning. Here, we learn of our own need to extend grace and our own need of God's mercy. Jesus then will identify himself as the Light of the World. The Pharisees will not understand what he is telling them, but to follow him is to have the light of life.

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.

MATTHEW 3–7

GOING PUBLIC

Welcome to the New Year. These chapters in Matthew will be familiar—yet, because they are God’s living Word, you can expect to be startled by fresh questions, truths, and challenges. At a fast pace, these five chapters lay the foundations as Jesus’ public ministry begins.

First, we see some critical building blocks of personal preparation. John the Baptist’s Elijah-like ministry bridges the Old Testament and the New. We should marvel when Jesus chooses to identify with the crowds seeking baptism. Matthew emphasizes how unacceptable this is to John, but John must learn, with us, just how different the Messiah will be. In the retelling of Jesus’ desert temptations, we wonder whether he could really fail. How human is he, as well as divine? That plumbs true theological depth! Astonishingly, as the incarnate Son of God, he is revealed as fully both. Yes, he could fail, but he does not. When Jesus moves to humble Galilee, we read that ordinary individuals matter to him. He chooses ordinary fishermen as his first disciples, and he heals many unnamed people who are hurting. This focus on individuals marks the entirety of his mission. He cares for people like us.

Second, Matthew recounts Jesus’ radical teaching on the mount, emphasizing that he is greater than Moses. Jesus fulfils the Old Testament with his deeper teaching. What jewels are to be found! The beatitudes and Lord’s Prayer are set in teaching that invites high standards in our attitudes and deeds. It’s meant to challenge, as in the stark choice between the narrow and wide gates, but not as an impossible list of moral demands. Rather, as Tom Wright describes it: ‘The sermon ... isn’t just about how to behave. It’s about discovering the living God in the loving and dying Jesus, and learning to reflect that love ourselves into the world that needs it so badly.’¹ That’s our opportunity in 2026!

FOR FURTHER READING

Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount* (Zondervan, 2013)

Elaine Storkey, *Meeting God in Matthew* (SPCK, 2022)

Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone* (SPCK, 2004)

¹ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone* (SPCK, 2004), 53.

2 CHRONICLES 1–12

THE GLORY AND THE SHAME

2 Chronicles takes us over the ground covered in 1 and 2 Kings, but with some significant differences. The chronicler's interest is confined to the southern kingdom of Judah, as his focus is on the house of David and the temple in Jerusalem. The account is also carefully edited, leaving out some of the more sensational aspects of this period. The book was shaped after the exile and the return to their land, when leadership, from Ezra onward, was increasingly in the hands of the priests. It wants to emphasize the central importance of worship.

Hence, in these chapters, aspects of Solomon's life are overlooked to convey the impression of a golden age when the temple was built and dedicated. At first, you may think the writer has simply written a more sanitized and duller account of their history. However, the writer wanted to help a small, beleaguered remnant to know their roots and rediscover their sense of destiny. They have returned to their land, but so much that was familiar has gone, and it would be easy to feel depressed and defeated. As the story is retold, the writer seeks to highlight God's faithfulness and promises to his people, the power of the Word of God, and the central role of worship in the lives of God's people. Through that, he wants them to take heart and keep going.

The books of Kings, written from a prophetic standpoint, show how far the nation fell short of its calling and so came under the judgment of God. Chronicles, written later, wants to convey a message of hope and how God's promises never fail. Only when the people have a sense of God's hand over their lives and God's purpose being outworked will they have the strength to cope with the present and believe for the future. The desire was that God should not be marginalized but remain firmly at the center stage. Keep your focus firmly on the Lord God.

ROMANS 1–8

LIVING BY FAITH

A vast cosmopolitan place, Rome was an impressive city, the powerful center of the world's civilization at the crossroads of the known world. Growing here among its inhabitants was a people of faith in Jesus, perhaps including some who had been in Jerusalem for the day of Pentecost,¹ perhaps including converted Jews or gentiles who had been traveling and returned to live in Rome.² The recipients of this letter were a mixed group—Paul names some of them later in 16:1–16. Who founded the church is not clear, but unlike those of the Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, this church was not founded by Paul. He came to them as a renowned teacher and apostle. He had deep concern for them, but not the founding-father authority that he had in some churches.

In his letter, probably written in Corinth around 56–57 AD, Paul takes on the task of explaining the gospel in a way that has grounded the church's understanding of its faith ever since. Writing early in the church's development, this was difficult. As shown in Acts and Paul's other letters, Christians, both Jew and gentile, found it hard to understand and accept that salvation came through faith in Jesus.³ Paul's writing makes it clear that all humans have sinned and fallen short of God's holy standards. That includes barbarians (non-Greeks), gentiles, palace courtiers,⁴ Jews, and us today. We all stand equal before God.

There is only one answer. Jesus has taken the penalty for our sin; all we need to do is have faith and believe in him. From Rome to Augustine's early Christian writing, to the teaching of great scholars today, to the subconscious liturgy spoken in our hearts by God's Spirit—Paul's words shape our understanding of what it means to live by faith.

FOR FURTHER READING

John Stott, *The Message of Romans* (IVP, 1994)

Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 2010)

Scot McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards* (Baylor University Press, 2021)

¹ Acts 2:5–11 ² e.g., Priscilla and Aquila, Rom 16:3 ³ e.g., Rom 3:21–24 ⁴ Phil 4:22.

2 CHRONICLES 13–27

REIGNS: RECORDS OR REVIEWS?

In these chapters, the chronicler describes the reigns of nine kings and one queen, assessing their characters, behaviour, level of allegiance to God's covenant with the nation, and the influence they had on the people. Some were generally good, some generally bad, some indifferent and some varying from very good to very bad! It is tempting to see all this as simply a record which we can skim-read, saying, 'Oh yes, that is what happened' and passing on quickly to more helpful writers. That, however, would misjudge the chronicler and miss out on a whole range of fascinating insights and lessons. He writes to teach, not just to inform. Anyone who has had to read references for students

or jobseekers knows the necessity to read between the lines! The chronicler challenges his readers to do just that. Look carefully at how he describes the reigns, remembering that he is writing after the events and his original readers would have already known the basic outline

of the history. What is it that he wants us to notice and to learn? How was he expecting his reign-appraisals to influence and change the behaviour of his readers, both the original ones and future ones?

Look out for the number of times good starters became very bad finishers. What influenced that change, who did they listen to, what made them stop listening to God and his prophets? Watch out for references to family and other minor characters. Look out for his use of irony, sometimes in the giving of faint praise. Notice how often pride led to the misuse of power and where personal or family loyalties became more significant than loyalty to God.

I must say I have been really grateful for the opportunity to dig into these chapters. To be honest, I wasn't expecting to find them as fascinating or learn as much from them as I did. I hope you end up appreciating the chronicler's writings as much as I have come to do!

MATTHEW 8-9

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 (Chs. 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, found Jesus' authority threatening. He didn't fit their idea of a Messiah, so the opposition to Jesus 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.¹ 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'.² 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.

FOR FURTHER READING

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

¹ Matt 5:3–10 ² Matt 9:11, 12.

Note that we will break into Matthew to study John in celebration of the upcoming Easter season, then resume Matthew next quarter.

JOHN 18

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 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, but 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 are 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

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