

Into the Book

READING PLAN

Start any time!

BEGIN ANY MONDAY OF THE YEAR AT WEEK ONE

- Choose to read just one Testament this year or read the whole Bible
- New Testament schedule designed to progressively unfold the story and teachings of Christ
- Read one of the four gospels every three months, to keep Christ central in your reading time
- Old Testament schedule based on the order of the Old Testament in Jesus' time
- Read one chapter of the New and three chapters of the Old Testament every weekday
- Read a psalm every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday



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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION PAGE 3

READING SCHEDULE PAGE 4

WEEKLY PREVIEWS OF
NEW TESTAMENT READINGS PAGE 8

Introduction

HOW & WHY TO GROW YOUR FAITH WITH A 5-DAY A WEEK READING PLAN

WHY: 5 Reasons for a 5-Day-A-Week Plan

Reading through the Bible in a year is a marathon, not a sprint, so we designed this plan to give you the flexibility to make it to the finish line!

- 1. Room:** Many people who read through the Bible in a year have other commitments, like Bible classes, or other topics they want to study throughout the year. For instance, you might notice a Bible word in your reading that you want to study further. The five day schedule gives you time on the weekends to dive into something else without competing with your daily reading time.
- 2. Routine:** Most of us have a different flow to our weekdays than to our weekends. This plan can help you remain consistent by placing reading time in your daily routine. Choose a time – morning, noon, or night – that makes sense for you and try to build your reading habit into your regular weekday.
- 3. Resilience:** If you get behind and miss a couple days, having the two day break lets you catch up before those days add up and it becomes overwhelming. Admittedly some of this is in our heads, but little things can be the difference between giving up and pushing through to keep reading.
- 4. Reworkability:** Some people prefer to read only the Old Testament during the week and catch up on the New Testament or the Psalms on the weekend. The open days in the plan give the flexibility for you to find what works for you.
- 5. Rest & Reflection:** As you go about your weekend, even if you don't set aside time for reflecting upon the readings of the past week, you might find yourself meditating on what God revealed in those readings and how that applies to you. As my mind wanders in periods of rest, new insights often bubble up to the surface from what my heart and mind has given attention to during the week.

HOW: 5 Tips for Reading

- 1. Keep Your Eyes on Jesus.** The life of Christ forms the hub of each quarter's readings, as the New Testament plan begins a new gospel every three months. Hopefully, this helps us always keep his example and lordship front of mind and reminds us to look for him in *any* passage we read (Luke 24:27).
- 2. Notice when you start a new book.** Each book of the Bible was first written as an individual document with its own themes and structure. To understand what God reveals through that book, it's best to read that book as a whole in its original order. While we understand why some plans might break up books and sections of Scripture to fit themes and historical timeframes, we have aimed to keep books whole, so that you can read each in its inspired form. Look for turning points in narrative works. As we read Psalms in order, notice its thematic arrangement (no, the psalms are not randomly assembled!). And as we read multiple volume works together (like Luke-Acts, Ezra-Nehemiah, and the Torah), notice how the books build on one another.
- 3. Consider this a weekly reading plan.** When you think of it as a weekly schedule, it's less stressful to fall behind by a few days, and there's more freedom to keep reading past the day's allotment when you find yourself "on a roll" and engrossed in the book.
- 4. Try listening to the Bible.** This can be a great way to keep up with the readings while driving, cleaning, or mowing. The YouVersion Bible app has free audio versions of most translations, and also allows you to change the speed of playback. Some passages work fine at 1.5 speed while others I might slow down to make sure I'm getting the point.
- 5. Feel free to try different versions.** To add some variety to my reading throughout the year, I like to vary the version I use. Sometimes when my brain isn't at its best, I'll switch to an easy reading version, like the International Children's Bible or the New Living Translation. I prefer to read challenging passages in a translation that leans toward formal equivalence ("word-for-word"), but the simpler language of a dynamic translation can be great for stories and poetry.

1

1st Quarter

*Torah
Luke-Acts
Romans*

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

*This Quarter's Goal:
Lay the Foundation*

*What do you learn about
God from the first five
books of the Bible?*

*What do you learn about
the gospel from the
sermons Jesus and his
apostles preach?*

*This Quarter's
Gospel: Luke*

*How does this gospel
present the humanity
of Jesus?*

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
1	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 1-3	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 4-6	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 7-9	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 10-12	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 13-15
2	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 16-18	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 19-21	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 22-24	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 25-27	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 28-30
3	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 31-33	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 34-36	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 37-39	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 14 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 40-42	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 15 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 43-45
4	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 16 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 46-48	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 17 <input type="checkbox"/> Gen. 49-50; Ex. 1	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 18 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Exod. 2-4	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 19 <input type="checkbox"/> Exod. 5-7	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 20 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Exod. 8-10
5	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 21 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Exod. 11-13	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 22 <input type="checkbox"/> Exod. 14-16	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 23 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 14 <input type="checkbox"/> Exod. 17-19	<input type="checkbox"/> Luke 24 <input type="checkbox"/> Exod. 20-22	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 15 <input type="checkbox"/> Exod. 23-25
6	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 16 <input type="checkbox"/> Exod. 26-28	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Exod. 29-31	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 17 <input type="checkbox"/> Exod. 32-34	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Exod. 35-37	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 18 <input type="checkbox"/> Exod. 38-40
7	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 19 <input type="checkbox"/> Lev. 1-3	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Lev. 4-6	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 20 <input type="checkbox"/> Lev. 7-9	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Lev. 10-12	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 21 <input type="checkbox"/> Lev. 13-15
8	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 22 <input type="checkbox"/> Lev. 16-18	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Lev. 19-21	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 14 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 23 <input type="checkbox"/> Lev. 22-24	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 15 <input type="checkbox"/> Lev. 25-27	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 16 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 24 <input type="checkbox"/> Num. 1-3
9	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 17 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 25 <input type="checkbox"/> Num. 4-6	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 18 <input type="checkbox"/> Num. 7-9	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 19 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 26 <input type="checkbox"/> Num. 10-12	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 20 <input type="checkbox"/> Num. 13-15	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 21 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 27 <input type="checkbox"/> Num. 16-18
10	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 22 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 28 <input type="checkbox"/> Num. 19-21	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 23 <input type="checkbox"/> Num. 22-24	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 24 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 29 <input type="checkbox"/> Num. 25-27	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 25 <input type="checkbox"/> Num. 28-30	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 26 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 30 <input type="checkbox"/> Num. 31-33
11	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 27 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 31 <input type="checkbox"/> Num. 34-36	<input type="checkbox"/> Acts 28 <input type="checkbox"/> Deut. 1-3	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 32 <input type="checkbox"/> Deut. 4-6	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Deut. 7-9	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 33 <input type="checkbox"/> Deut. 10-12
12	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 34 <input type="checkbox"/> Deut. 13-15	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Deut. 16-18	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 35 <input type="checkbox"/> Deut. 19-21	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Deut. 22-24	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 36 <input type="checkbox"/> Deut. 25-27
13	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 37 <input type="checkbox"/> Deut. 28-30	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Deut. 31-33	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 38 <input type="checkbox"/> Deut. 34; Josh. 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Josh. 3-5	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 39 <input type="checkbox"/> Josh. 6-8

2

2nd Quarter

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
This Quarter's Goal: Understand the Story

What can we learn about the ideal leader from the stories in Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings?

What issues did the early letters focus on? Do these concerns still come up?

This Quarter's Gospel: Mark

How does this gospel present the power of Jesus?

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
14	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 14 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 40 <input type="checkbox"/> Josh. 9-11	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 15 <input type="checkbox"/> Josh. 12-14	<input type="checkbox"/> Romans 16 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 41 <input type="checkbox"/> Josh. 15-17	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Josh. 18-20	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 42 <input type="checkbox"/> Josh. 21-23
15	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 43 <input type="checkbox"/> Josh.34; Jdg. 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Judges 3-5	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 44 <input type="checkbox"/> Judges 6-8	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Judges 9-11	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 45 <input type="checkbox"/> Judges 12-14
16	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 46 <input type="checkbox"/> Judges 15-17	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Judges 18-20	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 47 <input type="checkbox"/> Jdg.21;1Sam.1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 11 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Sam. 3-5	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 48 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Sam. 6-8
17	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 49 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Sam. 9-11	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 14 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Sam. 12-14	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 15 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 50 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Sam. 15-17	<input type="checkbox"/> Mark 16 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Sam. 18-20	<input type="checkbox"/> James 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 51 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Sam. 21-23
18	<input type="checkbox"/> James 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 52 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Sam. 24-26	<input type="checkbox"/> James 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Sam. 27-29	<input type="checkbox"/> James 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 53 <input type="checkbox"/> 1Sa.30-31; 2Sa.1	<input type="checkbox"/> James 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Sam. 2-4	<input type="checkbox"/> Gal. 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 54 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Sam. 5-7
19	<input type="checkbox"/> Gal. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 55 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Sam. 8-10	<input type="checkbox"/> Gal. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Sam. 11-13	<input type="checkbox"/> Gal. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 56 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Sam. 14-16	<input type="checkbox"/> Gal. 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Sam. 17-19	<input type="checkbox"/> Gal. 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 57 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Sam. 20-22
20	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Thes. 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 58 <input type="checkbox"/> 2Sa.23-24;1Kg1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Thes. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Kings 2-4	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Thes. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 59 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Kings 5-7	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Thes. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Kings 8-10	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Thes. 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 60 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Kings 11-13
21	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Thes. 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 61 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Kings 14-16	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Thes. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Kings 17-19	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Thes. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 62 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Kings 20-22	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Kings 1-3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 63 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Kings 4-6
22	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 64 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Kings 7-9	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Kings 10-12	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 65 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Kings 13-15	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Kings 16-18	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 66 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Kings 19-21
23	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 67 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Kings 22-24	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 9 <input type="checkbox"/> 2Kgs.25; Isa.1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 68 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 3-5	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 6-8	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 69 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 9-11
24	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 70 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 12-14	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 14 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 15-17	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 15 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 71 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 18-20	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Cor. 16 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 21-23	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Cor. 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 72 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 24-26
25	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Cor. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 73 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 27-29	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Cor. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 30-32	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Cor. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 74 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 33-35	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Cor. 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 36-38	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Cor. 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 75 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 39-41
26	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Cor. 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 76 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 42-44	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Cor. 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 45-47	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Cor. 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 77 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 48-50	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Cor. 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 51-53	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Cor. 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 78 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 54-56

3rd Quarter

THOUGHT QUESTIONS
This Quarter's Goal:
Connect the Testaments

How do the prophets point toward Christ and his kingdom?

How do Matthew and the New Testament letters reference the Old Testament?

This Quarter's Gospel: **Matthew**

How does this gospel present the kingship of Jesus?

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
27	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Cor. 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 79 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 57-59	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Cor. 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 60-62	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 80 <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 63-65	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Isa.66;Jer.1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 81 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 3-5
28	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 82 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 6-8	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 9-11	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 83 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 12-14	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 15-17	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 84 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 18-20
29	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 85 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 21-23	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 24-26	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 86 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 27-29	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 30-32	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 87 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 33-35
30	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 14 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 88 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 36-38	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 15 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 39-41	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 16 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 89 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 42-44	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 17 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 45-47	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 18 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 90 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 48-50
31	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 19 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 91 <input type="checkbox"/> Jer. 51-52; Ezk. 1	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 20 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezekiel 2-4	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 21 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 92 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezekiel 5-7	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 22 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezekiel 8-10	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 23 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 93 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezek. 11-13
32	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 24 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 94 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezekiel 14-16	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 25 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezekiel 17-19	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 26 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 95 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezekiel 20-22	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 27 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezekiel 23-25	<input type="checkbox"/> Matt. 28 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 96 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezek. 26-28
33	<input type="checkbox"/> Col. 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 97 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezekiel 29-31	<input type="checkbox"/> Col. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezekiel 32-34	<input type="checkbox"/> Col. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 98 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezekiel 35-37	<input type="checkbox"/> Col. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezekiel 38-40	<input type="checkbox"/> Philemon <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 99 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezek. 41-43
34	<input type="checkbox"/> Php. 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 100 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezekiel 44-46	<input type="checkbox"/> Php. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezk.47-48;Hos.1	<input type="checkbox"/> Php. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 101 <input type="checkbox"/> Hosea 2-4	<input type="checkbox"/> Php. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Hosea 5-7	<input type="checkbox"/> Eph. 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 102 <input type="checkbox"/> Hosea 8-10
35	<input type="checkbox"/> Eph. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 103 <input type="checkbox"/> Hosea 11-13	<input type="checkbox"/> Eph. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Hos.14;Joel 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> Eph. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 104 <input type="checkbox"/> Joel 3;Amos 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> Eph. 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Amos 3-5	<input type="checkbox"/> Eph. 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 105 <input type="checkbox"/> Amos 6-8
36	<input type="checkbox"/> Titus 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 106 <input type="checkbox"/> Am. 9;Obad;Jon.1	<input type="checkbox"/> Titus 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Jonah 2-4	<input type="checkbox"/> Titus 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 107 <input type="checkbox"/> Micah 1-3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Tim. 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Micah 4-6	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Tim. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 108 <input type="checkbox"/> Mic7;Nah.1-2
37	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Tim. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 109 <input type="checkbox"/> Nah.3;Habak.1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Tim. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Habak.3; Zph.1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Tim. 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 110 <input type="checkbox"/> Zeph. 3; Hag. 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Tim. 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Zechariah 1-3	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Tim. 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 111 <input type="checkbox"/> Zech. 4-6
38	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Tim. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 112 <input type="checkbox"/> Zechariah 7-9	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Tim. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Zechariah 10-12	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Tim. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 113 <input type="checkbox"/> Zech.13-14;Mal.1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Pet. 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Malachi 2-4	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Pet. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 114 <input type="checkbox"/> Prov. 1-3
39	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Pet. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 115 <input type="checkbox"/> Proverbs 4-6	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Pet. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Proverbs 7-9	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Pet. 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 116 <input type="checkbox"/> Proverbs 10-12	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Pet. 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Proverbs 13-15	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Pet. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 117 <input type="checkbox"/> Prov. 16-18

4th Quarter

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
40	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Pet. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 118 <input type="checkbox"/> Prov. 19-21	<input type="checkbox"/> Jude <input type="checkbox"/> Prov. 22-24	<input type="checkbox"/> John 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Ps. 119:1-24 <input type="checkbox"/> Prov. 25-27	<input type="checkbox"/> John 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Prov. 28-30	<input type="checkbox"/> John 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Ps. 119:25-48 <input type="checkbox"/> Prov.31; Job 1-2
41	<input type="checkbox"/> John 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Ps. 119:49-72 <input type="checkbox"/> Job 3-5	<input type="checkbox"/> John 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Job 6-8	<input type="checkbox"/> John 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Ps. 119:73-96 <input type="checkbox"/> Job 9-11	<input type="checkbox"/> John 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Job 12-14	<input type="checkbox"/> John 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Ps. 119:97-120 <input type="checkbox"/> Job 15-17
42	<input type="checkbox"/> John 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Ps. 119:121-144 <input type="checkbox"/> Job 18-20	<input type="checkbox"/> John 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Job 21-23	<input type="checkbox"/> John 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Ps. 119:145-176 <input type="checkbox"/> Job 24-26	<input type="checkbox"/> John 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Job 27-29	<input type="checkbox"/> John 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 120 <input type="checkbox"/> Job 30-32
43	<input type="checkbox"/> John 14 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 121 <input type="checkbox"/> Job 33-35	<input type="checkbox"/> John 15 <input type="checkbox"/> Job 36-38	<input type="checkbox"/> John 16 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 122 <input type="checkbox"/> Job 39-41	<input type="checkbox"/> John 17 <input type="checkbox"/> Job 42; Song 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> John 18 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 123 <input type="checkbox"/> Song of Songs 3-5
44	<input type="checkbox"/> John 19 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 124 <input type="checkbox"/> Song 6-8	<input type="checkbox"/> John 20 <input type="checkbox"/> Ruth 1-3	<input type="checkbox"/> John 21 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 125 <input type="checkbox"/> Ruth 4; Lam. 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> Heb. 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Lam. 3-5	<input type="checkbox"/> Heb. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 126 <input type="checkbox"/> Eccles. 1-3
45	<input type="checkbox"/> Heb. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 127 <input type="checkbox"/> Eccles. 4-6	<input type="checkbox"/> Heb. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Eccles. 7-9	<input type="checkbox"/> Heb. 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 128 <input type="checkbox"/> Eccles. 10-12	<input type="checkbox"/> Heb. 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Esther 1-3	<input type="checkbox"/> Heb. 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 129 <input type="checkbox"/> Esther 4-6
46	<input type="checkbox"/> Heb. 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 130 <input type="checkbox"/> Esther 7-9	<input type="checkbox"/> Heb. 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Esth. 10; Dan. 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> Heb. 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 131 <input type="checkbox"/> Daniel 3-5	<input type="checkbox"/> Heb. 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Daniel 6-8	<input type="checkbox"/> Heb. 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 132 <input type="checkbox"/> Daniel 9-11
47	<input type="checkbox"/> Heb. 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 133 <input type="checkbox"/> Dan. 12; Ezra 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 John 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezra 3-5	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 John 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 134 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezra 6-8	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 John 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Ezra 9-10; Neh. 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 John 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 135 <input type="checkbox"/> Nehem. 2-4
48	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 John 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 136 <input type="checkbox"/> Nehem. 5-7	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 John <input type="checkbox"/> Nehem. 8-10	<input type="checkbox"/> 3 John <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 137 <input type="checkbox"/> Nehem. 11-13	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Chron. 1-3	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 138 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Chron. 4-6
49	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 139 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Chron. 7-9	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Chron. 10-12	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 140 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Chron. 13-15	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Chron. 16-18	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 141 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Chron. 19-21
50	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 142 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Chron. 22-24	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 9 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Chron. 25-27	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 143 <input type="checkbox"/> 1Chr. 28-29; 2Chr. 1	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 11 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Chron. 2-4	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 144 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Chron. 5-7
51	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 145 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Chron. 8-10	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 14 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Chron. 11-13	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 15 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 146 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Chron. 14-16	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 16 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Chron. 17-19	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 17 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 147 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Chron. 20-22
52	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 18 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 148 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Chron. 23-25	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 19 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Chron. 26-28	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 20 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 149 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Chron. 29-31	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 21 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Chron. 32-34	<input type="checkbox"/> Rev. 22 <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 150 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Chron. 35-36

Writings
John
Hebrews
Revelation

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

*This Quarter's Goal:
Put It All Together*

How does Chronicles summarize the Old Testament story?

How does Revelation complete the story and "pay off" themes the rest of the Bible introduced?

This Quarter's Gospel: John

How does this gospel present the deity of Jesus?



Luke 1-5

INTRODUCING THE KING

This year, we invite you to read the New Testament, in a reading plan we designed to help us all grow in the Word. We will read five chapters a week of the New Testament, one for each weekday. If you want to read the whole Bible, you will also read three chapters of the Old Testament a day and read a psalm every other day – see the full plan at biblegeeks.fm/intothebook.

A Reader's Preview of This Week's Readings

Luke's story begins in a world waiting for a promised king, where we find an old priest in the temple burning incense. An otherworldly messenger meets him there with a strange promise, and we're off! This book is the first of Luke's two volumes on Christ and the church, both written to an official named Theophilus.

📖 Things You Don't Want to Miss

1. Jesus' Mic Drop. He announces himself as the Messiah by reading Isaiah 60 in his hometown synagogue. Bold move.
2. The Magnificat. Mary's famous song about the magnificence of a God who turns the tables on the strong and the weak. There's a reason it's a favorite of song composers (it's beautiful!).
3. The Temple Encounters. Like celebrity cameos, these chapters contain intriguing, brief brushes with fascinating characters like Simeon and Anna. And how I'd love to be a fly on the temple wall, listening to a pre-teen Jesus' talk with the teachers!

📖 Warnings

1. The words of John the Baptist has been known to prick sensitive hearts. If you own two coats, you might find yourself doing some closet sorting soon!
2. Luke is the longest book in the New Testament, but it only has 24 chapters...so some of these are loong chapters. Hang in there, it's worth it!
3. And chapter 3 features every modern reader's most daunting nemesis in these reading plans: a genealogy! But pay attention to the way it differs from Matthew's genealogy, the way it works backwards, and goes all the way back to Adam, "the son of God." What do you think that's about?

📖 Reading Keys for Luke 1-5

1. Note Luke's purpose for writing the book in his introduction (1:1-4). How should it affect the way we read it?
2. Slow down each time someone talks about Jesus and reflect on their words. Who do they say that he is (or will be)?
3. Watch how the account builds toward key events and statements. Anything seem particularly important/climactic in this first section?

