

Daily Bible Reading



MATTHEW
GENESIS
RUTH
MALACHI
PSALMS

MATTHEW

Mon	Tue
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GENESIS THEN RUTH THEN MALACHI

Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
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PSALMS

Sun

WEEK 1

- Matthew 17:1-8
- Matthew 17:9-13
- Genesis 12:1-9
- Genesis 12:10-20
- Genesis 13
- Genesis 14:11-24
- Psalm 10

WEEK 2

- Matthew 17:14-20
- Matthew 17:22-27
- Genesis 15
- Genesis 16
- Genesis 17:1-16
- Genesis 17:17-18:15
- Psalm 11

WEEK 3

- Matthew 18:1-6
- Matthew 18:6-9
- Genesis 18:16-19:11
- Genesis 19:12-38
- Genesis 20
- Genesis 21
- Psalm 12

WEEK 4

- Matthew 18:10-14
- Matthew 18:15-20
- Genesis 22:1-8
- Genesis 22:9-19
- Ruth 1:1-13
- Ruth 1:14-22
- Psalm 13

WEEK 5

- Matthew 18:21-22
- Matthew 18:23-35
- Ruth 2
- Ruth 3
- Ruth 4:1-10
- Ruth 4:11-22
- Psalm 14

WEEK 6

- Matthew 19:1-12
- Matthew 19:13-15
- Malachi 1:1-5
- Malachi 1:6-14
- Malachi 2:1-9
- Malachi 2:10-16
- Psalm 15

WEEK 7

- Matthew 19:16-22
- Matthew 19:23-30
- Malachi 2:17-3:5
- Malachi 3:6-12
- Malachi 3:13-18
- Malachi 4:1-6
- Psalm 16

We would love to hear your feedback about Daily Bible Reading!



Sign up for Daily Bible Reading emails that will be sent to your inbox from 10th October, 2022.



Foreword

As Christians we not only believe that God speaks to us through his Word...

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness"
(2 Timothy 3:16)

...but that the opportunity to listen to him is precious.

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path"
(Psalm 119:105)

Through the pages of the Bible we meet Jesus, the true Word of God. So, use these notes to help you regularly open your Bible and – even if it is only for a few minutes in your day – listen to God's Word. Allow it to challenge, comfort or encourage you, and point you to Jesus. We hope this leads you into prayer and assists you to commit each day to do "the good works God has prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10).

St Paul's Daily Bible Reading Team

INTRODUCTION TO TERM 4 DAILY BIBLE READING

This term we are moving toward the joy of Christmas: God's spectacular intervention in human history, the coming of Christ into our world. Every Old Testament book in some way looks forward to this, so we plan to dip into some of them as well as continue with the weekly sermon series (Matthew) and our Sunday Psalms.

In Genesis, we will read about God's promises to Abraham and his faithfulness despite Abraham's frequent lack of faith. Ruth tells the surprising story of how a kind, foreign daughter-in-law becomes a part of Israel's salvation story. And Malachi, the final book in the Old Testament, highlights God's reminders to a faithless people through his prophets, that though they have abandoned him, there is hope for those who trust in their Lord.

A Commanding Voice

Read Matthew 17:1-8

Who are the top three most influential people in your life? What words have they said to you that you remember still?

In this passage Jesus goes up a mountain with his closest disciples – Peter, James and John and is transfigured in front of them, like an OMO ad, becoming brilliantly white! (v2) This transfiguration is a foretaste of the resurrection he mentioned in 16:21 as he shines like the righteous in their resurrection (Daniel 12:2-3).

But something more than an assurance of Jesus' resurrection is given here. He is accompanied by two figures in his transfiguration: Moses and Elijah (v4). Moses – who represents the Law¹ and Elijah – arguably the greatest prophet in the Old Testament, representing the prophets.²

Jesus stands alongside the Law and the Prophets and the voice we hear next stops us in our tracks: "This is my *Son*, whom I love; with *him* I am well pleased. Listen to *him*!" Who is the '*Son*' or '*him*' to listen to? – could it be Moses or Elijah? One parted the red sea and the other raised the dead. But when the disciples looked up, they saw no one but Jesus (v8).

Jesus is great, even greater than Moses and Elijah. The voice from heaven says "This is my Son, my beloved. With whom I am well pleased." This is the "*Son*" who will rule the nations (Psalm 2:7-8), the "*beloved*" servant who will suffer (Isaiah 42:1). God wants us to know: Jesus is the conquering King and the suffering servant. He is the saviour and the Lord of this world. The command is simple: Listen to him!

Reflect: What are the voices that you listen to? The words you remember being spoken to you that still shape you today? Does Jesus' voice override or is it overridden by these words? Who speaks the loudest in your life? God is commanding us today to listen to Jesus, the beloved servant who suffered for our sin and the conquering Son who will rule our world.

