

# The Daily Reader

Reading through the Bible together in November

## BOOK Introductions

We're following the Hebrew order of the Old Testament and are currently in "The Writings." Within this section there is a collection of five books, beginning with Ruth, often read during Jewish feasts. It is interesting to feel the downward spiral in these five books (going down so far that God isn't even mentioned by the last book, Esther – although He's still very much involved!)

**Ruth** follows on the heels of Proverbs 31. Who can find a wife of noble character? This short romantic story is set in the times of the Judges, when everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes. A Jewish family leaves the land because of famine and heads to Moab, where things just go from bad to worse. After three deaths, Naomi is left with two widowed Moabite daughters-in-law. Ruth accompanies Naomi back to her home in Bethlehem, showing her commitment not only to Naomi, but also to Naomi's God. Naomi is transformed from bitterness to joy as God works in Ruth's life to bring her to a new husband – Boaz. As a relative of Naomi, Boaz took on the role of "kinsman redeemer," claiming not only the land, but also the foreign bride as his own. At the end we discover how Ruth sits in the royal line of David, the great grandson of Boaz and Ruth's son, Obed.

**Song of Songs** is a love song that doesn't hold back in its vivid description of marital intimacy. It presents the developing romantic and intimate love of a man, perhaps King Solomon, and a beautiful young woman. In the swirling voices of the poem we hear both main characters, as well as various other voices too. We feel the very real and vivid swings of emotion from exhilaration, to despair, to delight, as the relationship moves through times of separation and restoration. Early Jewish readers linked this song to the messianic Psalm 45 and decided that the song prefigured Israel's relationship with the coming

Messiah. Some Christians follow this approach and see it as a picture of Christ the king and the Church as His bride. Whichever way the song is read, it certainly celebrates the wonder of human intimacy – which is both a gift from God, and a picture of God's relationship with His people.

**Ecclesiastes** has a tone of apparent pessimism that causes many to struggle with the book. Life is futile, but does this mean that life is not worth living? No, but it does mean that the best of humans won't be able to figure it out for themselves. God is the only one that makes sense of the mysteries of life. The author, probably King Solomon, attempted to find meaning through pursuing wisdom in philosophy, through materialism, pleasures of every kind, work as an end in itself, prominence and power. But nothing done "under the sun" satisfies. The apparent meaninglessness of life should not cause us to live it up, or to give up, but rather to look up. Only when we believe in God's providence are we able to live with mystery. Only in knowing that God is just can we truly live responsibly. Only when we trust that God is good can we find enjoyment in life. God does not give us all the answers, but He does offer us Himself, and perhaps, when all is said and done, that is enough?

Lamentations is traditionally considered an addendum to the great prophetic work of Jeremiah. Judah has sinned. Jerusalem, the capital, had been besieged and conquered. The prophet had observed the worst days in Judah's history, and was left to lament the tragic suffering of God's people. Lamentations lives up to its name in the five poems that make up the book (each originally in the form of an acrostic – each line, or group of lines beginning with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet). Yet in the lamentation is woven a thread

*Book introductions continued on reverse >*

of divine mercy and faithfulness. Notice the verses in the heart of the book that gave rise to the great hymn, Great is Thy Faithfulness. In this book we see honest wrestling with God's terrible judgment that has left the heart of Judah in rubble. Yet God is not the enemy, for it is certain that God's great love and compassion will eventually prevail, and the enemies of God's people will themselves face judgment for what they have done.

**Esther** is the final book in the collection of five. The hero of the book goes unmentioned, but not unseen. God is never named in Esther. After the exile was over many Jews chose to stay in the Persian heartland, rather than taking the opportunity to return to their homeland. The two main Jewish characters, Mordecai and Esther, are woven into a web of intrigue and threat from the nasty Persian character, Haman. While God may be forgotten by His people, they are not forgotten by Him. Esther's riveting ten chapters weave a tale of intrigue, comic timing and apparent coincidences through which God continues to prove Himself faithful to His people. Esther becomes Queen, and with Mordecai's prompting she is able to help avert a near disaster for God's people at the hands of Haman. Take the time to read the story straight through in one sitting. God is clearly at work, even behind the scenes!

**Daniel** was a prophet during Judah's exile in Babylon. The book combines dramatic narratives, prayers and visions of events still future from Daniel's perspective. Daniel and three friends were taken to Babylon in the first siege on Jerusalem. They were trained in Babylonian values and beliefs to become leaders in the captive cultural assimilation project. Would they lose sight of their God? Not at all! They retained their devotion to Yahweh and lived out their faith in the higher echelons of this foreign empire. But there was a bigger question looming in light of Judah's defeat to this foreign army with its foreign gods – was Yahweh, the one true God, really sovereign?

Absolutely! Daniel saw the great emperor humbled and honouring God, he saw the empire defeated by the Medo-Persians, and he saw numerous visions presenting the sovereignty of God. The predictions in the book were so accurate, for instance, in anticipating the later transfer of power to the Greeks, that many have denied that Daniel could have written the book at all! Human kingdoms come and go according to God's plan, but only God remains on the throne, and only God will establish the ultimately victorious kingdom. Daniel is a book about the sovereignty of God in His faithfulness to His promises, and the faithfulness possible from His people, even in the toughest of times.

**Ezra** is the first half of a book now split into Ezra and Nehemiah. After the exile, a relatively small number of Jews took the opportunity given to them to return to the land. The leaders of the people had to face the tasks of rebuilding the temple and protecting the city. They also had the greater challenge of shepherding the hearts of the people. These were tough days to lead the Jewish people, because opposition was rife both from within and without. Yet in the midst of the tensions, God providentially provided support from the Persian kings Cyrus and Darius. Ezra's part of Ezra-Nehemiah is concerned primarily with a review of the reconstruction of the Temple, and then with major tension over the issue of intermarriage. While rebuilding provides one level of challenge, peoples' hearts provide the greater challenge for a leader. Have the Jewish people learned the lesson of the exile? Have they turned from the sin that led them into such strong divine discipline, or is intermarriage with other nationalities an indication that they are still prone to slide into idolatry. Ezra takes the strongest possible action to make sure idolatry is really a thing of the past.

### Where we'll be in November:

Proverbs 10-31, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, John 8-20

For a reading plan see Andy Jack or the church website [www.oakhallchurch.org.uk](http://www.oakhallchurch.org.uk)