📖 Cliffhangers

Since no good preview gives it all away, let's close with a couple questions you'll have to read to answer.

1. Did you notice all the nativity scenes around town last month? Where did they get the story right? Where did they miss the point?
2. What did Peter – shockingly – tell Jesus to do when he gifted out who he was?
3. What do you notice about Jesus' call for Simon and Levi to follow him, that might affect our own call to discipleship today?

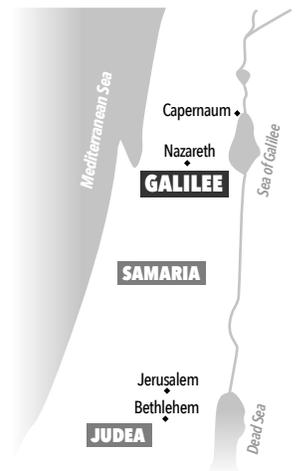
WEEK 2

Luke 6-10 JOURNEY WITH JESUS

Last week we started journeying through the New Testament, beginning with Luke. As Luke leads us through the mountains and seaside villages of Galilee, these Spirit-led words can bring us to someplace new – insights and fresh resolve to follow this unusual King. So let's get ready to set off on the next leg of our trip through Luke.

Put Jesus "on the Map"

Back in Luke 4:19, Jesus *"returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee."* Luke took us from Bethlehem to Nazareth to Judea in last week's readings, but this period of teaching and miracle-working in Galilee will put him on the map, as he rises to new heights of fame - or infamy, depending on who you ask – in chapters 5 to 9. As you read, try to see Jesus through the eyes of the people around him.



Catch the Sights

When I'm on a road trip, it's easy for me to get so caught up "making good time" that I forget to notice the interesting scenery around me. Some of the most beloved moments in the Bible come in these chapters, so don't rush past them without appreciating them. The Good Samaritan story will lead you to be more merciful. The story of Mary and Martha will remind you to slow down and listen at Jesus' feet. The exchange with Peter will highlight the gravity of confessing Christ. And while Jesus shows you his power as he feeds five thousand, he'll show you his compassion when he cares for the weak, the poor, and the outsiders – again and again. You don't have to stop at the gift shop, but you can take a mental snapshot of these landmark moments in Scripture as you pass.

Notice the "Turning" Point

Tensions build throughout these chapters as controversy increases. When we get to chapter nine, the pace of the events picks up even more, until the chapter closes around these heavy words: *"When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem"* (Luke 9:51).

He won't arrive in Jerusalem for another ten chapters. But now he starts preparing the disciples and himself. Jerusalem isn't just a geographic destination, it's the completion of his work, his purpose. What's about to happen in Jerusalem? A few verses earlier Jesus said it: *"Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men"* (Luke 9:44). The climax of history draws near. And speaking of words sinking in ...

Learn to Take Directions

Some of us (ahem) notoriously refuse to ask for directions, even in unfamiliar territory. A family member recently told me about a road trip where her driver got in a shouting match with Siri (the iPhone voice mapping their way)! But if we want to go where Jesus leads, we have to learn to listen. At the end of the sermon on the plain he asks, *"Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?"* (Luke 6:46). Ouch! When he starts telling parables, don't miss the surprising purpose of these stories (Luke 8:4-18). He says to *"pay attention to HOW you hear"* (Luke 8:18). And when Jesus' face shines on a mountain, what does God say from above? *"This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"* (Luke 9:35).

As you read Luke this week, take it as another opportunity to do just that – *listen to him!*



Luke 11-15

FEAST ON JESUS' TEACHING

I remember going to this party years ago that started at one house for appetizers, then went to another home for soup. Then onto the main course, before traveling to a final house for dessert. It's called a progressive dinner, and it was a lot of fun! This week's reading is kind of like that progressive dinner.

Meals on Wheels

We're in the middle act of the book, Christ's journey toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-19:44). As we travel, it sometimes feels like a trip from one dinner party to another. Jesus will attend feasts in the homes of two different Pharisees in these chapters (Luke 11:37-54; 14:1-24). Then some will accuse him of welcoming sinners and eating with them (Luke 15:1-2).

Beyond that, the Lord's teachings will take us to quite a few fascinating parties, like the grand banquet for the poor and crippled, the celebration in heaven, and the famous "fatted calf" supper a father held for his wayward son. In his banquet parables, the Lord explains the nature of his kingdom. Who will the king invite? What should we do as we wait for the feast? And what kind of thing makes God want to throw a party?

He also gives us some kingdom party etiquette. Like, who should you invite when you host a banquet? Where should you sit when you're a guest? How do these instructions apply to other areas of our lives?

Turning Down the Invitation?

Jesus describes the chosen people as a select guest list who decline the party invitation (Luke 14:16-24). Rather than receiving the Messiah and his kingdom, most of the Jews missed God's time of visitation (cf. Luke 18:42, 44). So from the fig tree parable to the warning to interpret time correctly to the lament over Jerusalem, listen for Christ's sad, prophetic message of judgment on the nation and its capital, Jerusalem.

What's on the Menu?

For my wife and me, our biggest wedding day regret is not finding time to enjoy the beautiful dinner we planned for everyone. We ran from table to table visiting folks, but never got more than a few bites ourselves, as we played host and then shuffled off to our honeymoon.

As Christ prepares his disciples to follow him after he's gone, Luke fills these chapters with disciple training. Like those first disciples, we need this training. So as you read this section, don't forget to partake in the meal yourself.

1. Do I think of money the way Jesus did?
2. Does my prayer life reflect the confidence Jesus teaches?
3. Do I readily acknowledge Christ before men?
4. Am I *striving* to enter, knowing the cost of following him?

God's people have anticipated a Great Messianic Banquet since Isaiah's time (Isaiah 25:6-7; 55:1-2; cf. Luke 14:15; 13:29). Reading Luke 11-15, examine your readiness for the master and his feast (Luke 12:35-48).



Luke 16-20

THE STORM IS COMING

They say you can tell a storm is coming by the signs in nature. The temperature drops suddenly, leaves go limp and show their undersides, dogs get jumpy, and of course, there's that fantastic smell. In the midwest, you can always tell a snowstorm is coming by the lines at the supermarket. And because every person you've seen that week only wanted to talk about the weather. In this week's reading, we'll watch the signs, as the storm at the end of the book draws near.

The Coming Storm

This week, we'll complete the Jerusalem Journey, the long middle section of the book (Luke 9:51-19:44). In this last stretch, Luke punctuates the climactic climb by mentioning Jesus' location at every stop. With each chapter, the dark clouds on the horizon loom larger. The distant thunder's rumble grows louder as he's "*on the way to Jerusalem*" (Luke 17:11), then he "*entered Jericho and was passing through*" (Luke 19:1), just down the road from his destination (cf. Luke 10:30). Then he's "*near to Jerusalem*" (19:11), "*going up to Jerusalem*" (Luke 19:28), and "*drew near to Bethphage and Bethany*," villages overlooking the city (Luke 19:29). At last, like a refreshing burst of light rain, "*drawing near – already on the way down the Mount of Olives*" (Luke 19:37) the multitude bless "*the King who comes in the name of the Lord*" (Luke 19:38). But don't miss the Lord's response "*when he drew near and saw the city*" (Luke 19:41), which reveals the coming torrent for what it is.

Severe Reading Advisory

- **How to Win Friends with Unrighteous Wealth?** We'll begin this week with a Strange Stewardship Parable that might seem confusing (Luke 16:1-13). Why does the master compliment the dishonest manager for his shrewdness? Christ doesn't praise dishonesty, but the forethought of the man who maximized his opportunities to set himself up for the future. How can we be shrewd with our money now, to gain rewards later?
- **Dead Men Talking.** One of the great figures of the Old Testament makes an appearance in one of the Lord's stories in chapter 16. His message to a doomed man may haunt you. Some things are beyond changing. What does it teach you about wealth, faith, and the Word of God?

The Five Day Forecast

Here's what to expect this week.

- **Money Monday** (Luke 16). From the Shrewd Manager to the Rich Man & Lazarus, this chapter will get us pondering our possessions.
- **Trial Tuesday** (Luke 17). Relationship challenges, the temptation to exalt ourselves and neglect thanksgiving, and the trials coming upon Jerusalem.
- **"What Do You Want?" Wednesday** (Luke 18). Reflect on your prayers and wishes as two parables poke at your prayer life, a rich man faces a crossroads, and Jesus asks a bling man a simple question.
- **Triumphal Thursday** (Luke 19). Jesus stops for dinner with a famous "wee little man," before entering Jerusalem.
- **Fiery Friday** (Luke 20). After forcefully cleansing the temple to end chapter 19, the conflict increases throughout chapter 20, as the leaders try to trap Jesus again and again.



Luke 20-24; Acts 1

SEE THE BIG PICTURE

When we go on vacation, my wife likes to work on a big, thousand-piece puzzle. I used to wonder, "what's the point?" Isn't it simpler to look at the picture on the box? But as those final pieces click into place and you see it all together, it's not hard to understand the appeal. I once got in trouble for robbing my wife of that satisfying sense of completion by sticking a piece in my pocket and filling the last empty spot myself. I still haven't heard the end of that one!

See the Big Picture

Like assembling pieces in a cardboard puzzle, as we end Luke and begin Acts this week, it's an ideal time to take a step back and notice how it all fits together. Luke's gospel has three acts.

- Act I (Luke 1:1-9:44) focuses on Jesus' identity. Everyone kept asking, "Who is this guy?" – his hometown neighbors (Luke 4:22), Pharisees (Luke 5:22), his cousin (Luke 7:20), and even his disciples (Luke 8:25). At last, Peter identified Jesus as "the Christ of God" – the King (Luke 9:20), and God confirmed it from heaven as Christ's face shone (Luke 9:35).
- Act II (Luke 9:51-19:45) follows Jesus on a journey to Jerusalem, as he prepares his disciples for the decisive events that await him there.
- Act III (Luke 19:46-24:53) is the climax – the Lord's last days in Jerusalem, leading up to his betrayal, trial, and death. Then he rose from the dead and explained that the Big Picture story of Scripture comes together in him (Luke 24:27).

Frame the Edges

Everybody knows you start a puzzle by finding all the flat-edged pieces and framing the outside. Likewise, Luke will begin Acts by framing the contents of the book in Christ's last words before ascending (Acts 1:8).

- Jesus says that first, they'll "receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon" them. The disciples will wait in Jerusalem (Acts 1) for the Spirit to come in power on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2).
- Next, he says, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem." The disciples will proclaim the risen Lord in Jerusalem (Acts 2-7) until persecution scatters them.
- Then, they'll preach "in all Judea and Samaria," as Philip preaches to Samaritans and an Ethiopian (Acts 8).
- Finally, the Word will go "to the end of the earth" as Peter and Paul bring the gospel into the gentile world (Acts 9-28).

Connect the Pieces

It's easy to miss the unity of Luke's gospel and Acts, but he wrote them to tell Theophilus one continuous story about Christ's work. Luke opens Acts by summarizing "the first book" where he "dealt with all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up" (Acts 1:1). The word "began" means that Jesus *continues* that work through his church, so Acts tells that story.

Appreciate Your Work

Half the fun of jigsaw puzzles is admiring your completed work. On that note, take a minute at the end of this week to acknowledge that – a month in – you've *already* finished reading the longest book in the New Testament. Keep up the good work!



Acts 2-6

SPEAK THE GOSPEL!

Have you ever walked around a foreign country with a phrasebook in your hand, looking for the right way to order your food or even find a bathroom? It's a disconcerting experience. Sometimes my wife and I feel like we're speaking different languages, and things get lost in translation. Only when we learn to *communicate* – to speak and understand – do we find a way forward.

In the Shadow of Babel

Over the last month, we saw in Luke that Jesus' salvation is for everyone, not just the Jews (cf. Luke 2:30-32). This month we'll see Christ's saving work reach all kinds of people. Though this week's chapters all take place in Jerusalem, right from the start, God signals his desire to bring together a restored human race. One of the early symptoms of humanity's moral decline was God's confusion of our languages at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). In a dramatic sign inaugurating the last days (Acts 2:16-17), the disciples begin to speak to people of over a dozen homelands and languages – each hearing the words in their native language (Acts 2:8-11)!

Lost in Translation

This passage includes some phrases that might be unfamiliar, so let's get a little context.

- **What's the Day of Pentecost?** One of three Jewish pilgrimage feasts (Exod. 34:22), held fifty days after Passover (Lev. 23:16), celebrating the firstfruits of the wheat harvest (Exod. 34:22). Jews from across the world gathered to Jerusalem to celebrate, hence the diverse audience in Acts 2. The thousands saved that day were the firstfruits of a worldwide harvest for the Lord.
- **What's the Sanhedrin?** The Supreme Court of the Jews made up of seventy men plus the High Priest.
- **Who were the Hellenists?** A minority of the population of Jerusalem were Jews whose first language was Greek, rather than Aramaic. Some of these culturally different Jews became disciples (Acts 6:1).

Keep Talking!

Acts is a book about witnesses (Acts 1:8) who must keep speaking! The Holy Spirit empowers them to speak (Acts 2). People told them to stop talking, and they said "*we cannot but speak*" (Acts 4:20). And when problems arose among them, they said they could not even "*give up preaching the Word*" to deal with it (Acts 6:2). As you read, consider the importance of the spoken Word in your life – both hearing it and sharing it!

Life-Changing Words

Here are a few application questions to consider as you read this week.

- **Something New:** What signs of a different kind of community do you see in this group? How can we imitate their zeal, reverence, love, prayer-life, and boldness?
- **Trouble in Paradise:** What three problems do you notice develop in the readings for Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday (Acts 4-6)? How does the new community deal with these problems?
- **Preaching's Greatest Hits:** What are the main ideas in Peter's sermons this week? What do you learn about Jesus and Christianity? How should this affect the message you share?



Acts 7-11

EMBRACE THE NEW WAY OF CHRIST

In one of my favorite musicals, *Tevye*, a Jewish farmer in Russia, says, "without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as ... as ... as a fiddler on the roof!" Jewish laws and customs shaped their identity, as Tevye explains, "because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is, and what God expects him to do."

"Tradition!"

In this week's readings, Jewish Christians face changes that could throw their world out of balance. Imagine the courage it took for those disciples to step out in faith.

- How would a typical Jew view Samaritans (John 4:10)? What changes (Acts 8:4-8)?
- What does Stephen imply about the temple (Acts 7:47-50)?
- Why does Peter refuse the Lord's command to eat unclean animals (Acts 10:14)?
- And what's crazier than giving up kosher food? How about an uncircumcised centurion becoming part of God's people (Acts 10:45-48)? Cornelius' conversion is so significant (and unfathomable!) that we'll read about it twice, as Peter describes it to the church, convincing them to accept Gentiles. Notice what Peter adds and emphasizes in his retelling.
- Another repeated event is Saul's conversion (Acts 9) – which he'll later recount to a Jewish crowd (Acts 22) and Agrippa (Acts 26). How does Saul's conversion ignite the spread of Christianity among Gentiles (Acts 9:15)?
- How is the church at the end of Acts 11 different from the one at the start of this week's reading?

"Matchmaker, Matchmaker"

Watch the way God brings speakers and seekers together this week, especially Tuesday and Thursday (Acts 8; 10):

- What characteristics do you see in Phillip and Peter that allows the Lord to use them?
- What makes the eunuch (Acts 8:26ff) and Cornelius (Acts 10) productive soil for the gospel (cf. Mark 4:13-20)?

"If I Were a Rich Man"

Slow down when you meet Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8:4-25), and you might find some helpful insights.

- What did Simon want to buy (Acts 8:19), and what did Peter say about Simon's money (Acts 8:20)?
- Philip performed signs (Acts 8:6-7; cf. Acts 6:5-6), but only a particular group of people could pass on the Spirit (Acts 8:14-19). What conclusions could you draw from this account?
- What did Peter tell Simon to do for forgiveness (Acts 8:22)? How does that differ from how Simon first came to Christ (Acts 8:12-13; cf. Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16)? Can you learn anything from this story about your forgiveness?

"Sunrise, Sunset"

A turning point comes in Acts 8:1 when persecution strikes the church. But as the sun seems to set on a period of growth in Jerusalem, a new opportunity for worldwide growth arises.

- How does Acts describe Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 6:8-8:3)? How are Stephen and the mob different?
- How did good come from the persecution (Acts 8:1-4)?

"To Life!"

A lyric from *Fiddler* says, "God would like us to be joyful, even when our hearts lie panting on the floor. But how much more can we be joyful when there's really something to be joyful for?" It's fun to see what we spread when we share the gospel.

- What came to Samaria along with the gospel (Acts 8:8)?
- What did the eunuch do after he "*came up out of the water*" (Acts 8:39)?
- What has come to the gentiles (Acts 11:18)?

WEEK 8

Acts 12-16 WATCH THE GOSPEL SPREAD

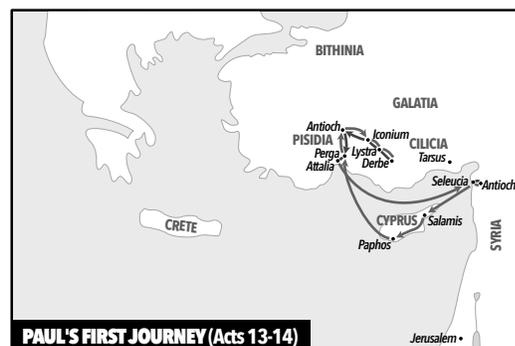
In 1957 – long before board games like *Settlers of Catan* and video games like *Civilization*, a Frenchman named Albert Lamorisse invented the "game of world conquest," known as *Risk*. I have great memories of huddling around a table, trying to outwit and outmaneuver friends as we all try to spread our troops across a map of the world. To win, you have to choose the right home base (I recommend South America, Africa, or Australia!) and spread from your home base into the right territories, at the right time.

A New Home Base

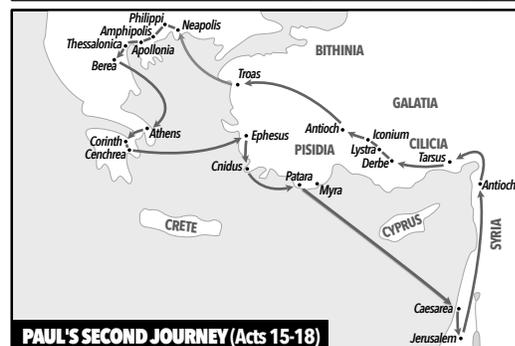
Last week, we saw persecution drive many of the Jerusalem Christians away from the city. In chapter twelve, we'll see one last look at the oppression in the region, as Herod kills James and imprisons Peter. After a divine prison break, even Peter leaves Jerusalem, and Luke turns the reader's attention to a new headquarters, Antioch. At the end of Friday's reading (11:19-30), we saw this group thriving, as Jews and Gentiles worked together, and Barnabas brought Saul to the city to teach the new converts (11:25-26). This Tuesday, we'll see the Holy Spirit set apart Paul and Barnabas to represent the group on a mission to spread the gospel into new regions.

Strategically Spreading

Tuesday and Wednesday, we'll read of Paul's first missionary journey, then on Thursday, he'll split with Barnabas and start his second journey. It helps to have a map handy as you read these chapters, as he goes from Syrian Antioch to Cyprus to Pisidian Antioch. From there, he heads to Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe before retracing his steps back "home" to Antioch at the end of chapter 14. On his second journey, he'll see a vision (16:9-10) that will lead him into Greece.



PAUL'S FIRST JOURNEY (Acts 13-14)



PAUL'S SECOND JOURNEY (Acts 15-18)

The Exciting Conquest of the Gospel

What's in a Name? This week, we'll watch Barnabas' sidekick Saul become Paul, the leading spokesman of the mission to the Gentiles. Notice the change from 13:7 to 13:13. What do you think led to the change?

Heroics in Jesus' Name! Luke packs these chapters with fantastic stories like when Peter gets mistaken for his angel and when a fortune-telling slave girl gets cured, only to leave her money-grubbing owners mad at the miracle-workers! The marvelous deeds of Paul and Barnabas even lead some to mistake them for the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes. Paul gets stoned, beaten, and imprisoned, but nothing stops him from speaking!

This is Us. After Paul's vision (16:9), the narrator stops calling Paul and his companions "they" and starts describing what "we" did. This change seems to indicate that Luke, the author, joined the traveling party in Troas, and will continue with Paul. The four "we" passages are Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; and 27:1-28:16.

Facing the Opposition

As Thursday's reading (Acts 15) begins, the harmony and growth in Antioch are threatened by "some men" who come from Jerusalem, teaching that Gentiles must be circumcised and follow the law of Moses for salvation. The issues outlined in this chapter will form the backdrop for many of the epistles we'll read later.



