

The Daily Reader

Reading through the Bible together in September

BOOK Introductions

Psalms is a collection of collections of poetry, many written by King David. Psalms 1 and 2 act as an introduction to the book. The first psalm contrasts the enduring blessing of the believer who meditates on God's Word with the fleeting and vain existence of the wicked. Yet the book clearly demonstrates that life usually doesn't seem to work out as it should – the wicked seem to prosper, the righteous seem to suffer, things are not right. So the various psalmists often ask questions, they express their fears, occasionally there's an emotional outburst. The second psalm points the reader to the hope of the believer – the coming Messiah. In the midst of the confusion we find thanksgiving and faith expressed. Psalms empathises with the many emotions of life, but urges us to draw near to God, to give thanks, to trust Him, to look to the Messiah and to give praise!

Galatians was probably Paul's first letter. Written to churches in modern day Turkey, Paul was deeply angered by developments in the churches there. Paul contrasts looking to the law for salvation and spiritual growth with a life focused on Christ and lived by faith. First he has to defend his authority, and that of his message against those who insisted on a law-centered spirituality. To turn back to the Old Testament law is like Abraham's attempt to help God out by turning to Hagar, his wife's maid. The result was a slave rather than a true son. In the same way, trying to live under the law is turning to fruitless enslavement. But Christ set us free to be free, to live by faith not works, to walk in step with the Spirit, not to be bound by the fruit of the flesh.

Ephesians was written by Paul during his imprisonment in Rome. It was written to the young church of Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern day western Turkey), where Paul had earlier had a significant ministry (see Acts 18-20).

Ephesians is about the church of Jesus Christ. The church is a body united in Christ – because now there is no longer division between Jew and Gentile, both are one. The first three chapters describe the calling of the church – our amazing spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus, our salvation, our unity, our identity. The last three chapters spell out the implications of that calling – the conduct of the church. Christians are to walk in a manner worthy of their calling. Practical issues such as church unity, personal purity, marriage relationship, family life and spiritual warfare are all addressed in this powerful letter.

Philippians is a thank you letter sent by prisoner Paul to the church at Philippi who had sent help to him upon hearing of his difficult situation. It is also a commendation of Timothy and Epaphroditus (being sent to help address some internal squabbles in the church). While the letter is very positive, Paul does know of tensions in the church, including those between Euodia and Syntyche. So Paul calls for some attitudes to change. Selfishness and grumbling are not appropriate. Instead Christ is lifted up as the supreme example of selflessness. At the same time, Paul's personal circumstances are very difficult, making his joyful faith all the more inspiring. Paul's personal expressions of devotion to Christ make this one of the most warm-hearted, encouraging and joyful books of the Bible.

Colossians is like the sister letter to Ephesians. Both were written by Paul at about the same time, they contain some similar thoughts and both build up the believers' understanding of their position in Christ. If Ephesians is about the church of Christ, then Colossians is about the Christ of the church! In Colossae there were false teachers that were undermining the Christians' view of Jesus. They were teaching the believers to focus on angels and extra rules, but Paul reminded them that Jesus created and sustains everything. Jesus is the only one worthy of worship. Jesus conquered all other spiritual forces. The believers were to look to Jesus, to set their hearts on things above and to live out their devotion to Christ in loving harmony with one another. Paul's letter is one of the greatest descriptions of Christ anywhere in the Bible!

Book introductions continued on reverse >

BOOK Introductions continued...

1 Thessalonians is Paul's response to Timothy's report about the young church in Thessalonica. It was facing persecution, but it was growing. Paul had been forced to leave the city soon after arriving because of hostility (see Acts 17). Now he was concerned for their well-being. All seemed to be going well, although there was some anxiety about the status of Christians who had died before Christ's return. Paul reassures the remaining believers that those who have died have not missed out on anything, but those who remain should live pure lives in anticipation of Christ's return.

2 Thessalonians was written just a few months after the first letter – same church, similar issues. Someone had distorted Paul's teaching, claiming that the day of the Lord had come already. Paul writes to reassure them that certain things must precede Christ's return. In the meantime, the Thessalonian believers are called to stand firm in Christ's love. However, looking forward to Christ's immanent return should not lead to giving up work and being idle. Those who were choosing this lifestyle were rebuked by Paul and urged to return to responsible employment.

Where we'll be in September:

Psalms 1-112, 2Cor.12-13, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians

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