

The Daily Reader

Reading through the Bible together in April

BOOK Introductions

Joshua had learned from Moses and now he steps into Moses' sandals. He leads the Israelites into Canaan, where they conquer and settle down in the land God had promised them. They learn that victory comes through faith in God and obedience to His instruction, not in their own strength and military might. The theme of faith in God sparkles throughout the book. Some display faith (Joshua, most of the time, Rahab the prostitute in Jericho, elderly Caleb), but others don't (Achan, for instance). Joshua calls for faith in God by his life, and in the end, by his final message to the people that concludes the book.

Judges covers the disappointing generations after Joshua died, but before they requested a king. Without godly leadership, everyone "did what was right in his own eyes" and trouble followed. The people were complacent in the good times, grew apathetic toward God, sinned, suffered at the hands of a foreign invader, cried out to God who would then provide deliverance through a leader (a "judge"), only for the nation to slide into apathy and sin again. Time and again God rescues them with an unlikely individual, but the nation keeps on growing colder toward God. (Notice the repeated cycle of sorrow in Judges: sin – slavery – "save us!" – single servant saves them – some blessing – "so what?" – sin again!) The broad picture may be discouraging, but the narrative moves quickly and is an exciting read.

Judges contains memorable stories such as Deborah's defeat of Sisera, Gideon's use fleeces to try and get out of what God was asking him to do, and Samson's philandering escapades. In Judges we learn how dangerous complacency and apathy can be for God's people, but we also learn what kind of people God uses. It's easy to think we need to be brainy, beautiful or beefy before God will use us, but God uses those who are foolish and weak in the world's eyes to do His work (and He gets the glory!)

1 Samuel – The books of Samuel and Kings cover the story of Israel's monarchy from its beginning through to the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 587BC. 1 Samuel tells the story of three key people: Samuel, the last judge and a prophet who anoints the first two kings of Israel – Saul and David. The stories of Saul and David overlap as David rises and Saul declines. Saul had it all externally; he was the kind of king the people wanted. But Saul had no real heart for God. David was a man after God's own heart, a man who loved God. Despite the constant threat from jealous Saul, David is protected and the book finishes with Saul and his son, David's dear friend, Jonathan, dead. In this book we see the importance of character, even over skill. We see the danger of wanting to be like the world around, and worse, the danger of serving God without having a heart for Him!

1 Peter – Peter wrote this letter to Christians that had been dispersed into foreign territory in ancient Turkey. The letter was an encouragement to stand firm in the grace of God. The reality of their salvation meant that their lives were different than those around, which led to suspicion, mistrust and disapproval. How should they respond in the face of hostility? Not with shame or doubt. But rather with commitment to personal holiness, love for each other, and trust in the work of God in their lives.

Peter felt it was important to encourage them in their struggles, but also instruct them in the challenging areas of submission to unjust authorities and of suffering for the right reasons. The letter begins by describing our great salvation, then addresses the issue of submission as a foundation for the instruction regarding suffering. Peter wants them to live in such a way that they don't create unnecessary tension and hostility, but with hope for when the going genuinely does get tough. Finally it ends with comments on service as a believer. Christ is an example to the believer who suffers, but also His resurrection is a source of great hope, and His care is a great source of encouragement to stand firm in the grace of God. 1 Peter is a clarion call to live our lives in light of eternity to come! (Written in the mid-60's AD)

2 Peter – How should Christians live in light of the certainty of Christ's second coming? Specifically, how should Christians respond when there are false teachers around who deny His coming, including the judgment to come, and thus live like pagans among the believers? True Christians should grow in godliness and love, underlining their election and calling. They should trust in the certainty of Christ's coming. They should also be clear that false teachers who deny His coming are certain to face judgment for their rejection of holy living. There is a difference between genuine freedom in Christ and the immoral freedoms of license. In the last chapter Peter clarifies the error of the false teachers – their cynical indifference to prophetic warnings. Since the Day of the Lord is coming, readiness is urged, not recklessness. (Written in the mid-60's AD)

Jude, along with James, is traditionally identified as a half- brother of Jesus. He wrote this letter to help a church deal with false members. These pseudo-spiritualists were dismissing the true message of God's grace in Christ, instead offering a faith that embraced immoral sensuality. This group was led by strong characters who spoke with authority. Jude points to Old Testament examples of similar errors. The church, instead, should be devoted to the content and conduct they had received through Christ by the Spirit. The letter ends with a well-known and beautiful statement of praise. (Written later in the first century, perhaps in the 70's.)

Luke, the physician and companion of Paul, set out to carefully and accurately present Christ and the gospel of salvation for all mankind. Throughout both books of Luke, there is a strong emphasis on the plan of God. Jesus "had to" do what he did, he "had to" suffer, etc. Jesus is clearly portrayed as the divinely appointed figure who was to fulfill the plan of God. Luke, perhaps because of his profession, takes care to present the compassion of Jesus for all kinds of people, including the poor, women, children and social outcasts. Luke also emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit. Although Luke uses Mark, and perhaps Matthew too, his diligent research also leads to the inclusion of various other events that enrich his gospel (eg. Simeon and Anna, the story of Zaccheus, many parables of Jesus, the road to Emmaus and the ascension).

Where we'll be in April: Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel, 1&2 Peter, Jude & Luke

For a reading plan see Andy Jack or the church website www.oakhallchurch.org.uk