Acts 17-21

MAKE THE CASE

In an 1880 case – *Miles vs. United States* – the Supreme Court ruled that a jury can't convict someone unless they have enough evidence of guilt "to the exclusion of all reasonable doubt." We believe defendants are "innocent until proven guilty," and proof should be "beyond a reasonable doubt." But in the modern media age – even with a sequestered jury – some trials can become public relations battles. And in Paul's day, too, cases sometimes played out first in the "court of public opinion."

The Charges

Theophilus, the recipient of Acts (Acts 1:1), had probably heard of "*disturbances*" (Acts 19:23) throughout the empire tied to Paul and other Christians. At every turn this week, Christianity itself will face opposition. Were Christians a dangerous gang of troublemakers? Or was it a misunderstood movement that could change the world for the better?

- Monday (Acts 17), they'll face accusers in Thessalonica who say they "*turned the world upside down*" (Acts 17:6) – not something the Romans wanted.
- Tuesday (Acts 18), Jews will bring Paul before Gallio the proconsul, but he will declare the matter an internal, religious debate among Jews, effectually making Christianity legal in Corinth (Acts 18:14-16).
- Wednesday (Acts 19), an Ephesian group of silversmiths decide that Christianity threatens their profits in the idol business "*in almost all of Asia*" because Paul says, "gods made with hands are not gods" (Acts 19:26).
- Finally, on Friday (Acts 21), Jews in Jerusalem will accuse Paul of "*teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law*" and bringing Gentiles into the temple (Acts 21:28).

The Jury

Paul made his case by "*reasoning with*" people (Acts 17:2,17; 18:4,19; 19:8,9; 24:25). But that defense strategy only works with fair-minded, impartial people. Paul was "*explaining and proving*" his case (Acts 17:3) in Thessalonica, but many Jews became jealous and took him before the city rulers (Acts 17:5-6). But those in Berea were more noble-minded. What can you learn from their open-minded example, as they searched the Scriptures daily to see if Paul's words were true (Acts 17:11)?

The Defendants

The personal vignettes of disciples in these chapters make a compelling case for Christianity. What kind of character do they display?

- Tuesday (Acts 18), we'll meet Aquila and Priscilla, an extraordinary Christian couple chased from Rome along with other Jews. Notice how they approach Apollos, and then examine your approach to correcting others.
- Thursday's reading (Acts 20) offers a look into an early Christian assembly (Acts 20:7-12) and then gives insights into the responsibility God gives to church leaders (Acts 20:17-38). Look for applications from these invaluable glimpses into the life of the first-century church.

The case for Christianity continues to play out in the "court of public opinion." These disciples boldly spoke while unsure what it might cost them. May we learn from their example and do the same! It makes me think of the old question: if you someone accused you of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

WEEK 10

Acts 22-26

FOLLOW THE LORD THROUGH TRIAL

In 1990, NBC introduced a new procedural show called *Law and Order*. Thirty years later, the franchise has six spin-offs and has produced over a thousand episodes. Known for its "ripped from the headlines" storylines and familiar, two-note, signature sound (Duh-duh!), the show blends plot twists with a familiar pattern. The first half of the show follows the investigation, while the second half focuses on the trial.

Like a serialized court drama, this week's readings in Acts will offer one trial after another.

A Series of Trials

- **Episode 1: The Crowd** (Acts 22) – While not an official trial, the week's readings begin with Paul asking a mob of Jews at the temple steps to "hear the defense" he will make before them (Acts 22:1). What details does he emphasize about Ananias (Acts 22:12), Jesus (Acts 22:14), and his conversion (Acts 22:16)?
- **Episode 2: The Sanhedrin** (Acts 23) – The high court of the Jews consisted of both Pharisees and Sadducees, two parties fiercely split on the issue of the resurrection of the dead. How does Paul deftly play them against one another?
- **Episode 3: Felix** (Acts 24) – Now in the coastal city of Caesarea – the Roman seat of government in the area – Paul makes his case before the governor of Judea, Marcus Antonius Felix. What topics alarmed Felix (Acts 25:25)?
- **Episode 4: Festus** (Acts 25) – Felix leaves the matter for the next governor, Porcius Festus, who ruled over Judea from 60-62 AD. What dilemmas do these rulers face as they try to render a verdict on Paul (Acts 25:18-20)?
- **Episode 5: Agrippa** (Acts 26) – When Festus hosts King Agrippa II and his wife, the king asks to hear from Paul. Why do you think he gives Agrippa more details?
- **To Be Continued** (Acts 27-28) – Paul appeals to Caesar – Nero at this time – which will ultimately bring him to the political capital of the world to make his case for the way of Christ.

Plot Twists

These chapters have their share of plot twists (and twisted plots)!

- In Monday's reading (Acts 22), as the Jews riot over Paul's speech (Acts 23:22-23), the Roman soldiers decide to flog and interrogate Paul (Acts 23:24). What does Paul reveal that stops them and changes the course of the events for the rest of the book (Acts 22:25-29; 23:27; 25:11-12)?
- In Tuesday's reading (Acts 23), a plot to assassinate Paul gets thwarted when Paul's nephew discovers it, and they alert a centurion. What promise did the Lord make to Paul right before the conspiracy came to light? How do these efforts of evil men end up facilitating the Lord's purposes?

A Familiar Pattern

In our readings in Luke, we emphasized the Lord's journey to Jerusalem. As Paul made his trip to Jerusalem, he too knew that suffering awaited him (Acts 20:22-23). In this week's chapters, we'll see that Paul – like our Lord – will face four trials before rulers. Despite all this, both Jesus (Luke 23:4, 14, 22) and Paul (Acts 23:9; 25:25; 26:31) are declared innocent three times in Luke-Acts. Why do you think Luke has emphasized the parallels in the lives of Jesus and his follower, Paul? What differences could we note?



Acts 27-28, Romans 1-3

PROCLAIM THE KINGDOM

Have you ever heard the saying, "All roads lead to Rome"? It comes from a monument Romans used to mark the beginning point of roads to major cities in the empire. They called it "The Golden Milestone."

This week, we reach our own milestone as we finish Acts, and it seems that all roads in our readings will lead to Rome! We'll witness Paul's travels to Rome on Monday and Tuesday. Then we'll spend the rest of the week reading his letter to the Romans.

But for Paul, all roads lead to Christ – to the spread of the gospel. His imprisonment might seem like a giant roadblock, but even his chains serve the gospel.

Paul's Road to Rome

An angel promised Paul that he "*must stand before Caesar*" (Acts 27:24), but it will require a long, treacherous journey to fulfill this commission. Paul already had shipwrecked three times before this (2 Cor. 11:25), so he knew the danger. He left after the Day of Atonement (Acts 27:9), which means it's close to the time all sailing stopped. But he knew that to follow Christ, he had to live a life of risk and sacrifice. Through many hardships, his journey from Caesarea will take him to port in Sidon, Myra, and Cnidus, then to the islands of Crete, Malta, and Sicily before arriving in Rome.

Reaching the Destination

Paul reaches Rome, but we don't know much about what happens next. When we leave Paul, he has not yet come before Caesar, but he's busy "*proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance*" (Acts 28:31). The book of Acts ends abruptly, with much more left for Paul and other disciples to do. And that's probably the point! The story must continue, and you are part of the story too!

Changing Lanes

Before he reached Rome, he reached a group of Romans with the gospel, writing to the Roman Christians during his third missionary journey, on his way to Jerusalem (Rom. 15:25). With Luke and Acts, we saw the story of Jesus and the church. Now we turn to Romans because, in this book, Paul explains many of the most important ideas we'll encounter throughout the rest of the year.

Roadmap to Romans

In between the familiar greetings at the beginning (Romans 1:1-15) and end (Romans 15:22-16:27), the book reads more like a treatise than a letter. It's Paul's richest, most robust expression of the gospel, and we want to take it all in as we read.

- Look for the gospel in a nutshell at the beginning of the book (Romans 1:1-6). What do you learn about Christ and the goal of his message?
- Find the book's main point in Romans 1:16-17. Why is the gospel so important, and what does it reveal about God? As you read the rest of the book, keep Paul's thesis in mind.
- Then, look for our biggest problem in Romans 1:18-3:20. What is the problem, and how does it affect the Gentiles (Rom. 1:18-32) and the Jews (Rom. 2)?
- Finally, starting in Romans 3:21, look for God's great solution. With two, wonderfully simple words, "*But now*" Paul begins explaining how everything has changed for those faithful to the Messiah.



Romans 4-8

KNOW WHO YOU ARE

Disney's *The Lion King* tells the story of a lion named Mufasa, the great king of the Savannah, and his son, Simba, who should've succeeded him as king after Mufasa died. But Simba shirks his duty. He wanders around having fun with no worries until a wise baboon named Rafiki approaches him and says, "You don't even know who you are!"

Simba says, "And you do?" to which Rafiki replies, "You're Mufasa's boy."

"You knew my father?" Simba asks.

"Correction," Rafiki says, "I know your father." And Rafiki leads him to a pond and points to Simba's reflection to show him that his father is still alive in HIM. But Simba must remember who he is before he can fulfill his purpose.

Like Simba, we can lose our way when we forget our identity in Christ. So our readings this week remind us of who we are. Where do you find your identity?

A New Lineage

We often find some of our identity in the family we come from, and in Monday's reading (Rom. 4), we discover that we are part of a different family. As Gentile believers, we have a new lineage that goes back to a great forefather, Abraham. At the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 3-11, we read about the destructive influence of sin on the world. Then God picked this one man, and his family, through whom to bless the whole world (Gen. 12). Jews, who took great pride in their ancestor Abraham, might expect that God would declare Abraham righteous based on keeping the Law of Moses. But instead, Abraham has this relationship with God based on his faith (Gen. 15:6), long before Moses received the law! Now we who believe God are his children (cf. Gal. 3:7). How does this chapter affect the way you think of your part in the story of the Old Testament?

A New Relationship

On Tuesday (Rom. 5), Paul contrasts Christ with Adam – who brought sin and death into the world. How are Christ and Adam different? How does Christ start something new in us? Why should we be confident in our relationship with God now (Rom. 5:8-10)? Can trials be a good thing in Christ (Rom. 5:3-5)?

A New Way of Life

When we forget who we are, we forget how we should live. On Wednesday (Rom. 6), we'll read the importance of obeying the right master. What two masters must we choose between? What do you learn about baptism (Rom. 6:3-5)?

A New Present and a New Future

On Thursday (Rom. 7), we will see a bleak picture of human life in the flesh, including a tragic relationship with God's good law. But that all turns around in the glorious last verses of the chapter and the beautiful picture of our new life we'll read on Friday (Rom. 8). Romans chapter 8 is one of those passages worth reading more than once, savoring, even memorizing. What does it mean to be led by the Spirit of God? Why can we now call out to God as our "Abba, Father," the name Jesus used when praying (Mark 14:36)? What kind of future awaits us? What assures us that God is with us now?



Romans 9-13

LIVE THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Have you ever heard of a DINO? How about a RINO? Some Democrats and Republicans use these terms to describe people in their party who don't support the party's ideology. They'll say, "he's a Democrat In Name Only," a DINO. Or, "she's a Republican In Name Only," a RINO. They're trying to distinguish those who hold the same views from those who just go by the same party name.

Israelites in Name Only

In our readings on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday (Romans 9-11), Paul does something similar, as he tries to answer the big questions about Israel. To answer these questions, he has to explain how you know a true Israelite – a Jew who is more than an Israelite in name and ethnicity. He's not putting his Jewish kin down. As you read this week, you'll hear his passion for his nation and his heartbreak (Rom. 9:2-3) that *"not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel"* (Rom. 9:6).

Monday's reading (Rom. 9), draws from Isaiah and Jeremiah to envision Israel as pottery crafted by God for his purposes. God has used all of Israel for his purposes, just as he even used Pharaoh for his purposes. However, some of Israel chose unfaithfulness, and they'll face God's wrath.

Tuesday's reading (Rom. 10) highlights the difference between those Jews (and Gentiles) who will be saved and those who won't. God saves those who hear the good news of the Messiah and believe it, confessing their allegiance to Jesus as Lord (Rom. 10:5-17). No wonder Paul felt such a debt to everyone to share the gospel (Rom. 1:14-16)! So should we!

Wednesday's reading (Rom. 11) concludes the discussion of Israel, showing that Israel isn't one monolithic group. God has always had a remnant of faithful Israelites within the nation, and so he does today. But lest us Gentiles get a big head, he reminds us that we're grafted onto the tree of Israel. We should honor Israel's role in salvation history and count ourselves grateful to find ourselves among Abraham's children.

Christians in Name Only

On Thursday (Rom. 12), Paul transitions from explaining the gospel to applying it, challenging us with commands for daily Christian living. In a word, *"therefore,"* he packs the ideas of the previous eleven chapters – like grace, faith, justification, and hope – and directs all of that energy into a command. *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice"* (Rom. 12:1).

Are you offering God your body (Rom. 12:1), transforming your mind (Rom. 12:2), and using your gifts (Rom. 12:3-8)? Do you love unhypocritically (Rom. 12:9), wholeheartedly serving others (Rom. 12:10-11,13)? Do you celebrate their joys and mourn their heartbreaks (Rom. 12:15)? Do you respond to life's difficulties with hope, patience, and prayer (Rom. 12:12)? And are you willing to respond to hurtful people in a way that overcomes evil with good, confident in the Lord's justice (Rom. 12:17-21)?

Friday (Rom. 13), we'll learn how to respond to government authorities (Rom. 13:1-7), the one debt we owe everyone (Rom. 13:8-10), and what it means to be people of the day (Rom. 13:11-14).

So do you genuinely reflect God's love to people around you? Do you place your trust in Christ and present yourself every day as a living sacrifice? Are you more than a Christian in name only?



Romans 14-16, Mark 1-2

HOLD ONTO WHAT MATTERS MOST

Our family recently watched *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, and our kids couldn't understand why Elsa and Indy had trouble letting the Grail go, even when their lives depended on it. After Indy watches Elsa fall into a pit, he finds himself in the same position. Wanting desperately to reach the Grail, he hears his father call to him.

"Indiana," his father says, "Indiana, let it go." As much as he wanted to save the treasured relic, the cost was too high. He reaches up and takes his father's hand, escaping the crumbling cave just in time.

In this week's reading, we'll see that – like Indy – we sometimes have to let go of something dear to us to take hold of what matters more.

What Matters: One Another!

At the beginning of the week, we'll finish the book of Romans with instructions about life in the family of God. These chapters show us the problems among the Roman Christians, shedding some light on Paul's goals for the rest of the book: explaining the gospel of salvation for all through faith – not through the works of the Mosaic law. Gentiles and Jews had to learn to live together in harmony, holding their common faith without letting differing opinions (Rom. 14:1), backgrounds, and baggage separate them.

- Monday's reading (Romans 14) teaches us not to "judge one another" (Rom. 14:13).
- Tuesday's reading (Romans 15) commands us to "accept one another" (Rom. 15:7).
- Wednesday's reading (Romans 16) reminds us to "greet one another" (Rom. 16:16). The whole chapter displays the love Paul shares with this group, as he greets many of them by name.

Looking at these brethren in Rome, we might ask ourselves: Am I ready to swallow my pride and accept my brother?

What Matters: Following Jesus!

This week we start quarter two of our reading plan, where we'll go back to some of the early books of the New Testament. We begin on Thursday with our earliest gospel, the fast-paced, action-packed gospel of Mark. One of Mark's favorite words is "*immediately*" (Mark 1:12,18,20,21,29), and sometimes reading Mark I feel like an uptempo, thumping soundtrack should play in the background as the Lord races from town to town, healing and casting out demons as he proclaims his great announcement about God's kingdom.

On Thursday (Mark 1), we meet four fishermen who let go of their old lives to hold onto something more precious: becoming disciples of Jesus (Mark 1:16-20). We also see villagers flocking to Jesus, practically breaking down his door to see his wonders and hear his teaching. What do you make of Christ's authority (Mark 1:22,27), his compassion (Mark 1:41), and his credentials (Mark 1:8,11,24)? What does Jesus consider his mission (Mark 1:38)? And what can you learn from his prayer life (Mark 1:35)?

Friday's reading (Mark 2) focuses on a different cast of characters – scribes and Pharisees – who stumble over everything Jesus does. They think he blasphemes when he claims to forgive sins (Mark 2:1-12). They can't believe he eats with "tax collectors and sinners" (Mark 2:13-17). They think his disciples are slackers for not fasting (Mark 2:18-22) and lawbreakers for picking grain on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28). Can you put yourself in their shoes? Why do you think they had such a hard time accepting the Lord?

Looking to Christ's earliest disciples makes me ask myself: Is there something I need to walk away from to follow the Lord?



Mark 3-7

HEAR THE SECRET

What is it about a great story that pulls you in, making you turn the page or binge-watch to the next episode? J.J. Abrams, the celebrated producer of shows like *Lost* and movies like *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, calls it the "Mystery Box." As a boy, his grandfather took him to a magic store and bought him a wooden box covered in question marks. To this day, he keeps it in his office and has never opened it. He says it represents all the possibilities and secrets a story could unfold. "What are stories," he asks, "but mystery boxes?" What's in the box of secrets keeps us reading, watching, wanting to know more.

Secrets & Stories

As we read through Mark, we sense a growing tension. We can see that the conflict with the Jewish leaders will keep escalating. Where will their opposition lead? Well, since this is the most famous story ever told, most of us now know where that's headed – more on that in a minute.

But you might notice another tension in these stories, between two contradicting themes. On the one hand, these chapters emphasize the mission of Christ and his apostles to proclaim the good message. Nothing spreads like a good story, so the news of Jesus reaches far and wide, and crowds find him everywhere he goes. On the other hand, Jesus commands demons (Mark 1:24-25,34; 3:11-12) and people he heals to keep it quiet (Mark 1:44; 5:43; 7:36). As readers, we learned that Jesus is "*the Christ, the Son of God*" in the book's first sentence (Mark 1:1). There's no more critical truth we could know. So why keep it a secret (Mark 8:29-30)?

Well, not everyone in Jesus' day knew the end of the story. Most Jews had different ideas about the Messiah. As we read Mark, watch how Jesus unveils what it means to be Messiah – and to be one of his disciples. To carry a cross, to die, to rise again – what a strange and wonderful mystery this box holds for those who find it! But who can open the box?

Insiders & Outsiders

On Monday in Mark 3, we'll read stories of a new kind of family. The Lord's kin told people, "*he's out of his mind*" (Mark 3:21), but Jesus chose a new inner circle. He named them "*apostles*" (Mark 3:14), delegates he could send out to represent him and share his message. He selected twelve of them, just like the twelve patriarchs that began God's first covenant people. Who did Jesus say were his "*mother*" and "*brothers*" (Mark 3:34-35)?

On Tuesday in Mark 4, Jesus will explain the distinction between those who get to see what's in the mystery box and those who don't. This is the "parable chapter" in Mark. Jesus told his disciples, "*To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside everything is in parables*" (Mark 4:11). As Jesus explains God's kingdom, notice the keyword "*hear*." And ask yourself, "What kind of hearer am I?"

On Wednesday (Mark 5) and Friday (Mark 7), Jesus will enter Gentile cities and perform miracles. He helps a frightening demon-possessed strongman (Mark 5:1-20), a humble Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter (Mark 7:24-30), and in Decapolis, he heals a deaf man (Mark 7:31-37). What do you learn from these encounters? And how does the deaf man's cure foreshadow the spiritual goal Christ seeks for his disciples?



Mark 8-12

SEE CLEARLY WHAT DISCIPLESHIP MEANS

In Monday's reading in Mark 8, there's a striking story about Jesus healing a blind man (Mark 8:22-26). Jesus takes the blind man's hand and leads him out of town, spits in his eyes and asks, "*Do you see anything?*" (Mark 8:23).

And he does – Jesus has given a blind man sight. But he doesn't see clearly yet, everything is blurry. He says, "*I see people, but they look like trees, walking*" (Mark 8:24). But when Jesus laid his hands on him again, "*he saw everything clearly*" (Mark 8:25).

This story kicks off the middle act of the gospel of Mark, a unit that ends with the healing of blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52). In a way, this whole section is about going from blind, to blurry, to seeing clearly.

Blurry

After healing the blind man, Jesus gets to work healing the spiritual blindness (Mark 8:17-21) of the disciples. Like the blind man he healed, it's a process. Peter's confession (Mark 8:29) shows that he sees Jesus' true identity, yet Peter's next conversation with the Lord (Mark 8:31-38) reveals that he still doesn't see clearly what that means. The two stories of blind men receiving sight form bookends to the heart of Mark's gospel, in which we'll find the book's three predictions of Christ's coming death (Mark 8:31; 9:30-31; 10:33-34) and three challenges for disciples to humble themselves and serve others (Mark 8:33-38; 9:33-50; 10:38-45). In this way, our readings on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday (Mark 8-10) will reveal the surprising future of the Messiah and his followers. Anyone who would consider being the Lord's disciple needs to wrestle with what that means.

- Are you ready to take up a cross, deny yourself, and follow the Lord? Are you willing to walk the Lord's counterintuitive path to greatness, by becoming the servant of everyone around you?
- What do you think the three disciples who witnessed Jesus' transfiguration (Mark 9:1-13) took away from the event?

Blind

We'll begin the third and final section of Mark on Thursday (Mark 11). The happy fanfare of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11:7-10) quickly turns into a clash with religious leaders too blind to understand who Jesus is.

- What is the message of the cursed fig tree (Mark 11:12-14, 20-25)? How does it parallel the cleansing of the temple?
- What do you think the cleansing of the temple (Mark 11:15-19) is all about? How might Jesus' actions relate to the coming destruction of the temple in the judgment on Jerusalem (cf. Mark 13)? What's the meaning of the temple? Why do the chief priests and scribes want to kill him?
- Who are the tenants in Jesus' vineyard parable (Mark 12:1-12)?
- What do you learn from the Lord's exchanges with religious leaders in Mark 12:13-37?



Mark 13-16, James 1

LOOK FOR THE LIGHT

Once, when I was younger, my teacher drew a dot on a blank whiteboard. She asked us what we saw, and someone said, "A black dot." She reminded us that most of the board was white, but we only mentioned the black spot in the middle. It's easy to focus on the darkness and miss the light. Sometimes life's trials feel overwhelming, and the night seems to surround us. But if we look for it, we'll see God's light piercing the blackness, like a light at the end of a tunnel.

This week's chapters pull no punches about the blackness around us, but they also show us the gospel's light. These are chapters about trial and temptation. They remind us that God's present and future blessings are real, but so is the hardship we must face along the way.

A Warning of Trials

On Monday in Mark 13, we'll read Jesus' warning about some coming tribulations. Pay attention to the conversation that sets the stage for the rest of the chapter: What does Jesus predict (Mark 13:1-2), and what questions do the disciples ask (Mark 13:3-4)?

This is a challenging chapter with some unfamiliar, Jewish language. Don't be intimidated. As you read it, take an extra minute to look at some Old Testament passages that use the same imagery.

- Jesus references a phrase from Daniel, "*the abomination of desolation*" (Daniel 11:31; 12:11). What do those passages describe?
- Imagery like falling stars and the darkened sun comes from passages like Isaiah 13:10 and Isaiah 14:12. What are those passages about, and why do you think Jesus would use language like that here?
- What time frame does Jesus give for these things taking place (Mark 13:30)?
- Do you notice a transition from talking about a time disciples should recognize and flee (cf. Mark 13:14) to a time no one can know (Mark 13:32)? What two different events do you think Jesus has in mind?

An Example in Trials

Through the middle of the week, in Mark 14-16, we'll slow down and witness the Lord in *his* time of trial.

- On Tuesday (Mark 14), as he shares the Passover with his disciples, imagine the scene and take in his heaviness of heart. What do you learn from his spirit of obedience?
- On Wednesday (Mark 15), as he goes through the sham of a legal trial, the mocking, and the crucifixion, remember why he went through it all. How can you imitate the king who came "*not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (Mark 10:45)?
- On Thursday (Mark 16), consider the light at the end of the tunnel that the Lord's resurrection has brought into your life?

A Perspective on Trials

On Friday, we'll begin the book of James. This book will challenge us with its practical wisdom on how to *live* by faith (cf. Jam. 1:19-2:26). He starts by giving us a crash course on enduring trials:

- Why should we rejoice in trials (Jam. 1:2-4)?
- Where can we turn when we have difficulty seeing the blessings in trials (Jam. 1:5-8)?
- Where does temptation come from, and why should we "*remain steadfast*" through trials (Jam. 1:12-18)?



James 2-5, Galatians 1

SLOW DOWN AND LISTEN

There's a funny scene in the old show, *Taxi*, where a guy taking a driver's test – played by Christopher Lloyd – asks, "What does a yellow light mean?" Someone tells him, "Slow down." So Christopher Lloyd slows down, asking, "Whaaat doooes aaa yeelloooow liiiight meean?" The guy says, "Slow down!" And Christopher Lloyd continues repeating the phrase slower and slower! When I think of the book of James, I think of that question, "what does a yellow light mean?" and I remind myself that my relationship with God often has to do with slowing down and really listening to what he has to say.

You might remember a helpful, pithy verse we read on Friday:

"Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (James 1:19).

This verse contains some of James' major themes, with its emphasis on how we listen, speak, and manage our anger. The book of James begins and ends with instruction about trials (James 1:2-18 and 5:1-18), but in between, we find a challenging collection of sayings that force us to examine our daily lives.

Quick to Hear

Like a mirror, hearing God's word shows us who we are so that we can change (James 1:22-25), not so that we can play at worthless religion (James 1:26-27). On Monday, James develops the theme further, challenging us to fulfill the law and live our faith.

- If we love our neighbors as ourselves, we can't pick and choose who to treat with honor. All of God's laws matter, so hear and apply them all (James 2:1-13).
- Just like hearing the word without doing it is useless, empty words (James 2:15-16) and shuddering belief (James 2:19) mean nothing until our faith lives in our works (James 2:14-26).

Slow to Speak

On Tuesday, we'll take a hard look at what we say, in James' famous examination of the tongue (James 3:1-12). Are you consistent in speaking only pure and helpful words? Where can you improve the use of your tongue?

Slow to Anger

When James returns to the theme of wisdom (James 3:13-18; cf. James 1:5), he describes a meek (James 3:13; cf. James 1:20-21) and gentle, peaceable attitude (James 3:17) that produces righteousness (James 3:18), something that the anger of man never can produce (James 1:20). When our passions war within us, we fight (James 4:1), but when we humble ourselves before God, he helps us (James 4:11). Such humility will lead us to submit to the leadership of God, knowing our lives are in his hands (James 4:13-17).

Never Quick to Desert

On Friday, we'll start Paul's letter to the Galatians who – to Paul's astonishment – are "*quickly deserting*" God and "*turning to a different gospel*" (Gal. 1:6). False teachers convinced them that they had to submit to the Mosaic law to be God's people. Why do you think Paul brought up his background and his relationship with the leaders in the Jerusalem church? What does Paul say about those who bring us any other gospel? Where did Paul get the gospel he preaches?



Galatians 2-6

LIVE FREE

In the United States, we love our liberty. We name our famous landmarks after it: a cracked bell, an iconic statue, a restored tower. When the French made us mad, we even renamed our fries for a while to honor freedom. But we also understand that we can lose freedom as quickly as it was won. As Ronald Reagan said, "Freedom is a fragile thing and is never more than one generation away from extinction... it must be fought for and defended constantly by each generation, for it comes only once to a people."

Paul knew that spiritual liberty is as fragile as civil liberty. Remember our time in the book of Acts last quarter, with its debates about accepting uncircumcised Gentiles (e.g., Acts 11, 15)? Imagine Paul hearing how these Gentiles he converted had turned to a twisted gospel built on observing Old Testament laws, like circumcision (Gal. 5:2) and the Sabbath (Gal. 4:10). When teachers came to "trouble" the Galatian Christians and "distort the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:7), Paul wrote to defend their freedom.

"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).

A Declaration of Independence

Keeping with our metaphor of American liberty, we might describe Paul's first argument as his "Declaration of Independence" from any other man (Gal. 1:10-2:14). His gospel didn't come from Peter or James (cf. Gal. 1:18-19; 2:6-10), but by revelation from God himself (Gal. 1:11-12). These "pillars" accepted Paul as an apostle ministering to the uncircumcised (Gal. 2:7-9).

- What did Paul do when a group wanted to "_spy out our freedom_" and "_bring us into slavery_" (Gal. 2:4)?

The Enemies of Freedom

On Tuesday (Gal. 3), we'll read that Christ frees us from the law (Gal. 3:23) and its curse (Gal. 3:10-14).

- What purpose did the law play "until Christ came" (Gal. 3:23-24)?
- Who has "put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27)? Whose offspring are you, if "you are Christ's" (Gal. 3:29)?

Shockingly, Jews and Gentiles outside Christ find themselves in the same predicament: "_enslaved to the elementary principles of the world_" (Gal. 4:3,9). Gentile Christians were set free from enslavement to false gods (Gal. 4:8), just like Jews were freed from the law (Gal. 4:3). So Paul asks a good question: Now that you've tasted freedom, why go back to slavery?

Children of the Free Woman

Our reading on Wednesday (Gal. 4) gives two memorable contrasts:

- First, he contrasts the slave with the heir (Gal. 4:1-7). Only full-grown sons could inherit their father's fortunes, but whether you're male or female (Gal. 3:28), you can become a full-grown "_son, and if a son, then an heir through God_" (Gal. 4:7).
- The second contrast (Gal. 4:21-27) goes back to the stories of Isaac and Ishmael, two sons of Abraham (Gen. 16, 17, 21). One was the son of a slave woman, Hagar, and the other the son of a free woman, Sarah. God promised to bless all nations through Isaac. Paul compares Ishmael to the old covenant and Isaac to the new.

Life of the Freeman

Freedom can be dangerous. What if people abuse it? Our readings on Thursday and Friday (Gal. 5 and 6) show us what our lives look like when God's Spirit leads us (Gal. 5:16-26) and Christ forms in us (Gal. 4:19).

"For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13).

WEEK
20

1 Thessalonians 1-5

FIND STRENGTH IN FAMILY

Growing up watching classic TV shows like *The Walton's*, *Eight Is Enough*, and *The Brady Bunch*, I wondered what it'd be like to have a huge – sometimes dysfunctional – family. Though I didn't grow up in a house bursting with brothers or sisters, reading Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians this week reminds me how I'm part of a family that's bigger than I could ever imagine.

Family Matters

In chapter 2, Paul sets the familial tone for the letter. He came to them in gentleness, "*like a nursing mother taking care of her own children*" (1 Thess. 2:7). But he also spoke "*like a father with his children*," exhorting and charging them to live as they should (1 Thess. 2:11-12). Throughout the book, he calls them his "*brothers*," the most common word in the book. What do you learn about brotherly love from Paul's intense concern for these brethren, and his longing to see them face to face (1 Thess. 2:17-3:11)?

Family Reunion

In chapters 4 and 5, Paul answers a concern the Thessalonians had about the Lord's coming and the brothers who had already died. This might be the best news of the whole letter, and he saves it for the very end.

"Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17).

- Who are you excited to see again?
- What do you learn about the Lord's coming in this passage (1 Thess. 4:17-5:4)?
- Are you ready for that great reunion that's coming "*like a thief in the night*" (1 Thess. 5:2)?

Family Life

This book is full of encouragement for the way we walk in God's family, living as "*children of light*" (1 Thess. 5:5). Here's a thought to consider for each day of the week:

- Monday (1 Thess. 1), ask yourself if you receive (1 Thess. 1:6) and send out the word (1 Thess. 1:8) in the same way this church did?
- Tuesday (1 Thess. 2), consider what it means for you to "*walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory*" (1 Thess. 2:12).
- Wednesday (1 Thess. 3), consider how your commitment to your brethren's spiritual well-being compares to Paul's. Do your prayers for others prioritize holiness, love for others, and right standing with God at Christ's coming (1 Thess. 3:12-13)?
- Thursday (1 Thess. 4), examine your control over your body (1 Thess. 4:4) and your brotherly love (1 Thess. 4:9). Then ask yourself if you "*aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands*" so you're blameless before outsiders and "*dependent on no one*".
- The week ends with a bunch of short, pointed commands (1 Thess. 5). Do you respect those who "*are over you in the Lord*" (1 Thess. 5:12) and pursue "*peace among yourselves*" (1 Thess. 5:13)? How do you respond to the idle, the fainthearted, and the weak (1 Thess. 5:14)? How often do you rejoice, pray, and give thanks (1 Thess. 5:16-18)? And finally, do you make a practice of carefully examining everything, so you can hold onto the good stuff and stay far away from any form of evil (1 Thess. 5:21-22)?

WEEK 21

2 Thess. 1-3, 1 Cor. 1-2

STOP THE SPREAD OF CHURCH PROBLEMS

Chances are, you've heard the phrase "flattening the curve." For months we've taken preventative measures to avoid winding up in the hospital. But when you DO get sick, you need treatment fast! And when our local churches encounter problems, we need to deal with those issues quickly too. This week's readings diagnose five spiritual ailments and prescribe an effective treatment plan for each.

Persecution

On Monday (2 Thess. 1), we'll encounter the problem of persecution. While this church faced a constant barrage of affliction, Paul encourages them to treat it with perseverance (2 Thess. 1:4) and confidence (2 Thess. 1:5-12).

The persecution should give them even more confidence – it's "*evidence*" of God's coming judgment (2 Thess. 1:5), which will turn the tables on their wicked tormentors (2 Thess. 1:6) and bring relief to the afflicted believers (2 Thess. 1:7).

- What do you learn about the Lord's coming in this chapter (2 Thess. 1:7-10)?
- What encouragement do you find from Paul's closing prayer (2 Thess. 1:11-12)?

Deception

On Tuesday (2 Thess. 2), we find that someone has lied to the believers, teaching that the Lord has already come, even claiming that Paul said so (2 Thess. 2:1-3)!

Paul addresses their lies by reminding them of some coming events he already told them about (2 Thess. 2:5). Before the end comes, a man will sit in God's temple and exalt himself (2 Thess. 2:3-4).

- What can we do to inoculate ourselves against deception (2 Thess. 2:10-12)?
- What does Paul ask for in this chapter's closing prayer (2 Thess. 2:16-17)?

Idleness

On Wednesday (2 Thess. 3), we discover that some in the church aren't willing to work, rather spending all their time in other people's business (2 Thess. 3:11)!

Paul warns that if they don't want to work, they shouldn't get to eat (2 Thess. 3:10). And he holds up his example of hard work and sacrificial service for them to imitate (2 Thess. 3:7-8).

- What do you learn in this chapter about how the church disciplines members who refuse to repent (2 Thess. 3:6-12)?
- Where does true peace come from in his closing request for them (2 Thess. 3:16)?

Division

On Thursday, we'll start reading First Corinthians, where Paul addresses ailments of an immature church, like immorality and pride. The first six chapters address problems he's heard from reports about them (1 Cor. 1:11; 5:1). The rest of the book (1 Cor. 7-16), Paul answers the questions they had asked him (1 Cor. 7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1). He wastes no time before diagnosing problem number 1: divisions in the church (1 Cor. 1:10-17)! Rather than following their favorite preachers, they need to follow the crucified Lord and stop thinking like the world!

- What was Paul's mission from Jesus (1 Cor. 1:17)?
- What are we permitted to boast about (1 Cor. 1:31)?

Earthly Wisdom

On Friday (1 Cor. 2), we'll continue with a problem introduced in 1 Cor. 1:18 – the wisdom of the world. Unlike the smooth-talking, pompous philosophers the Corinthians were familiar with, Paul came with simple speech, a humble appearance, and astounding acts of power (1 Cor. 2:3-4).

- How does Paul describe the wisdom of God, and who was unable to hear it (1 Cor. 2:7-8)?
- How can you know if you are a "*spiritual*" person or a "*natural*" person (1 Cor. 2:12-16)?



1 Corinthians 3-7

BE HOLY

Years ago, as a teenager abroad in Germany, I lost my passport. For a day or so, I felt a little like a man without a country! I couldn't return home without a passport, but Germany couldn't issue one. So how do you step into a US government office while inside another country? Of course, I had to go to the US embassy!

Twice in this week's readings, Paul brings up the temple to convince the Corinthians they needed to think and act differently than everyone around them. The temple was like an embassy – a meeting place between two countries. Heaven and earth overlap in the temple. Stepping inside was like stepping into the residence of God on earth – his home-away-from-home (cf. Psalm 132:13). No building could contain him, yet his glory dwelt there (1 Kings 8:10-11, 27).

The Church is God's Temple

Last week we began reading about the divisions in the Corinthian church, as they organized around different teachers (1 Cor. 1:10-17). But as we'll read on Monday (1 Cor. 3), they didn't see that all of those teachers were just servants at work on God's building (1 Cor. 3:5, 9, 10). He tells them "you" (plural) "*are God's temple*" (singular), so they need to tend to the unity of God's house (1 Cor. 3:16, cf. 1 Peter 2:5). In other words, you're not just forming cliques and arguing with people. You're in danger of destroying God's temple, and if anyone does that, "*God will destroy him*" (1 Cor. 3:17)!

On Tuesday (1 Cor. 4), Paul continues putting himself and all the other apostles and teachers in their proper place. The church needed to learn "*not to go beyond what is written*" (1 Cor. 4:6), so that they wouldn't get puffed up. What do you learn from Paul's attitude about being judged (1 Cor. 4:1-6) and being humbled (1 Cor. 4:8-13)?

On Wednesday (1 Cor. 5), we learn of another report Paul heard, about sexual immorality in the church (1 Cor. 5:1). Since the church is God's holy temple, it must stay pure (1 Cor. 5:6-7, 12-13). What do you learn about the purpose and process of church discipline from this chapter? What do you think it means to celebrate the Passover feast today (1 Cor. 5:6-8)?

Your Body is God's Temple

On Thursday (1 Cor. 6), after dealing with the problem of lawsuits within the church (1 Cor. 6:1-8), Paul returns to the issue of sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:9-20). Maybe their freedom in Christ got to their heads, and they started saying things like "*all things are lawful for me*" (1 Cor. 6:12) and "*food is meant for the stomach*" (1 Cor. 6:13) to justify sexual sins. All of this brings Paul back to the temple ... this can't happen in God's temple!

"Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

On Friday (1 Cor. 7), Paul moves from the reports (1 Cor. 1:11, 5:1) to their questions (1 Cor. 7:1), beginning with questions about marriage. What fundamental principles guide Christian marriages? Why do you think he implies singleness is a "*gift*" (1 Cor. 7:7; cf. 7:32-35)?

WEEK
23

1 Corinthians 8-12

DO ALL TO GOD'S GLORY

Elizabeth Barrett Browning began (possibly) her most famous sonnet with these words, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." And as Paul attempts to reconnect with the Corinthian church after his challenging first letter and painful visit to them (2 Cor. 2:1), he begins "counting the ways" he loves them, with some poetic language of his own.

"For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you" (2 Cor. 2:4).

The Aroma

On Monday (2 Cor. 2), after urging them to forgive their penitent brother (1 Cor. 5:1-2), Paul compares himself to a captive of Christ in a triumph. He likens his work of spreading the knowledge of Christ to a permeating fragrance in the world (2 Cor. 2:14-16).

- Why do you think their discipline was so effective toward this sinning brother? And what do they need to do now (2 Cor. 2:7-8)?
- How far and wide does the "aroma" of your teaching spread around you?

The Letter

Then on Tuesday (2 Cor. 3), Paul defends himself against those who questioned his credentials as an apostle of Christ. But Paul shows them his credentials – by pointing them to a mirror! *"You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all" (2 Cor. 3:2).*

- Where does Paul's confidence come from (2 Cor. 3:4-6)?
- And how does the glory of the old covenant differ from the glory of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:7-18)?

The Clay Pot

On Wednesday (2 Cor. 4), Paul contrasts his human frailty with the light of Christ's glory that shines in him. He calls his body to a jar of clay (2 Cor. 4:7-12). But he keeps suffering and speaking because believers *must* speak (2 Cor. 4:13), *"so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God" (2 Cor. 4:15).*

- What will happen if we blindly ignore the light of Christ (2 Cor. 4:3-4)?
- What's the difference between what the outer person is going through and what the inner one experiences (2 Cor. 4:16)?

The Tent

Then on Thursday (2 Cor. 5), Paul takes his weakness a step further, comparing the "tent" we live in now with the eternal "building" God prepares for the faithful (2 Cor. 5:1-5). But while we're here, we aim to please him (2 Cor. 5:9), persuade others (2 Cor. 5:11), and live as a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17)!

- Are you comfortable in this "tent" or groaning for something more (2 Cor. 5:2)?
- What motivates you to be Christ's ambassador in the world (2 Cor. 5:11)?

The Temple

And finally, on Friday (2 Cor. 6), Paul says that, *"now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).* It's time to cast away unhealthy friendships with the world, and embrace a relationship with God as his temple (2 Cor. 6:16-18)!

- Are you surprised by anything Paul uses to "commend himself" (2 Cor. 6:4-10)?
- How can you cut ties with darkness today (2 Cor. 6:14-18)?



1 Cor. 13-16, 2 Cor. 1

SAY "AMEN" IN CHRIST

Almost every prayer I've ever heard in a gathering of Christians has ended with the same word: "Amen." It's an ancient word that has passed from Hebrew into hundreds of other languages, as generation after generation has made it their own. Ever wonder what this word means and why it's so meaningful to so many people?

The more unstable life gets, the more I appreciate this word. To say "amen" is to say, "truly," or "may it be certain." It's related to words like steadiness and trustworthiness. It asserts confidence. In this week's reading, Paul uses "amen" several different ways, and in a way, the whole week will focus on what we can say "amen" to, what we can rely on.¹

What Can You Say "Amen" To?

On Monday (1 Cor. 13), Paul applies love to spiritual gifts (cf. 1 Cor. 12:1). In a famous, life-changing chapter, he shows that love is the *"more excellent way"* (1 Cor. 12:31) to deal with everything, including gifts. Then he turns to the assembly and says we need love and order to affect positive change in one another (1 Cor. 14). He asks: *"how can anyone in the position of an outsider say 'Amen' to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?"* (1 Cor. 14:16).

We can only say "amen" to what we understand and affirm, but the message got lost in translation. We come together to be built up, not to show off our gifts or put on a show. But in their gatherings, people spoke over one another. Others spoke in foreign tongues with no interpreter. Though the gifts came from the Spirit, it became so disorderly that no one could learn, or sing, or pray in a meaningful way.

- Do all of the attributes of love (1 Cor. 13:4-7) describe your attitude? What do you still need to learn about actively loving others today?
- What do you learn about God's aims for our assembly? How can you align your intentions with God's purposes for your time with the church this Sunday?

What Can You Count On?

When things get crazy, it's so reassuring to meditate on lasting, unchangeable things. We start the week with the reassurance that – though prophecy and tongues would cease – faith, hope, and love abide (1 Cor. 13:8-13).

On Wednesday (1 Cor. 15), we'll read Paul's deepest dive into the subject of the resurrection. He rehearses the evidence for Christ's resurrection, then makes it clear that if we believe Jesus arose, we must recognize that we will too. This single fact gives lasting significance to everything we do for the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58).

On Thursday (1 Cor. 16), after instructions about the collection (1 Cor. 16:1-4), he commands the Corinthians to stand firm in faith and love (1 Cor. 16:13-14). Then he gives a fitting conclusion to the book: *"My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen"* (1 Cor. 16:24).

At the end of the week, we'll start the book of Second Corinthians, one of Paul's most personal letters. Some in Corinth have questioned Paul's integrity, since his travel plans changed (2 Cor. 1:15-17; cf. 1 Cor. 16:5-7). He wasn't *"vacillating"* or saying "yes" and "no" at the same time (2 Cor. 1:17). Then he offers these encouraging, stabilizing words:

"Jesus Christ . . . was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. And it is God who establishes us . . . who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee" (2 Cor. 1:19-22).

1 - For further study, look at the usage of "amen" in Num. 5:22; Deut. 27:15-26; 1 Kings 1:36; 1 Chron. 16:36; Neh. 5:13; 8:6; Psalm 41:13; 72:19; 89:52; 106:48; Jer. 11:5; 28:6; Matt. 5:18; John 3:5; Rom. 1:25; 9:5; 11:36; 15:33; Gal. 1:5; Phil. 4:20

WEEK
25

2 Corinthians 2-6

REFLECT THE LIGHT OF GOD'S LOVE

Elizabeth Barrett Browning began (possibly) her most famous sonnet with these words, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." And as Paul attempts to reconnect with the Corinthian church after his challenging first letter and painful visit to them (2 Cor. 2:1), he begins "counting the ways" he loves them, with some poetic language of his own.

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- Where does Paul's confidence come from (2 Cor. 3:4-6)?
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- What will happen if we blindly ignore the light of Christ (2 Cor. 4:3-4)?
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The Temple

And finally, on Friday (2 Cor. 6), Paul says that, *"now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation"* (2 Cor. 6:2). It's time to cast away unhealthy friendships with the world, and embrace a relationship with God as his temple (2 Cor. 6:16-18)!

- Are you surprised by anything Paul uses to "commend himself" (2 Cor. 6:4-10)?
- How can you cut ties with darkness today (2 Cor. 6:14-18)?

WEEK
26

2 Corinthians 7-11

BOAST IN THE LORD

Something about college football brings out our pride in the strangest ways. Rivalries get so intense that winning isn't enough, we need a crazy trophy! For example, the winner of the Oregon-Oregon State "Civil War" game gets the Platypus Trophy – that's right, a big, wooden platypus! The winner of the Indiana-Michigan State game takes home the Old Brass Spitoon! Other trophies include the Dutchman's Shoes (two wooden clogs!), the Battle of the Bones (a 100 lb., bronze rack of ribs), and the Troll (a monster made of moss and pinecones!). The things we'll do to show off our bragging rights! Look beyond football and notice all our status symbols – we love to show we're exceptional. We even have a name for stealth boasting – the "humble-brag!"

But as we read Second Corinthians, we find Paul in a dilemma. He deserves the Corinthians' respect as the apostle who brought them the gospel. They should submit to his authority and listen with open hearts. So when they question his credentials, he has to build himself up. But this can come across as boasting. So in this week's reading, Paul helps us all understand what it means to boast as a Christian.

Ready to Repent

On Monday (2 Cor. 7), Paul rejoices that they heard his letter with godly sorrow and repented. He boasted to Titus about their character, and they proved him right by receiving his correction (2 Cor. 7:14). Remember, Paul opened the letter reveling in his confidence that they'd boast in each other when Christ returns (2 Co 1:14). What a different kind of boasting – not in how great Paul is, but that God has brought more saints into fellowship through Paul, and someday they'll celebrate Christ's final victory together!

- How can you distinguish godly sorrow for your sins from worldly sorrow?

Ready to Give

Our readings on Tuesday and Wednesday (2 Cor. 8 and 9), focus on the gift Paul want to collect for the needy saints in Judea. You might remember, he told them to set money aside "for the saints" in his first letter (1 Cor. 16:1-4). This week we'll read some of the New Testament's most profound – and convicting – insights into giving.

- Why should grace lead to generosity (2 Cor. 8:9-11; 9:7-15)?
- What did the Macedonians give first, before giving their money (2 Cor. 8:3-5)?
- What does the principle of equity have to do with manna (2 Cor. 9:9-10)? What kind of responsibility comes when others have a lack, and you have more than you need (2 Cor. 8:12-15)?
- How does the law of the harvest affect your giving (2 Cor. 9:6-7)?

Ready to Preach

On Thursday (2 Cor. 10), we'll see a shift in tone, as Paul completes his heartfelt appeal and begins a sharp defense. He uses the word "boast" 22 times this week, and 17 of those come on Thursday and Friday (2 Cor. 10 and 11). He closes Thursday's reading with his commitment to do the work God gave him – bringing the gospel to new areas, just as he did in Corinth. "*We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence*" (2 Cor. 10:15-16).

Maybe some in Corinth commended themselves, but Paul aimed to anchor all his boasts in the Lord (2 Cor. 10:17; cf. Jer. 9:23,24).

- What "strongholds" in your life need destroyed (2 Cor. 10:4)? What arguments, opinions, and thoughts in you need taken captive to obey Christ (2 Cor. 10:5)?
- How can we maintain simple devotion to Christ, protecting ourselves from Satan's cunning (2 Cor. 11:2-3)?



2 Cor. 12-13, Matt. 1-3

EXPERIENCE THE POWER OF CHRIST

In 1971, the popular series of educational shorts *Schoolhouse Rock!* debuted their pilot episode of the series, called "Three Is a Magic Number." The past, the present, and the future – faith, and hope, and charity – the song highlights just how significant this little number can be! And in this week's readings – as we close out Second Corinthians and start the gospel of Matthew – we'll find the number three in every chapter!

Three Pleas to the Lord

On Monday (2 Cor. 12), Paul shares his struggles with a *"thorn in the flesh"* – some affliction he begged the Lord to remove three times! But to keep him humble, the Lord refused his request, leaving Paul to boast in his weakness rather than feel ashamed (2 Cor. 12:7-10). He's deeply worried that the Corinthians are chasing after "super-apostles" rather than listening to him, and the more he loves them, the less they seem to reciprocate (2 Cor. 12:15).

- How can you apply Christ's promise that *his grace* is sufficient, and *his power* is perfected in your weakness (2 Cor. 12:9)?

Third Visit to Corinth

On Tuesday (2 Cor. 13), he closes the letter with a conversation about his third trip to see them. He warns them how he'll address those in sin (2 Cor. 13:2) and that he's coming with the power of God in Christ (2 Cor. 13:3-4). But he doesn't want his visit with them to be harsh – so instead, he prays for their restoration and peace (2 Cor. 13:10-11).

- How can you examine yourself *"to see whether you are in the faith"* (2 Cor. 13:5)?

Our Third Gospel

We began our reading plan with Luke's rich and detailed gospel, looking at Jesus' humanity. Then in the second quarter, we flew through Mark's gospel, exploring Jesus' power. Now in the third quarter, we're back to consider Christ's kingship as recorded by Matthew.

On Wednesday (Matt. 1) we'll encounter every reading plan's "arch-nemesis" – the genealogy! But as you read this long list of names, notice the three sets of fourteen generations – Abraham to David (Matt. 1:2-6), David to Babylon (Matt. 1:6-11), and Babylon to Christ (Matt. 1:12-16). And the chapter closes out with an abbreviated account of Jesus' birth, leaving us with the angel's words ringing in our ears, *"... you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins"* (Matt. 1:21).

- More than a simple family tree, what does this genealogy tell you about the Old Testament's story?

On Thursday (Matt. 2), we'll find some who seek to worship Jesus and others who want him dead. In his search for this newborn "king of the Jews," King Herod sends some wise men to Bethlehem, where they offer Jesus three gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But things quickly turn dark as Joseph and Mary escape to Egypt before Herod slaughters all the baby boys in the region (Matt. 2:16-18).

- How do the events in Christ's life echo important moments in Israel's story, and what should we learn from these parallels?

And finally, on Friday (Matt. 3), we're back with John the Baptist as he powerfully preaches repentance in the wilderness of Judea, preparing the way for Jesus. And Jesus comes to John to be baptized, though Jesus has to do some convincing first before John would agree. Notice the three-persons of the godhead here at his baptism – the Spirit descending, God the Father speaking (Matt. 3:16-17).

- How do John's and Jesus' message about God's kingdom (Matt. 3:2; 4:17) apply to you (cf. Acts 3:18-21; Col. 1:9-14)?



Matthew 4-8

LEARN FROM THE MASTER TEACHER

In recent years you may have seen advertisements for a brand of celebrity-led online classes called "MasterClass." Their pitch? If you're going to take a course, why not learn from a world-renowned expert. Let Carlos Santana teach you to play guitar. Hire Serena Williams as your tennis instructor. Make Gordon Ramsay your cooking coach. You can see the appeal. But what if your aspirations run a bit higher than improving your backhand? What if you want a master class in living? Who qualifies as the master teacher of life?

In this week's reading, Matthew presents Jesus of Nazarene as the Great Instructor and invites you into a curriculum for total life training.

Introducing the Master Teacher

Last week we saw Jesus endorsed by angels (Matt. 1:20-21), wise men (Matt. 2:10-11), John the Baptist (Matt. 3:14), and God the Father (Matt. 3:16-17).

On Monday (Matt. 4), Matthew presents more credentials, as Jesus goes into the wilderness for testing, just as the children of Israel did. But unlike Israel, Jesus passes every test (Matt. 4:1-11). Matthew continues to present Jesus as the one who fulfills the Scriptures (Matt. 4:13-16; cf. Matt. 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23), as he calls followers (Matt. 4:18-22), doing mighty works and growing in fame (Matt. 4:23-25).

- What does Jesus call his first disciples to do (Matt. 4:19), and what might this mean for you as Christ's disciple?

Enrolling in the Master Class

On Tuesday (Matt. 5), we dive into the Sermon on the Mount – undoubtedly one of the most influential lessons by any teacher in history. The Lord begins by painting a strikingly different picture of a blessed life than what we might expect (Matt. 5:3-11). Then he relates his teaching to the Old Testament. Jesus did not come to invalidate God's Word in the "*law and the prophets*" – rather, he fulfills them (Matt. 5:17-18)! He offers six antitheses, setting what "*you have heard*" against what "*I [Jesus] say to you*" (Matt. 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43).

On Wednesday (Matt. 6), Jesus cautions against hypocrisy in charitable giving (Matt. 6:2-4), praying (Matt. 6:5-15), and fasting (Matt. 5:16-18). He warns us to watch what we treasure (Matt. 6:19-24) and avoid worry by trusting God and prioritizing his righteousness (Matt. 6:25-34).

- What aspects of the Lord's prayer (Matt. 6:9-13) can you apply to your prayer life?

On Thursday (Matt. 7), the Lord teaches on judging others (Matt. 7:1-6), asking for what we need (Matt. 7:7-11), and the golden rule (Matt. 7:12). Then he wraps up the discourse by presenting our two choices – pictured as two roads (Matt. 7:13-14), two fruit trees (Matt. 7:15-20), and two houses (Matt. 7:24-27). How we respond to Jesus will determine how he responds to us (Matt. 7:21-23). Will we *do* what Jesus says (Matt. 7:21, 24, 26)?

Watching the Master in Action

On Friday (Matt. 8), Jesus displays his authority again (Matt. 7:28-29), this time with his deeds! Each miracle shows us a little more about Jesus and his kingdom, from the way his touch cleanses the unclean (Matt. 8:1-4) at the chapter's start, to the way demons know his identity at the chapter's end (Matt. 8:28-34).

- What do you notice about the people Jesus meets in this chapter?



Matthew 9-13

LET THE DOCTOR SPEAK

Maybe we don't see them as much in the age of ad-free streaming, but chances are you've seen those awkward commercials for oddly named medications, often with frightening side effects. They usually encourage viewers to, "talk to your doctor to see if this medication is right for you." In this week's readings, we'll find the greatest physician speaking profound and healing words to those he meets.

Speaking to the Sick

On Monday (Matt. 9), Jesus speaks forgiveness and healing to the paralyzed man (Matt. 9:1-8). He declares himself the great physician for those sick in their sins (Matt. 9:11-13). Then he speaks to a woman who touched his coat on his way to raise a girl from the dead (Matt. 9:18-26) and to two blind men, restoring their sight (Matt. 9:27-31). He even made a demon-possessed man speak who had previously been mute (Matt. 9:32-34).

- How do you view the spiritually (and physically) sick people around you?

Speaking to (and Through) His Disciples

On Tuesday (Matt. 10), Jesus sends out his disciples on a parallel preaching path with the Spirit's power. If they're concerned about public speaking, Jesus offers some encouragement.

"... do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Matt. 10:19-20).

Then on Wednesday (Matt. 11), John the Baptist sends some of his disciples to ask if Jesus is "the one who is to come" (Matt. 11:3). Jesus speaks a message for John about the signs of the Messiah. When they left, Jesus called John a great prophet, *"... Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he"* (Matt. 11:11).

- What does John's question teach you about being confident in your understanding of the truth?

Speaking to His Critics

On Thursday (Matt. 12), Jesus faces accusations of breaking the Sabbath because his disciples picked heads of grain, and Jesus healed a man with a withered hand (Matt. 12:1-14). And if that weren't enough, as Jesus healed a blind, mute, and demon-possessed man, they accused him of working for Beelzebul, the prince of demons (Matt. 12:22-24)!

So Jesus addresses their hypocrisy with these chilling words, "You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34).

- Are you prepared to face opposition like Jesus and his disciples did?

Speaking in Parables

And finally, on Friday (Matt. 13), Jesus began some of his most powerful, yet puzzling teaching – speaking in parables. He shows us the kingdom's unique nature in stories about dirt, plants, treasure, nets, and pearls. The point is to open a window into God's purposes.

- Why do people receive the kingdom in different ways?
- How can God's kingdom coexist with the evil in the world around us?
- And why would someone joyfully sell everything they have for the kingdom, and consider it the most reasonable thing they could do?



Matthew 14-18

REMEMBER THE TROUBLES CHRIST FACED

"Nobody knows the trouble I've seen," says an old Spiritual. The song was sung by slaves in the American south, who surely knew its meaning better than most of us. Yet it has continued as a consoling lament for those wearied by life's troubles. In the version I learned growing up, the opening refrains ends with the words, "Nobody knows but Jesus." Those four words make all the difference for me. They remind us that even when we feel utterly alone, misunderstood, and burdened in a way no one else seems to see, there is one who knows what we're going through.

In this week's reading, we see Jesus face a day of stress and sorrow. We'll watch mean-spirited people try to foil his noble goals. And even his closest friends seem to have the wrong idea about him, misunderstanding half the things he says and does.

Jesus Knows All About Hard Days

On Monday (Matt. 14), the Lord gets news of a death in the family. His cousin (and forerunner) John the Baptist has been beheaded. Pay attention to how the day goes from there, and imagine what it must have been like for Jesus.

"Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns" (Matt. 14:13).

He had compassion for them and fed them (Matt. 14:14-21), then finally escaped for a long night alone in prayer (Matt. 14:22). It was sometime between 3 AM and 6 AM when he famously helped Peter walk on water. The miraculous combination of sea crossing and feeding thousands reminds you of Exodus. Just another signal of the great deliverance God is working in Jesus.

Jesus Knows All About Difficult People

On Tuesday (Matt. 15), Jesus faces off (again!) with the Pharisees and scribes, this time about handwashing (Matt. 15:1-9) and defilement (Matt. 15:10-20). But in each case, the Lord aims beyond *their* arguments to give us a broader lens and a deeper truth. Contrast these religious "experts" with the gentiles who approach Jesus in faith (Matt. 15:21-39).

Jesus Knows All About Being Misunderstood

On Wednesday (Matt. 16), those pesky Pharisees come again, now asking for a sign (Matt. 16:1), as though Jesus hadn't given dozens of signs already. In this chapter, we find Jesus misunderstood by his disciples (Matt. 16:5-12) and even rebuked by Peter when he predicts his death (Matt. 16:21-23). But don't let Peter's ignorance overshadow his extraordinary confession – the confession you and I cling to today (Matt. 16:13-20).

Then on Thursday (Matt. 17), the Lord's glory and authority are confirmed from on high, at the mount of transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-13). This series of events – Peter's confession, Jesus' predicted death, and the transfiguration – are at the center of Matthew's gospel.

All of this misunderstanding leads Jesus to offer a corrective discourse on Friday (Matt. 18). When some of the disciples come to Jesus asking, "*Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven*" (Matt. 18:1), Jesus takes another stab at getting through to them about the kingdom. He says to learn from children (Matt. 18:2-6), be willing to cut out anything that tempts you to sin (Matt. 18:7-9), and do whatever you can to restore your lost brother (Matt. 18:10-20). And when Peter asks about forgiving someone seven times, he tells a story that puts forgiveness into perspective for all of us (Matt. 18:21-35).



Matthew 19-23

FACE LIFE'S TESTS LIKE CHRIST

Growing up, most teenagers excitedly prepare for one of the most impactful tests of their lives – the driving test! Some day, hopefully, they'll become skilled and responsible drivers. But as any fearful parent knows, they don't always start that way. In this week's readings, we find Jesus masterfully passing multiple tests, while the religious leaders, and even some disciples, seem to fail at every turn.

Tests on the Road

On Monday (Matt. 19), the Pharisees test Jesus with a controversial question about divorce (Matt. 19:3-12). We find the disciples preventing parents from bringing their children to see Jesus (Matt. 19:13-15). And a rich young man asks Jesus to point out what he's missing (Matt. 19:16-24).

Then on Tuesday (Matt. 20), Jesus shares a powerful parable about equity after Peter wonders what they'll receive for giving up everything (Matt. 20:1-16). Misunderstanding the kingdom's true nature, James and John's mom awkwardly asks Jesus if her sons can have powerful positions someday (Matt. 20:20-28). And along the road outside Jericho, the crowd tried to keep two blind men from bothering Jesus with their cries for healing (Matt. 20:29-34).

- How does the Lord's teaching on divorce affect the importance you place on your marriage covenant?
- Would you have prevented those parents from bringing their children to Jesus, or the blind men from being healed?

Tests in the City

On Wednesday (Matt. 21), Jesus sends two disciples into Jerusalem to fulfill Zechariah's prophecy, entering the city on a donkey while the people shout his praises (Matt. 21:1-11). He comes to the temple to put the religious leaders to the test, asking them to state their position on John's baptism (Matt. 21:23-27). And after two thinly veiled parables about an obedient son and some murderous vineyard-keepers, the religious leaders are ready to arrest him (Matt. 21:28-46).

Then on Thursday (Matt. 22), Jesus tells a story about how some will accept the invitation to the wedding feast, while others reject it (Matt. 22:1-14). He faces three attempts to trap him in his words, with questions about taxes (Matt. 22:15-22), the resurrection (Matt. 22:23-33), and the greatest commandment (Matt. 22:34-40). But he finally silences their barrage of questions when he asks, "Whose son is the Christ?" (Matt. 22:41-46).

- Why do you think the crowds went from celebrating Jesus as he entered the city to shouting "Crucify him!" days later at his trial?
- What do you learn from Jesus about responding to probing questions?

Failing the Test

Finally, on Friday (Matt. 23), Jesus points out the total failure of the scribes and Pharisees, pronouncing seven "woes" on them for their hypocrisy and unrighteousness (Matt. 23:1-36). He calls them "*blind fools*" (Matt. 23:17), "*children of hell*" (Matt. 23:15), and a "*brood of vipers*" (Matt. 23:33), among other things. And the week closes with Christ's lament over the city of Jerusalem, wishing he could bring them together in safety, despite their stubborn rejection (Matt. 23:37-39).

- How would you have felt to hear these woes from Jesus about *you*?
- In what ways do you struggle with the same failures as the Pharisees did?

WEEK
32

Matthew 24-28

LEARN FROM JESUS' SERMONS

In *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, a high school senior skips school, reasoning that, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it" I may not let my kids use that line to ditch school, but he has a point. As we race through our days, we lose sight of the forest when we fixate on the trees. Likewise, a through-the-Bible reading plan can keep us zooming through chapters without realizing how it fits together.

So before we wrap up the book, let's "stop and look around" at Matthew's gospel, noticing how five of Christ's sermons take center stage in this book. Each sermon's design lends itself to teaching and memorization. And each ends by saying what happened "*when he had finished*" speaking (Matt. 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Let's look at how these sermons fit into the story of Jesus in Matthew.

The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7)

After Matthew's introduction took us from Christ's birth to his early ministry (Matt. 1-4), we got a window into the kind of teaching that grabbed people's attention. "*And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him*" (Matt. 7:28-8:1).

The Missionary Sermon (Matt. 10)

After Jesus chose his apostles, he sent them with a warning of persecutions (Matt. 10:16-25), a promise of providence (Matt. 10:26-32), and a sense of authority (Matt. 10:40). "*When Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples*" he continued preaching throughout Galilee (Matt. 11:1). But controversy grew in the next set of stories, fulfilling the sermon's foreboding tone.

The Parable Sermon (Matt. 13)

Christ's parables painted earthly pictures to illustrate the kingdom of God. They hid the truth from some but illuminated it for others, and the difference between these two groups becomes even clearer in the next stories. "*And when Jesus had finished these parables*" he faced rejection in his hometown (Matt. 13:53-58) before turning to others, including Gentiles (Matt. 15:21-39).

The Church Sermon (Matt. 18)

Here, Jesus directed congregational life, prompted by a question about "*_Who is the greatest in the kingdom_*" (Matt. 18:1). "*_Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan_*" (Matt. 19:1), transitioning from Galilee to his Judean ministry.

The Sermon of Predictions (Matt. 24 & 25)

On Monday and Tuesday (Matt. 24 & 25), Jesus predicts the fall of Jerusalem and the temple (Matt. 24:1-34), then explains his final coming in judgment (Matt. 24:35-25:46). "*When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said... "the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified"*" (Matt. 26:1-2). So the final chapters of the book will lead us through the betrayal night (Matt. 26), crucifixion (Matt. 27), and resurrection of the Lord (Matt. 28).

All of these sermons share an underlying theme: separation. The Lord's trial gives us a final, literal example of what we've seen throughout the book – people deciding what they think about this figure. As a familiar hymn says, "What will you do with Jesus?"

Then at the end of the book, the disciples receive a commission to instill all of the Lord's teaching in new disciples throughout the world (Matt. 28:19-20). How fitting that this book of Christ's sermons closes with a command for *us* to continue Jesus' ministry of teaching!



Colossians 1-4, Philemon

THINK DIFFERENT

Few advertising slogans are more iconic than Apple's "Think Different" campaign. Back when computers were big beige boxes, Apple shook up the status quo with a new perspective. And as we read Paul's prison letters, Paul challenges us to shift our perspective as well – to "Think Different" about almost everything.

Think Different About Jesus

On Monday (Col. 1), Paul opens up his short letter to the Colossians, telling them how he prays for them to be full of the "knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Col. 1:9). He shares his thankfulness that God has pulled us out of darkness, giving us a place in his Son's kingdom – where we find forgiveness of all our sins (Col 1:12-14). And he lifts up Jesus as preeminent, the Creator of the world, the perfect embodiment of God in human form, who is head of the church, bringing us peace through his death (Col. 1:15-23).

Think Different About Suffering

As Paul closes out the first chapter, he says that it isn't easy following Jesus – which he should know, as he's writing from a prison cell! Is he discouraged from his sufferings? Not at all! He describes these trials as opportunities to serve the entire multi-ethnic community of the Lord's people, bringing them to maturity, wherever they are (Col. 1:27-29).

Think Different About Growth

And then on Tuesday (Col. 2), Paul encourages them to keep growing, not only in their faith (Col. 2:7) but growing closer to each other in love (Col. 2:2). They might be tempted to follow either the Jewish or pagan influences around them, Paul reminds them that *in Christ*, they're set free from all these old traditions and religious-looking practices (Col. 2:16-19).

Think Different About Your Life

So, on Wednesday (Col. 3), Paul gets practical by reshaping our thinking on basically every aspect of our lives. He lists a slew of sinful practices and shows us the better alternatives for each (Col. 3:5-17). He gets personal, addressing our relationships with spouses, parents, children, masters, and slaves (Col. 3:18-4:1). This new way of life is more than changing our actions. It's a total change in mindset!

"Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:2-3).

Think Different About Your Brother

On Thursday (Col. 4), Paul familiarly closes his letter with some warnings, encouragements, greetings, and some housekeeping. But as he mentions a handful of first-century brothers and sisters who say, "Hello!", he name-drops – just briefly – a man named Onesimus, "*our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you*" (Col. 4:9).

And that leads us to Friday (Philem.), where we learn more about Onesimus. He had run away from his master – a believer – named Philemon. And while he was on the run, he heard the gospel and obeyed it! So Paul writes to Philemon to get the two of them back together again. He leverages his relationships with both men to bridge the gap between them. We don't really know how their story ended. But seeing Paul's confidence in Philemon as we read the letter makes it easy to imagine forgiveness and reconciliation. How can a slave and a master be transformed into brothers? Through a new way of thinking, in Christ.



Philippians 1-4, Ephesians 1

FOCUS ON THE THINGS THAT MATTER

When Disney wanted to learn what captured children's attention at their theme parks, they hired Kare Anderson and a cultural anthropologist to study DisneyWorld's guests. Do kids focus on Mickey and his friends? Or maybe the sweets and rides? No, as Anderson wrote in the *Harvard Business Review*, "Instead it was their parents' cell phones, especially when the parents were using them. Those kids clearly understood what held their parents' attention – and they wanted it too." She says, "we often fail to realize how what we focus on comes to control our thoughts, our actions, and indeed, our very lives. Whatever we focus upon actually wires our neurons."¹

This week, we'll see that the key to joyful maturity in Christ is our *focus*. Reading Philippians and Ephesians, it's clear that whatever has your attention determines your attitude about circumstances and people. So, where should we place our focus?

Focus on the Gospel

On Monday (Php. 1), as Paul writes from prison, he shows a surprisingly positive outlook on his situation. Not that he likes imprisonment, but he sees progress where it matters most: in the spread of the gospel (Php. 1:12-18). As he sees it, living "*means fruitful labor*" (Php. 1:22) and dying is even better (Php. 1:23)!

- How would your perspective change if you viewed everything as an opportunity for bringing people to Christ?

Focus on Others

On Tuesday (Php. 2), Paul challenges us to look beyond our interests and prioritize others (Php. 2:3-4). We must learn from Christ, who emptied himself for us (Php. 2:6-8). We can also learn from the selfless example of Paul (Php. 2:17), Timothy (Php. 2:20-21), and Epaphroditus (Php. 2:25-30).

- How far should we take the command to "*count others more significant than yourselves*" (Php. 2:3)?

Focus on the Goal

Wednesday's reading (Php. 3) begins with Paul stacking up his credentials (Php. 2:4-6) against the Judaizing false teachers' (Php. 3:2-4). It's easy to get stuck in past achievements and failures, but Paul shows us how to get beyond our past. How? By looking forward to our resurrection (Php. 3:10), like a runner looks to the finish line (Php. 3:12-14).

"But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body ..." (Php. 3:20-21).

- Have you fixed your attention on that great day?

Focus on the Lord

On Thursday (Php. 4), we find some of Paul's most famous and inspiring words, encouraging us to fix our hearts on God. He says to "*rejoice in the Lord always*" (Php. 4:4), to "*not be anxious about anything*" (Php. 4:6), and to think noble thoughts (Php. 4:8). He promises that God's peace "*which surpasses all understanding*" will guard our hearts (Php 4:7), and we "*can do all things*" through Christ (Php. 4:13).

- Why do you think joy and peace accompany those who wholeheartedly follow these instructions?

Focus on Your Blessings

On Friday, we start the book of Ephesians, Paul's explanation of God's grand, eternal purposes. He praises God who has "*blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*" (Eph. 1:3). Then he lists many of our spiritual blessings, like our adoption (Eph. 1:5), redemption (Eph. 1:7), and inheritance (Eph. 1:11). Then he fittingly moves from praise to express his thanksgiving and prayer for the Ephesian disciples (Eph. 1:15ff).

- How often do you reflect on your spiritual blessings in Christ? What effect does gratitude have on your perspective of your life?

1 - <https://hbr.org/2012/06/what-captures-your-attention-c>

WEEK
35

Ephesians 2-6

UNDERSTAND GOD'S ETERNAL PLAN

Plato told a famous story about prisoners chained up in a cave, with a fire burning behind them. The prisoners couldn't see anything except the shadows of whatever passed by the fire. To them, everything looked like shadows; that was all there was. But then a prisoner was freed to experience the world above. After seeing this fuller reality, he returned to tell the other prisoners about it, but they thought he was crazy and sent him away.

For Plato, the story illustrated the philosopher's life. But it raises a lot of other questions for me. Do I see things as they are? What am I missing? Is there a reality beyond the shadows, a greater meaning to life?

As we bring these questions to our readings in Ephesians this week, let's notice three phrases that lift us to see "*the eternal purpose*" (Eph. 3:11) – the epic, cosmic story behind everything.

The Heavenly Places

Last Friday, we read about the "*spiritual blessings in the heavenly places*" (Eph. 1:3). This week, on Monday (Eph. 2), we learn that God saved us by grace and seated us with Christ "in the heavenly places" (Eph. 2:6; cf. 1:20) to display his "*immeasurable riches*" of kindness toward us (Eph. 2:7). But later in the book, we'll see that the "*heavenly places*" are also the spiritual realm where dark forces exist. To see the world beyond the cave, we must realize that "*we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*" (Eph. 6:12).

The Mystery

God hid his plans for a long time, but God has now revealed "*the mystery*" (Eph. 3:3), and "*when you read*" Paul's letters, you can grasp the insight God gave him (Eph 3:4). God has brought people from all nations together with Jewish Christians as "*fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ*" (Eph 3:6).

In Tuesday's reading (Eph. 3) Paul explains "*the plan of the mystery hidden for ages...so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places...according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ*" (Eph. 3:9-11). God shows his wisdom in the church! By his redemptive love, believers unite with Christ as a bride to a husband. As Paul says, "*this mystery is profound*" (Eph. 5:29-32).

The Walk

One of Ephesians' striking features is how it shifts seamlessly from three chapters of lofty ideas to three chapters of practical applications. On Wednesday (Eph. 4), the second half of the book begins, "*I therefore ... urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called*" (Eph 4:1; cf. 4:17).

On Thursday, Paul says to "*walk in love*" (Eph. 5:2), "*walk as children of light*" (Eph. 5:9), and "*walk, not as unwise but as wise*" (Eph. 5:15). If our affections rest with Christ in the heavenly places, it changes life below, in our earthly walk.

The book closes on Friday (Eph. 6) with a call to arms, urging us to equip ourselves with God's character and join the battle against evil (Eph. 6:10-20). Flawed as we are, God aims to make you and me his holy instruments of love and righteousness – that's the point of it all!



Titus 1-3, 1 Timothy 1-2

LEARN TO LEAD

Imagine taking responsibility for 155 people in a life-or-death crisis. In 2009, Captain "Sully" Sullenberger piloted flight 1549 to safety after they hit a flock of geese, and the engines lost power. His landing strip? The Hudson River. Captain Sully was calm and decisive in that dangerous moment, though he later called it "the worst sickening, pit-of-your-stomach, falling-through-the-floor feeling" of his life. And he put those under his charge ahead of himself, waiting until every soul deboarded the plane before he exited. That's leadership!

This week we'll find Paul's message of leadership to a pair of younger evangelists – Titus, teaching on the island of Crete, and Timothy, working with the church in Ephesus. These letters show us how to stand courageously under seemingly impossible odds.

Leadership Protects

On Monday (Titus 1), Paul directs Titus to appoint elders to protect the church. These men must be "*above reproach*" (Titus 1:7) and "*hold firm to the trustworthy word*" (Titus 1:9). They have to watch for "*liars, evil beasts, (and) lazy gluttons*" as a Cretan poet called them (Titus 1:12).

- What differences do you notice this week between empty teaching and healthy teaching?

Leadership Models

On Tuesday (Titus 2), Paul encourages Titus to teach sound doctrine to those of every age (Titus 2:1-6). His life should give them a "*model of good works*" (Titus 2:7). God's grace is for everyone, but it doesn't loosen God's standard for us; instead, it trains us "*to renounce ... worldly passions*" and live with self-control (Titus 2:11-12). And he needs to teach these truths "*with all authority*" (Titus 2:15).

- Paul gives commands for different groups (Tit. 2: 2-10). Which group fits you, and how can you apply the instruction?

Leadership Submits

Some truths bear repeating, so Wednesday's reading (Titus 3) says to remind people to submit to authorities and do good works (Titus 3:1). But our righteous works don't save us. Our gracious God justifies us "*by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ*" (Titus 3:4-7). So, instead of battling with each other, avoid foolish controversies and fights (Titus 3:9)!

- Who must we "*show perfect courtesy*" toward (Tit. 3:2)?

Leadership Isn't Ashamed

On Thursday, we move onto Paul's first letter to Timothy. In chapter 1, we learn more about those who have "*swerved*" from the truth (1 Tim. 1:6), having "*shipwrecked*" their faith (1 Tim. 1:19). But rather than fear, Timothy must stand against them with power, love, and discipline (1 Tim. 1:5). Nobody's perfect – including Paul (1 Tim. 1:13-15) – but don't be ashamed when you follow the pattern of sound words, guarding the treasure.

- What's the "*aim*" of our teaching (1 Tim. 1:5)?

Leadership Prays

Finally, on Friday (1 Tim. 2), Paul equips Timothy with the most indispensable leadership tool of all: prayer! We need to pray for all people, including authorities, through our mediator, Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:1-5). He calls on men to pray rather than fight (1 Tim. 2:8), and women to live in faith, love, holiness, and self-control (1 Tim. 2:15). All these lessons of leadership and faith help us serve and bring others to God, "*who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*" (1 Tim. 2:4).



1 Timothy 3-6, 2 Timothy 1

SERVE THE CHURCH

All jobs are important, but during the COVID-19 crisis, we've come to realize that some jobs are *essential*. Imagine a hospital with no doctors, a grocery store with no one at the register, or a restaurant with no one cooking the food! Especially when difficult times come, these jobs become even more critical to keep our economy functioning smoothly.

In this week's readings in 1st and 2nd Timothy, Paul details a few '*essential*' jobs. He encourages elders, deacons, evangelists, and *every member* to help the body of Christ thrive through tough times.

Frontline Workers

On Monday (1 Tim. 3), Paul tells Timothy about a few critical roles in the church: overseers to lead and deacons to serve. But only certain men are qualified, as Paul explains in detail (1 Tim. 3:2-7, 8-12). Paul hopes to visit Timothy soon, but until then, his letter explains how to handle themselves in the church (1 Tim. 3:14-15).

Then on Tuesday (1 Tim. 4), Paul shifts his focus to the evangelist's work. He warns that "*some will depart from the faith*" (1 Tim. 4:1), and encourages the young preacher to "*have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths*" (1 Tim. 4:7) which these false teachers promote. Timothy needs to "*command and teach*" the truth (1 Tim. 4:11), showing his "*example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, (and) in purity*" (1 Tim. 4:12).

- Why do you think elders and deacons need to have such a specific character and background?
- What could happen if a preacher didn't "walk the walk" after "talking the talk?"

Essential Jobs

So on Wednesday (1 Tim. 5), Paul gets practical, explaining the church's members' work. He says to "*honor widows who are truly widows*" (1 Tim. 5:3). Why make such a distinction? He says if a family *can* support a widow, they should. But if a believing widow has no one to care for them, then it's the church's job to help. He tells them how to handle accusations against elders (1 Tim. 5:19), to watch out for bias and prejudice (1 Tim. 5:21), and to keep their eyes open for evildoers among them (1 Tim. 5:24-25).

- What do you learn about the role of the church in helping its members?
- How should we view our elders who do their job well?

Protect Yourself

On Thursday (1 Tim. 6), Paul warns Timothy again to watch out for those who have "*unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words*" (1 Tim. 6:4). While they're motivated by pride and greed (1 Tim. 6:2, 5), "*godliness with contentment is great gain*" (1 Tim. 6:6). It's time for Timothy to "*fight the good fight of faith*" (1 Tim. 6:12) and "*guard the deposit entrusted*" to him (1 Tim. 6:20).

And finally, on Friday, we transition to Paul's second letter to Timothy (2 Tim. 1), where he echoes many of the same encouragements from 1 Timothy 6. He thanks God for Timothy and his family (2 Tim. 1:3-5), and tells him to stoke the fire of his faith (2 Tim. 1:6). Rather than be ashamed of Paul's suffering, Timothy needs to take courage and "*follow the pattern of the sound words*" that Paul left him (2 Tim. 1:13).

- What should we watch out for when a brother turns away?
- Paul says we should expect to suffer as servants, so why are we sometimes caught off guard by life's troubles on our race for the eternal crown?



2 Timothy 2-4, 1 Peter 1-2

SUFFER FOR CHRIST

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." — Martin Luther King Jr.

Following Christ will lead the world to hate us (John 15:20). Though we may never sit in a prison cell for our faith, living for Jesus leaves us increasingly disconnected from today's dark world. So, how do we deal with these "times of challenge and controversy?" In this week's readings, we'll gain insight from Paul and Peter about how a disciple responds to suffering!

Suffer as Soldiers

On Monday (2 Tim. 2), Paul tells Timothy to "*Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus*" (2 Tim. 2:3). A soldier battles to please God (2 Tim. 2:4), competes according to the rules (2 Tim. 2:5), and works hard in the Lord's vineyard (2 Tim. 2:6). But we're not alone, since Paul also suffered for Christ with his imprisonment in Rome (2 Tim. 2:8-10). There's no shame in suffering, as long as you're "*rightly handling the word of truth!*" (2 Tim. 2:15).

What does a soldier for Christ *do* and *not do* in our battle for the cross?

Suffer for Scripture

On Tuesday (2 Tim. 3), Paul explains that "*in the last days there will come times of difficulty*" (2 Tim. 3:1). Many won't listen to God, but instead, they'll turn aside to pride, unholiness, and self-gratification (2 Tim. 3:2-5). So Timothy must hold on to Scripture since it's "*breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work*" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

How does our expectation of suffering for the truth shape the way we live?

Suffer with Sobriety

On Wednesday (2 Tim. 4), Paul charges him to be "*sober-minded*" in his defense of the gospel, just like he is (2 Tim. 4:5-8). The message is powerful and active both "*in season*" and "*out of season*" (2 Tim. 4:2). And as he closes out this short letter, he urges caution about specific people who oppose his message (2 Tim. 4:15).

What do we say to those who reject "sound teaching?"

Suffer with Hope and Holiness

On Thursday, we move on to Peter's first letter to the "*elect exiles of the Dispersion*" (1 Peter 1:1). They're dealing with suffering too, and Peter offers a message of hope during their difficulty. They've been "born again to a living hope" to experience an "*inheritance that is imperishable*" awaiting in heaven (1 Peter 1:3-4). And because of this hope, God's people must be holy like he is (2 Peter 1:14-16).

How does starting with hope and holiness change what we do in response to suffering?

Suffer with Submission

On Friday (1 Peter 2), Peter tells them to "*long for the pure spiritual milk*" like newborns, that they may grow up and be saved (1 Peter 2:2). Believers serve the King as integral parts of God's building – living stones and royal priests (1 Peter 2:4-10)! While serving the King of kings, earthly rulers and authorities deserve respect and honor (1 Peter 2:13-17). Looking to Christ's sufferings, don't fight back out of anger, but trust in God to lead us to eternal life (1 Peter 2:21-24)!

Is it enough to suffer, or is there a kind of suffering we should avoid?



1 Peter 3-5, 2 Peter 1-2

PREPARE FOR ADVERSITY

How is it that the secret agent stays so calm and collected in every spy movie, even when their life is on the line? When the assassin sneaks up behind them, they quickly disarm them at the last possible minute. While strapped to a table with a laser beam approaching, they shrug it off with some pithy remarks. And though they can see right through the enemy's tricks, they play it cool until it's time for action. All their training and experience must really pay off!

This week, as we finish up First Peter and begin Second Peter, we find some helpful instructions when we're in the enemy's grips ourselves.

Don't Be Surprised

On Monday (1 Peter 3), Peter continues his encouragement about submission from the previous chapter, now directed to wives (1 Peter 3:1-6). He calls on the church to be loving, unified, tender, and to bless rather than curse (1 Peter 3:8-9). And when we're slandered for Christ, our response should be gentle, respectful, and with good behavior (1 Peter 3:15-16).

Then on Tuesday (1 Peter 4), we're to arm ourselves with Christ's mission of suffering by putting off sin and putting on righteousness (1 Peter 4:1-11). And though the world will be surprised by your change in lifestyle, we shouldn't be surprised by their rejection and ridicule (1 Peter 4:4, 12). Instead, we should rejoice for the opportunity to share in Christ's difficulties (1 Peter 4:13-14).

- Why are Peter's instructions about the family so hard for our modern society to accept?
- How have you handled rejection by those who knew you before you came to the Lord?

Don't Be Anxious

On Wednesday (1 Peter 5), Peter encourages the elders – as a fellow elder himself – to willingly oversee the congregation with eagerness for their wellbeing (1 Peter 5:1-3). He calls the whole church to be humble and not to be anxious about life's troubles but cast every care on God who loves us (1 Peter 5:6-7).

- With the devil prowling around, what safeguards can we take to keep him at bay?
- How long is suffering going to last, and what will happen after it's over?

Don't Be Misled

Then, on Thursday, we move on to Peter's second letter (2 Peter 1), where he addresses troubles with false teachers. He lists the qualities that make us productive for Christ: faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love (2 Peter 1:5-7). Without these, we're no longer able to see the life to which Christ has called us (2 Peter 1:9). Then he explains that it's not a bunch of clever myths that they're following, but the eye-witness accounts of Peter and the apostles (2 Peter 1:16-21).

And finally, on Friday (2 Peter 2), Peter warns about the devil's secret agents who will bring destructive teachings into the church (2 Peter 2:1-2). Though many will listen to them and be destroyed, God will rescue those who stay firmly rooted in the word (2 Peter 2:4-10). He calls them "*irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed*" (2 Peter 2:12). These people would have been better off never knowing Christ than to come to him and abandon their faith (2 Peter 2:21-22).

- How can we confirm our calling and election today?
- Knowing that these false teachers come from "*among the people*" (2 Peter 2:1), how does that impact our watchfulness?



2 Peter 3, Jude, John 1-3

DON'T MISS THE KEY INGREDIENTS

Fall is baking season, when we fill our homes with the aroma of pies and cookies. It's a fun time, but have you ever forgotten a key ingredient in a recipe you've made? Maybe you've left out the eggs, flour, salt, or yeast in your cake, bread, or cookie batter – the result: lackluster at best.

This week in our readings, we'll find Peter, Jude, and John describing those who've missed a crucial ingredient in their faith. And the results: eternally disastrous!

Missing God's Promise

On Monday (2 Peter 3), Peter reminds us of promises made long ago (2 Peter 3:1-2). He warns that "*scoffers will come in the last days*" questioning whether God will ever return to judge the world (2 Peter 3:3-7). But God operates on a different timetable than we do (2 Peter 3:8-10)! And since he'll judge us on some unknown day, we must stay ready with "*holiness and godliness*" (2 Peter 3:11-13).

- How does God's patience change the work you do today?

Missing Reverence

Then on Tuesday, we jump to Jude's brief but powerful letter. He warns that "*certain people have crept in unnoticed*" and introduced contrary ideas to Christ (Jude 4). "*These people blaspheme all that they do not understand*" and have no reverence for God or his angels (Jude 8-10). He describes them as "*waterless clouds,*" "*fruitless trees,*" and "*wild waves of the sea*" (Jude 12-13).

- But on Wednesday, as we begin John's gospel (John 1), we'll contrast these false teachers with powerful statements of reverence and honor about Jesus.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:1-3).

Then we meet another John – John the Baptist – as he says to Jesus, "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29). And as Jesus calls his first disciples after his baptism, we find Andrew telling his brother, "*We have found the Messiah' (which means Christ)*" (John 1:41), and Nathaniel saying, "*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*" (John 1:49).

- What should we do about people who try to divide the church?
- Would you have responded to Jesus with such reverence if you had met him as these men did?

Missing Belief

On Thursday (John 2), after performing his first miracle by turning water into wine at a wedding (John 2:1-12), he faces his first opposition from the Jews in the temple. He turned over the moneychangers' tables and cleaned out the house of the Lord, but the people wanted a sign to show his authority. Jesus answered, "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*" (John 2:19), which caused quite a bit of confusion (John 2:20)!

Finally, on Friday (John 3), we watch as a Pharisee named Nicodemus secretly meets with Jesus by night. He calls him "Rabbi" (or Teacher), and then listens as Jesus teaches him precisely what he needs to hear: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*" (John 3:3). He explains God's great love for humanity (John 3:16), and that anyone who doesn't believe in the Son of God cannot be saved (John 3:18).

- What areas of your life need "cleaning out" as Jesus did in the temple?
- How does the most famous passage in the whole Bible (John 3:16) change your view of God?

WEEK 41

John 4-8

FIND SATISFACTION IN CHRIST

Some meals have the power to transport us back to a simpler time. Often high in calories and loaded with sentimental attachment – we call them *comfort food*. Maybe it's a freshly baked apple pie, a big bowl of macaroni and cheese, or a tray full of warm chocolate chip cookies. In this week's readings in John's gospel, Jesus serves up a few "dishes" that aren't just comforting but *eternally satisfying*.

The Food of God's Work

On Monday (John 4), Jesus offers a Samaritan woman "*living water*" from "*a spring of water welling up to eternal life*" (John 4:9-14). His disciples return with lunch, but Jesus declines, saying, "*I have food to eat that you do not know about ... My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work*" (John 4:32-34). And when the Samaritan woman brought her friends to hear his teaching, many of them believed. Then he continued God's work by healing an official's son in Capernaum.

On Tuesday (John 5), Jesus tells a man by the pool of Bethesda to "*Get up, take up your bed, and walk*" (John 5:8). And as the Jews criticize him for healing on the Sabbath, he tells them, "*My Father is working until now, and I am working*" (John 5:17). He explains his authority to judge the world and calls everyone to believe in God's Son and be saved (John 5:19-29). For further proof, he summons four witnesses to the stand – John the Baptist, his miraculous works, God the Father, and Scripture (John 5:30-47).

- What do you learn about teaching the gospel from Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman?
- Are you willing to believe the testimony Christ presented?

The Bread of Life

Then on Wednesday (John 6), as Jesus teaches across the Sea of Galilee, he provides a miraculous meal for over five thousand people (John 6:1-15). Then he walks on water to meet his disciples in the middle of the night (John 6:16-21). And after the crowds chase him down, he challenges them with these shocking words:

"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst ... Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:35, 54-55).

Though his disciples believed, many in the audience turned away and stopped following him from then on (John 6:60-69).

- How would you have reacted to Jesus' statement about eating his flesh and drinking his blood?

Rivers of Living Water

On Thursday (John 7), Jesus' brothers urged him to attend the Feast of Booths in Judea. But instead of going, Jesus follows behind secretly to listen in on the festivities (John 7:1-9). He went to the temple to teach (John 7:14-24), but his message raised plenty of questions (John 7:25-36). And on the final day of the feast, he stood up publicly and said, "*If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'*" (John 7:37-38). But again, many were unwilling to believe.

Finally, on Friday (John 8), the Jews came to test Jesus, asking him what they should do with a woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). Pointing to their hypocrisy, he called on the sinless ones to stone her first. And after they all went away, he told her to "*go and sin no more*" (John 8:11). He continued teaching that he is the "*light of the world*" (John 8:12-30), that his words "*will set you free*" (John 8:31-38), and "*before Abraham was, I AM*" (John 8:48-59).

- What did Jesus mean when he said, "*rivers of living water*" would flow from our hearts?
- How does Christ's compassion for the adulterous woman change the way you relate to the world?



John 9-13

BELIEVE IN THE EXCEPTIONAL SAVIOR

It's amazing how a short, carefully crafted piece of paper can stand between you and employment in a competitive job market. What makes your résumé stand out from the crowd? What qualifications or work history would "seal the deal" and get you that new job? In this week's readings, we'll see Jesus' extraordinary qualifications on display. But unfortunately, despite all his marvelous works, he continues to face rejection at every turn.

Jesus the Healer

On Monday (John 9), Jesus passes a man born blind. And after spitting on the ground to make some mud, he rubs the man's eyes, tells him to wash in the pool of Siloam, and he returns with his sight (John 9:6-7)! Everyone was shocked at his healing, but the Pharisees were skeptical. After questioning the man and his parents, they cast him out of the synagogue (John 9:13-34).

- Why wasn't the blind man's healing enough to convince the religious leaders?

Jesus the Shepherd

On Tuesday (John 10), Jesus addresses the Pharisees. He calls himself "*the good shepherd*" who brings abundant life, laying down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). Unlike the hired hand who runs at the sight of danger, he's committed to protecting his flock (John 10:13). He says that "*I and the Father are one*," (John 10:30), which almost pushes the Jews to stone him for blasphemy.

- Are you listening to the Shepherd's voice?

Jesus the Resurrection

On Wednesday (John 11), Jesus' good friend Lazarus gets sick and dies (John 11:1-16). Martha and Mary – Lazarus' sisters – come to get Jesus. And after he tells them that their brother will rise again, he says, "*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live*" (John 11:25). And when Jesus calls him to come out of the tomb, Lazarus walks out – four days after his death (John 11:38-44)!

- How does Jesus' reaction to Lazarus' death help you connect with him?

Jesus the King

On Thursday (John 12), Mary anoints Jesus with oil in Bethany (John 12:1-8) before entering Jerusalem on a donkey. The crowds praise him, "*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!*" (John 12:13). He prepares the crowds for his upcoming death (John 12:20-36), and though many still wouldn't believe (John 12:37-43), he reiterated his mission to save the world (John 12:47).

- Why do you think the people went from shouting "Hosanna!" to "Crucify him!" in only a few days?

Jesus the Servant

Finally, on Friday (John 13), Jesus retreats from the crowds for an intimate Passover meal with his disciples. He washes all their feet in a shocking turn, showing them an example of what real service looks like (John 13:1-12). He tells them to "*love one another just as I have loved you*" (John 13:34). But there's already trouble among them, as Judas will soon betray him (John 13:21-30), and Peter will soon deny him (John 13:36-38).

- Does Jesus washing Judas' feet impact how you treat those who hurt you?



John 14-18

DRAW CLOSER TO CHRIST

What do you look for in a friend? In one of my kids' favorite movies, a toy cowboy overcomes his jealousy and acts with courageous loyalty. As Randy Newman's well-known theme song says: "You got troubles, and I got 'em too, There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you, We stick together, and we see it through, 'Cause you've got a friend in me."

In our readings this week, we'll get an intimate look at Jesus in the hours before his betrayal and crucifixion. Even in his time of trial, the Lord gives attention to his friends, preparing them for life after his death.

Friends Love

The word "love" is used twenty times in John 14-15, as Jesus expresses his commitment to them and calls them into loving, obedient fellowship with him and his Father.

On Monday (John 14), Christ tells them not to let their hearts be troubled but to believe in him (John 14:1). He's going away, but he will make a way for them to be together again (John 14:3). In fact, Jesus *is* the "way the truth and the life" (John 14:6). Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit, "*the Helper*" (John 14:26), will remind them of everything Jesus said. And so, he leaves them with peace (John 14:27).

On Tuesday (John 15), the Lord says to hold onto him, abiding in him, so that we can bear fruit (John 15:2). Like branches apart from the vine, Jesus tells his disciples, "*apart from me, you can do nothing*" (John 15:5). So, when the world hates us, we remember that they hated him first (John 15:18-20), and we stay close to Jesus.

- *What do Jesus' true friends do (John 15:14)?*

Friends Support

On Wednesday (John 16), Jesus continues his final encouragement to his disciples before his death. Rather than being filled with sorrow, he tells them, "*It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you*" (John 16:7). And with the Holy Spirit's help, their sadness will turn to joy (John 16:20). Though they will all be scattered after his death, they'll quickly find courage as they see how Christ has overcome the world (John 16:33)!

On Thursday (John 17), Jesus lifts his eyes to heaven in a moving prayer to the Father. He calls on God to "*glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed*" (John 17:5). He recalls his work on earth and asks the Lord to strengthen, protect, and unify his beloved disciples (John 17:11-12). Though the world will hate them, just like it hated him, he prays for "*evil one*" to be kept at bay (John 17:14-15). And, in a sense, he prays for *you and I* today – those who believe through the disciple's words (John 17:20-21).

- *How does the Holy Spirit's work continue to support you today?*
- *What do you learn about the importance of unity from Jesus' prayer?*

Friends Show Dedication

Finally, on Friday (John 18), we watch two of Jesus' friends turn their backs on him – as Judas betrays him (John 18:2-3), and Peter denies knowing him (John 18:15-18, 25-27). Though Peter displays courage in defending Jesus in the garden, he's reminded of his mission when the Lord asks, "*Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?*" (John 18:11). After Annas (John 18:12-14) and Caiphas, the high priest, questioned him (John 18:19-24), he went to Pilate, the Roman governor (John 18:28-38). And after Pilate finds nothing to accuse him of, the crowds turn their backs on him, asking to release a criminal rather than the King of kings (John 18:38-40).

- *How do Peter's denials help you become more dedicated to the Lord?*



John 19-21, Hebrews 1-2

BEHOLD THE SON OF GOD

Naming a child is hard. Most parents make lists and look up word origins, dreaming of how those names might sound as their child gets older. We packed as much meaning into our kids' names as their birth certificates could hold, giving each of our kids five names!

On the other hand, when kids are mean to each other, we say, "Don't call each other names!" Because what we call someone matters. Never is that more evident than the designations given to Jesus, as we'll see this week.

The Man

This week begins and ends with Christ's humanity. Let's start at the end of the week, where Friday's reading (Hebrews 2) asks, "*What is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you care for him?*" (Heb. 2:6-7). In his inexplicable grace, God gives humanity a place of honor. Considering our failings, perhaps someone should show us what it means to be human as God intends, to bear his image and reflect his glory? Enter the one "*who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor*" (Heb. 2:9). He "*had to be made like his brothers,*" you and me, "*in every respect*" to "*become a merciful and faithful high priest*" (Heb. 2:17), freeing us from sin (Heb. 2:17) and death (Heb. 2:14-15).

On Monday (John 19), Pilate ironically points to Jesus and says, "*Behold the man!*" (John 19:5). But Pilate didn't even realize how darkly ironic his statement was, as Jesus is indeed "*the man,*" the "*Son of Man*" (John 13:31), the Word made flesh (John 1:14). They dress him in a purple robe and a crown of thorns, and Pilate later mocks the Jews by saying, "*Behold your King!*" (John 19:14). Seeing his humiliation and pain on "*the day of Preparation of the Passover*" (John 19:14), we remember that he's *our* passover, the "*lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29).

- What encouragement do you find in knowing our High Priest was tempted in all ways as we are, yet without sin?

The Lord

On Tuesday (John 20), we'll read about encounters with the risen Christ. Mary Magdalene meets Jesus at his tomb (John 20:1-18) and announces, "*I have seen the Lord*" (John 20:18). Then Jesus shows up in a locked room to meet the disciples (John 20:19-24). But Thomas wasn't there, and doubts it ever happened, demanding to see and touch the nail scars of crucifixion (John 20:25). When – eight days later – Jesus appears and invites him to do just that, he cries out, "*My Lord and my God!*" (John 20:28).

On Wednesday (John 21), Jesus meets the disciples on the shore as they fish (John 21:1-8), inviting them to join him for breakfast (John 21:9-14). John's closing words remind us that no book can capture all of Christ's great deeds: "*Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written*" (John 21:25).

- What is John's stated purpose for writing (John 20:30-31)? Did the book accomplish its goal?

The Son

And on Thursday (Hebrews 1), Jesus is contrasted with angels, who delivered God's message in times past (Heb. 2:2). Now, God "*has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world*" (Heb. 1:2).

- What do you learn about angels from this passage?
- What do these Old Testament quotes tell you about the Son?



Hebrews 3-7

FIND MATURITY IN CHRIST

Have you ever pined away for days gone by when times were simpler, and life seemed better? My wife loves to say that she was born in the wrong decade, wishing that she'd lived during the turn of the 20th century. But in our nostalgia for those "good old days," it's easy to overlook life's difficulties back then, especially without our many modern conveniences and technological improvements today.

In this week's readings, the writer of Hebrews addresses his audience's desire to go back to their Jewish traditions. And pointing back to a few important historical figures, he shows how Christ is better in every way.

Better Than Moses

On Monday (Hebrews 3), we learn that "*Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses*" (Heb. 3:3). While Moses was a great servant in God's house – delivering God's Law to the people – Christ is better as the Lord's faithful son (Heb. 3:4). Unlike the rebellious people Moses led through the wilderness, if we follow Jesus in faith and soft-heartedness, we'll avoid falling like they did (Heb. 3:7-19).

On Tuesday (Hebrews 4), we'll think about our rest, and consider how Israel viewed Canaan from a distance. Will we trust in God and enter that rest? Or will we fail to reach it because of disunity and disobedience (Heb. 4:2, 6)? As David spoke long ago, "*Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts*" (Heb. 4:7; Psalm 95:7-11).

- What do you think it means that "*the word of God is living and active ... discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart*" (Heb. 4:12)?

Better Than the Priests

Transitioning from Moses to the priesthood, Hebrews calls Jesus "*a great high priest who has passed through the heavens*" (Heb. 4:14). Through his temptations, he can sympathize with us and mediate for us to the Father. And on Wednesday (Hebrews 5), we're reminded how the high priests under the Old Law had to sacrifice for their own sins (Heb. 5:1-3). But God has appointed Christ as a sinless high priest (Heb. 5:5-9), the "*source of eternal salvation to all who obey him*" (Heb. 5:9).

And continuing the thought, let's skip ahead to Friday (Hebrews 7), where Jesus is compared to Melchizedek, "*king of Salem and priest of the Most High God*" (Heb. 7:1). Though only mentioned briefly in Genesis (Gen. 14:18-20), we see that Abraham gave him a tenth of his spoils and honored him as a priest and king. And so we honor Christ today, who's a greater priest than those long ago (Heb. 7:15-25), a better mediator between God and us (Heb. 7:25), and guarantees us "*a better covenant*" (Heb. 7:22).

- Does Christ's mediation give you boldness as you "*draw near to the throne of grace*" seeking mercy in your time of need (Heb. 4:16)?

Better Than Basic Understanding

But let's go back to our midweek reading (Hebrews 5 & 6), where the writer expresses his frustration over their immaturity. These Jewish believers should have been teachers of God's law by now, but instead, they were stuck on basic principles (Heb. 5:12-13). He pushes them to live with wisdom and discernment, leaving the basics behind (Heb. 5:14-6:2). He warns about the dangers of backsliding and calls them to bear fruit for God (Heb. 6:4-8). Believers can trust God to keep his word, just as he made good on his promises to Abraham long ago (Heb. 7:13-19).

- How can we train our "*powers of discernment*" and become mature (Heb. 5:14)?



Hebrews 8-12

REACH FORWARD TO EXCELLENCE

What if you could travel back in time to visit some of history's most iconic figures? Who would you visit? No matter how far back you went, everything would be very different, but also the same in many ways.

In this week's readings from Hebrews, we're transported back on an excellent adventure to the days of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and others – whose faith made an impact on the world. And as we consider these notable historical figures, we're called to embrace excellence as they did.

Excellent Ministry

On Monday (Hebrews 8), we look to Jesus as our high priest, who's seated at God's right hand (Heb. 8:1). He *"has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises"* (Heb. 8:6). And because the first covenant could not save humanity from their desire for sin, it was made obsolete by a new covenant where God would mercifully forgive our sins (Heb. 8:7-13).

Then on Tuesday (Hebrews 9), we're reminded of the earthly tent where the Israelites worshipped, with its structure and furnishings (Heb. 9:1-5). And when Christ appeared as high priest, he offered his blood (Heb. 9:6-14) – rather than animal's blood – becoming the mediator of that new covenant (Heb. 9:15). Unlike the copy of the tent on earth, he entered heaven itself, with a single sacrifice *"offered once to bear the sins of many"* (Heb. 9:28).

- What disqualified Jesus from being an earthly high priest, and what does this say about where he ministers today?
- How is the sacrifice that purifies us different from the animal sacrifices under the law?

Excellent Faith

On Wednesday (Hebrews 10), we see how Jesus' blood – offered once – was more effective than that of bulls and goats – shed year after year (Heb. 10:1-18). And with our confidence in his priesthood and blood, *"let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith,"* being excellent to each other in holiness (Heb. 10:22-25). And if you're tempted to give up, don't *"throw away your confidence,"* since it brings such an excellent reward (Heb. 10:35)!

On Thursday (Hebrews 11), we're reminded that *"faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen"* (Heb. 11:1). And with our faith, we follow in the footsteps of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, the Israelites, Rahab, and countless more who waited on God's promises (Heb. 11:4-40).

- How are you encouraging others to keep the faith today?
- Which historical figure of faith do you connect with the most?

Excellent Endurance

Finally, on Friday (Hebrews 12), we're called to let go of sin and run with endurance by looking to Jesus (Heb. 12:1-2). While discipline may be painful, it's given by our Father out of love to train us (Heb. 12:5-11). Unlike Israel, who trembled with fear when they heard the Lord's voice from the mountain, we – who have come to an even more glorious assembly – must not refuse him (Heb. 12:18-26). So let us endure, and *"be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire"* (Heb. 12:28-29).

- What do you learn from Esau's example about the things you value most in life?



Hebrews 13, 1 John 1-4

BE CONFIDENT

I don't know what the word of the year should be for 2020, but one of the contenders has to be "Uncertainty." Call it a crisis of confidence – in our future, in our government, in our news, maybe even in ourselves. If we're not careful, doubt and fear can overwhelm us and dominate our lives. But as a well-known hymn says, "When all around my soul gives way, He then is all my hope and stay, On Christ the solid rock I stand, All other ground is sinking sand." This week, we'll find some solid ground in Hebrews and First John.

Confident the Lord Is With Us

On Monday (Heb. 13), we finish Hebrews, with its encouragement to hold onto our confidence (Heb. 3:6,14; 10:35). After inviting us to boldly "*draw near to the throne*" (Heb. 4:16; cf. 10:19-22), the book concludes with a call to confidence in his ever-present help, "*for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'* So we can confidently say, '*The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?*'" (Heb. 13:5-6).

Even if we have to bear shame with Christ "*outside the gate*" (Heb. 13:10-13), we know the city we seek is eternal (Heb. 13:13-14), and our hope is worth the cost.

Confident We're Forgiven

Tuesday's reading (1 John 1) emphasizes "*fellowship*" (1 John 1:3,6-7), our close association with God and Christ, which we share with all who "*walk in the light*" (1 John 1:7). Since God is light, we can't have fellowship with him while walking in darkness (1 John 1:5-6), a sobering thought. But – John assures us – if we confess our sins, we can count on him to forgive us (1 John 1:9).

- Why's it so important for us to honestly acknowledge our sin?

Confident We're His Children

This book's purpose is to give confidence in what we can "*know*" (1 John 2:21; 5:13) – a word used nearly forty times. How do "*we know that we have come to know him*" (1 John 2:3)? On Wednesday (1 John 2), John says we know because we keep his commandments and "*walk in the same way*" that he walked (1 John 2:3-6). That means loving each other (1 John 2:7-11) and *not* loving worldly things (1 John 2:15-17). We know we're God's children because "*everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him*" (1 John 2:29).

Thursday's reading (1 John 3) exclaims in wonder, "*See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are*" (1 John 3:1). When Christ returns, we'll become like him (1 John 3:2, cf. Rom. 8:29; Php. 3:20-21). While we wait, we imitate him by keeping ourselves from continually practicing sin (1 John 3:6-8; cf. 1:7-9) and by actively loving people (1 John 3:17-18). So our lifestyle makes it "*evident who are the children of God*" (1 John 3:10). And even when "*our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything*" (1 John 3:20).

- How do Christ's actions define love?

Confident at Judgment

On Friday (1 John 4), John says to "*test the spirits*" (1 John 4:1) – to examine all teaching and ensure that it aligns with what the apostles taught (1 John 4:6). He particularly confronts teachers who distort the gospel and question Christ's incarnation (1 John 4:2-3; cf. 1 John 1:1-3; 2:22-23; 2 John 7; John 1:14).

God is love (1 John 4:16), and as we imitate his love and abide in it, love is "*perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear*" (1 John 4:17-18).

- How do we know what real love is? And who initiated the relationship of love between God and us?



1 John 5, 2 & 3 John, Rev. 1-2

LEARN FROM JOHN AND JESUS' LETTERS

It's amazing that we're only a text message, email, or video call away from almost anyone in the world – including our coworkers, friends, and family. But up until a few decades ago, communication took a lot longer! Like something straight out of the stone age, once upon a time, we had to write letters – *by hand* – to stay in touch. We even have a pejorative name for it these days – *snail mail*! And in this week's readings, we'll reach into that old-fashioned first-century mailbag to read some powerful and personal letters from some important authors.

Letters From John

On Monday (1 John 5), John concludes his first letter, encouraging believers to keep God's commandments (1 John 5:3) and to believe in the Son of God, knowing our faith is our victory (1 John 5:4-5). John wrote this letter so that those who believe in the Son of God "*may know*" that they have eternal life (1 John 5:13). While we know we're of God, we also know that "*the whole world lies in the power of the evil one*" (1 John 5:19). So we try to restore one another when we fall into sin (1 John 5:16-17).

On Tuesday (2 John), John writes to "*the elect lady and her children*" (2 John 1). He says to love one another (2 John 5-6) and warns of "*deceivers*" who say Jesus Christ didn't come in the flesh (2 John 7). To have Christ, we must stay within his teaching (2 John 9).

On Wednesday (3 John), he writes to Gaius, giving a snapshot into church life through two very different men: "*Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first*" (3 John 9) and Demetrius, who has "*a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself*" (3 John 12). We too must learn to distinguish between different influences, so that we will "*not imitate evil but imitate good*" (3 John 11).

- What have you learned from John's letters about truth, love, and obedience?

Letters From Jesus

On Thursday (Revelation 1), we begin the last book of the Bible, heading into the home stretch of our reading plan. The opening words provide some keys to the reader. It is a "*revelation*," or uncovering, of events that John said "*must soon take place*" (Rev. 1:1). While the end of the book will reveal some final events (Rev. 20-22), most of Revelation revolves around historical events the Christians of John's time needed to understand. We can learn a lot for our time as well, as we endure trials and place our hope in the One "*who is and who was and who is to come*" (Rev. 1:8).

The chapter closes with a picture of Jesus in all his fierce might and glory. He wants John to write a message to the "*angels*" of seven churches, whose "*lampstands*" surround Christ (Rev. 1:20; cf. 2:1).

On Friday (Revelation 2), we read Jesus' letters to four churches in Asia:

- Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7), a church who stood firm against false teaching but lost their passion and love for the Lord.
- Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11), a church that was faithfully dedicated to suffering and standing for the truth despite their deep poverty.
- Pergamum (Rev. 2:12-17), a church who didn't deny their faith but harbored those who promoted immorality and lies.
- Thyatira (Rev. 2:18-29), a church full of love and service, but where a woman named Jezebel was encouraging sexual immorality.

In all the letters, we see that Jesus knows what they're going through and what they're doing (e.g., Rev. 2:2).

- What encouragement can you take from seeing how much Christ knows and cares about their struggles and victories?



Revelation 3-7

BEHOLD A VISION OF HEAVEN

In one of cinema's most iconic moments, a young girl's little dog pulls back a curtain to uncover a "great and powerful" wizard – only to find a scared, hesitant old man. But unlike that lackluster "revelation" from the movie, we'll watch as John pulls back the curtain into heaven itself in this week's readings! And from his incredible vision, we'll stand in awe at the greatness and power hiding just beyond our view.

Our Hope in Heaven

On Monday (Rev. 3), the Lord dictates three more letters to the churches in Asia:

- Sardis (Rev. 3:1-13), a church with a good reputation, but that's fallen asleep and nearly dead.
- Philadelphia (Rev. 3:14-22), a church whose unwavering stand for the truth, leads Jesus to protect them from evil influences.
- Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22), a lukewarm church who thinks they're rich when in reality they're poor.

He promises that those who conquer with him will wear white garments and have their name in the book of life (Rev. 3:5). Conquerors will sit with him on his throne (Rev. 3:21) and never leave God's temple. They'll wear the names of God, Christ, and "*the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven*" (Rev. 3:12).

- What does it mean for you to conquer with Jesus?

The Throne in Heaven

On Tuesday (Rev. 4), John sees an open door into heaven and hears the thunderous words, "*Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this*" (Rev. 4:1). Immediately he sees a great throne, surrounded by a rainbow, a sea of glass, seven fiery torches, and twenty-four other thrones with elders in white clothes seated on each (Rev. 4:2-6). Then he sees four fantastical creatures around the throne, all shouting, "*Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!*" (Rev. 4:6-8).

- Why is it important for us to remember – even through our trials – that God is the one on the throne?

The Scroll in Heaven

On Wednesday (Rev. 5), John's attention turns to the one seated on the great throne, holding a scroll with seven seals in his right hand. "*Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?*" a mighty angel cries (Rev. 5:2). The Lion of the tribe of Judah! Suddenly, a Lamb appears, as if killed, taking the scroll from the one on the throne (Rev. 5:6-7). The four fantastical creatures and all the elders fall to the ground, singing, "*Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals*" (Rev. 5:9).

On Thursday (Rev. 6), the Lamb begins to open six of the seven seals, one by one. And with the first four, one of the four creatures shouts, "*Come!*", and a horse appears with a rider carrying a powerful object (Rev. 6:1-8). Opening the fifth seal, we see martyred souls under the altar receiving white robes (Rev. 6:9-11). The sixth causes a great earthquake and darkness, as the earth's rulers hide from the Lamb's wrath (Rev. 6:12-17).

- Why is Christ alone worthy to open the scroll?
- What do the martyrs cry out? How does the rest of the book reveal God's answer to this prayer?

The Multitude in Heaven

Finally, on Friday (Rev. 7), before opening the seventh seal, John's attention turns to four angels standing at the earth's corners and holding back the four winds (Rev. 7:1-2). A fifth angel calls to them, "*Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads*" (Rev. 7:3). Then 144,000 from Israel – 12,000 from each tribe – receive a seal (Rev. 7:4-8). Afterward, an innumerable multitude appears with people from every nation, wearing white robes and shouting praise to God and the Lamb (Rev. 7:9-11). Who are these people, and from where do they come? "*These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation*" who were cleansed by the Lamb's blood (Rev. 7:13-17)!

- Revelation 6 closed with the question, "*who can stand?*" (Rev. 6:17). How does this chapter (Rev. 7) answer that question?
- What words of hope and comfort do you find in this picture of people in God's presence?



Revelation 8-12

EXPERIENCE JOHN'S VISION

Through our imagination, the sounds, sights, and smells of a story can transport us to another place. It may be frightening or exciting. It might stir memories of a past time. It can even lead us to consider a time and place beyond this world. Last week, John's vision led us through the "door standing open in heaven" (Rev. 4:1). And as you read this week, take in all the colorful sights, and dramatic sounds as the spectacular scenes play out in your mind.

Hear the Trumpets

Monday's reading (Rev. 8) begins with the sound of "silence in heaven for about half an hour" (Rev. 8:1). But with the opening of the seventh seal, seven angels receive seven trumpets, and the silence is broken (Rev. 8:2, 7). Each of these trumpets brings partial destruction, affecting a third of the earth (Rev. 8:7-12). They're not meant to bring an end, but repentance – yet people still won't turn from evil (Rev. 9:20-21). The first four trumpets brought hail and fire mixed with blood, a flaming mountain, a falling star, and a darkened sky (Rev. 8:7-13).

- What do you learn about prayer from the opening paragraph of this chapter (Rev. 8:3-5)?

Smell the Smoke

The week began with incense smoke, bringing its sweet scent before God with the saints' prayers (Rev. 8:3-4). But Tuesday's reading (Rev. 9) is filled with the stench of a different kind of smoke released by two more trumpets. At the sound of the fifth trumpet, smoke rose from a bottomless pit where locusts arose to torment those who hadn't been sealed (Rev. 9:1-6). The sixth trumpet brought sulfurous smoke coming from horse's mouths (Rev. 9:13-19).

- How do God's purposes for the plagues on Egypt (Exod. 7-11) help us understand these symbols?

Taste the Scroll

On Wednesday (Rev. 10), we turn to watch a mighty angel come down from heaven – standing on the sea and the land – carrying a tiny scroll that John is told to eat (Rev. 10:1-3). The seven thunders sounded when the angel called out, but John wasn't allowed to record what they said (Rev. 10:3-4).

- What do you think is signified by John eating the scroll (Rev. 10:9; cf. Jer. 15:16; Ezek. 2:9-3:4)?
- Why might it bring him both sweetness and bitterness?

Feel the Earthquake

On Thursday (Rev. 11), John is handed a stick to measure God's temple, the altar, and those who worship there (Rev. 11:1). We learn of two witnesses who would eventually be killed by the great beast from the bottomless pit (Rev. 11:3-10). And as the world rejoices over their death, they would return, bringing a massive earthquake (Rev. 11:9-13)! Then, when the seventh trumpet sounded, those in heaven shouted, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:14).

- What's the purpose of the temple throughout Scripture, and where is his temple today (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16)?
- Why is it comforting to recognize that God knows the measure of his temple (cf. Zech. 2:1-5)?

Watch the Battle

On Friday (Rev. 12), two great signs appear in heaven – a pregnant woman and a red dragon (Rev. 12:1-3). But before the dragon could eat the woman's son "who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron*" (cf. Psalm 2:7-9) – he's swept away to God's throne, and the woman escapes into the wilderness (Rev. 12:4-6). Then Michael and his angels fight the dragon – "that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" – defeating him and casting him down to the earth (Rev. 12:7-9). He chases the woman in the wilderness, but as every attempt to destroy her fails, he turns his attention to the rest of her children (Rev. 12:13-17).

- What does the wilderness represent throughout Scripture, and what do you notice about it here?



Revelation 13-17

COUNT ON GOD'S JUDGMENT

When I was a kid, I grew up learning how to count from a mysterious but friendly purple vampire who lived on a familiar television street. Whether he counted spiders on the wall or cobwebs in the hall, his musical approach to enumeration always left you tapping your feet. And this week, as we count down some of the final chapters in our reading plan, we'll find more noteworthy numbers in Revelation.

Two Beasts

On Monday (Rev. 13), John watches the first of two multi-headed beasts rise out of the sea with authority over the earth (Rev. 13:1-5). It spoke blasphemies against God and made war against the saints (Rev. 13:6-8). Then a second beast rose from the earth, deceiving the world into worshiping the first beast (Rev. 13:11-13). And through its deception, all humanity wore a mark with its name on their forehead (Rev. 13:16-18).

- Why should these terrifying beasts lead the saints toward endurance (Rev. 13:10)?

Three Angels

Unlike those who wore the beast's mark, on Tuesday (Rev. 14) we'll find the Lamb surrounded by 144,000 who wore God's name on their foreheads (Rev. 14:1). They sing a new song around the throne (Rev. 14:2-5). Judgment is coming, as we look up to see three angels flying overhead, bringing an eternal gospel and a condemnation against the beast and all who worship it (Rev. 14:6-11).

- How do the closing images about harvest relate to what Christ said about a "harvest" of judgment (Rev. 14:14-20; cf. Matt. 13:24-30)?

Seven Bowls of Wrath

On Wednesday (Rev. 15), those who conquered the beast sang Moses' song – the song of the Lamb – in heaven as seven angels came from the sanctuary with seven terrible plagues, wearing pure white robes. Then the four creatures gave each angel a bowl of wrath to pour out on the earth (Rev. 15:2-7).

The angels began to empty their bowls on Thursday (Rev. 16), pouring God's wrath upon the earth (Rev. 16:1). The plagues against God's enemies are terrible – like those in Egypt – with painful sores, rivers and seas of blood, fire burning the earth, darkness, drought, and finally hail after a great earthquake (Rev. 16:2-21).

- Are you willing to say to God, "*True and just are your judgments*" (Rev. 16:7)?

Ten-Horned Beast

On Friday (Rev. 17), one of the seven angels shows John a great prostitute riding on a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns standing on many waters (Rev. 17:1-5). Her evil is evident, as she holds a cup full of abomination and sexual immorality and is drunk from the blood of Jesus' martyrs (Rev. 17:4-6). And while John marvels at the sight, the angel explains in great detail what it all means (Rev. 17:7-18).

- How does the angel's explanation of the woman shape your understanding of the book?



Revelation 18-22

REACH THE END OF THE JOURNEY

Have you ever waited to see a movie or TV show, only to have the ending suddenly revealed by a coworker or friend? Where was the "spoiler alert" before you learned that *Rosebud* was a sled, the astronauts never left earth, or the villain is actually the hero's father? As we come to the final week of our reading plan we'll wrap up the last five chapters of the Bible in Revelation. And – **SPOILER ALERT** – you won't want to miss John's vision of the ending of history itself.

The Good Guys Win

On Monday (Rev. 18), we hear the angels announce "*Babylon, the great*" city's destruction (Rev. 18:2). Since it was full of immorality and luxurious living, onlookers marvel as it burns to the ground in a single day (Rev. 18:2-8). Then a voice cries out to the faithful, "*Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities*" (Rev. 18:4-5).

- If God can destroy evil nations, what else can he accomplish in your life today?

Happily Ever After

After the fall of the evil city, on Tuesday (Rev. 19), the multitudes in heaven shout their praise and worship to God (Rev. 19:1-5). With great anticipation, they announce a wedding feast for the Lamb and His Bride (Rev. 19:6-8). Just then, a rider arrives on a white horse, with eyes like fire, wearing a blood-dipped robe, and commanding the armies of heaven (Rev. 19:9-16). Who could this be? It's the "*King of kings and Lord of lords*" (Rev. 19:16)!

- How does God's victory over evil earthly establishments help you trust him and praise him more?

To Be Continued

On Wednesday (Rev. 20), we watch an angel lock up the ancient dragon – the devil – into the bottomless pit for a thousand years. But "*Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive*" the earth (Rev. 20:7-8). And once his deceptions are over, he's thrown into the lake of fire to suffer eternal torment (Rev. 20:10). But the story continues with a fantastic judgment scene, as all the dead stood before the throne when the great books were opened (Rev. 20:11-12). "*And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire*" (Rev. 20:15).

- Is your name found in the book of life (Rev. 20:12-13)?

On Thursday (Rev. 21), a new heaven and earth appear, as the holy city – the new Jerusalem – descends from heaven as the Bride for her Husband (Rev. 21:1-2). Now, God dwells with man, taking away all our sorrows, pain, and fears (Rev. 21:3-7). In vivid detail, John describes the Bride's beauty as he watches the heavenly city descend from above (Rev. 21:10-21). It's simply breathtaking to imagine! There's no sun or moon to shine over the city because God's glory gives it light, illuminating all who live there (Rev. 21:23-26). Praise God that some things will continue forever!

- What will not be in that great city, and why is that comforting for John's audience to hear?

Finally, as we close out our yearlong New Testament readings, on Friday (Rev. 22) we find a life-giving river flowing from the Lord's throne through the great city (Rev. 22:1-2). And along the river, there's the tree of life, like the one we saw in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9), bringing life and healing to all who ate it (Rev. 22:2). We're reminded that the prophecy of this book "*must soon take place*" and how Jesus is coming soon in judgment as a bright and morning star (Rev. 22:6-16). And as John closes, he warns us not to add to or take away anything written in this prophecy (Rev. 22:18-19).

- Can you say, along with John, "*Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*" (Rev. 22:20)?