1 Moses is understood to be the author of the first five books of the Old Testament – also known as 'The Law'.
2 It is noteworthy that they have both had their own experience on a mountain. Moses on Mt Sinai as he received the Law, and Elijah – as he went to this same mountain in his panic, wanting to hear a word from God (1 Kings 19).

Doing Whatever You Want

Read Matthew 17:9–13

Everyone who practises sin practises lawlessness as well. Indeed, sin is lawlessness.
1 John 3:4 (ESV)

1. What is Jesus' command in v9 and the disciples' response in v10? What doesn't make sense to you?³
2. Look at Matthew 14:1–12, what happened to John the Baptist, the Elijah who came?
3. These are some very chilling words in v12, "(they) have done to him everything they wished." And this is the story of John the Baptist who was beheaded – Herod did whatever he wanted to him. Jesus is saying that "*In the same way*" (v12) he will suffer at the hands of people who will do whatever they want to him, the Son of God. How does Jesus' words compare with your assessment of humanity? What does this make you appreciate about Jesus, the conquering King and suffering servant from yesterday?

Prayer: Today we are confronted with the chilling reality of sin and also given assurance of the depth of God's love as Jesus willingly suffered at the hands of lawless men for us. Thank God for Jesus and also ask for endurance as lawlessness increases, that your love will not grow cold.

³ The disciples respond to Jesus' words about the resurrection by asking about Elijah because they expected this timeline: Elijah > Judgment & Resurrection. In Malachi 4:5 we are told that Elijah will come before the Day of the Lord (associated with judgment). In Daniel 12:1–3 this judgment happens alongside the resurrection. So as Jesus speaks about his resurrection the disciples naturally wanted to ask about Elijah who should come before this resurrection.

Introduction to Genesis 12-22

After Creation, the Fall and its immediate consequences, the Flood and the tower of Babel, in Chapter 12 we reach the beginning of the long family saga which will take up the rest of the book of Genesis.

What is remarkable about these chapters is not the particular family chosen or the flawed individuals within it, but God's far-reaching and extravagant promises to them, and his faithfulness to his Word – despite the doubt, deceit, foolishness and malice of those who should have responded in awe and thankful obedience.

In Romans 4, Paul explains that we “who are of the faith of Abraham” are all his children “He is our father in the sight of God – the God who gives life to the dead.”

In Acts 13:32, he proclaims “We tell you the good news: What God promised to our fathers he has fulfilled for us their children, by raising up Jesus.”

We are then inheritors of these great promises and, on this side of the Cross, we understand that these chapters point to Jesus, his obedience even to death and his eternal reign.

Three “Unbelievable” Promises

Read Genesis 12:1-9

What promises of God amaze and delight you? Which ones do you find it hard to trust?

For us – on this side of the Cross, and with the whole of the Old and New Testaments at hand – it can be hard to realise the enormity of what happens in these verses. Abram appears suddenly at the beginning of Chapter 12. We learnt in the previous chapter that he is a descendant of Noah’s (a family with which the Lord has already had dealings) – but we are not given to understand that Abram has had a prior relationship or interaction with the Lord. So it is quite shocking that the holy and omnipotent God – who we have come to know, so far, through the Creation, Fall and Flood narratives – interacts with an ordinary sinful man and reveals not only His plan, but also the undeserved and blessed part this man’s family will be given in this plan. Then come the amazingly far-reaching promises full of God’s blessings to Abram and his descendants, and through them to the whole world – making a great nation (this encompasses both people and land), making his name great, blessing all nations through him (v2-3).

God speaks to him – and Abraham listens (v4). We are not told how Abram reacted emotionally to this, just that he left – and separated from his settled family – “as the Lord had told him.” God speaks to him again in v7 – clarifying that the promise is for Abram’s own offspring. Then, Abraham builds an altar to the Lord, as apparent public acknowledgement of these promises and, although he is not yet able to settle in one place, emphasising God’s right to give him the land.

Later the writer to the Hebrews, would call attention to this act of faithful obedience and many others of Abraham – 11 verses out of 39 in the “By Faith” chapter (Hebrews 11:8-19) are given to Abraham’s obedient faith. As we read on however, Abram’s sinful human nature will become only too clear – we may even question God’s choice of this flawed individual. But Abram is NOT the hero of this narrative – God is. It is God’s steadfast faithfulness to His promises which will be our focus.

Reflect: Although we live on this side of the cross, we still hold to some huge and to many “unbelievable” promises: Jesus will return, all will kneel before him and be judged and there will be a new heaven and a new earth. How does our daily life – our obedience – reflect our trust in these promises?

Cowardly Deception?

Read Genesis 12:10–20

Have you ever been in a difficult situation where it is tempting to “bend the truth” to protect yourself?

Note: Genesis 20:12 seems to affirm the truth of a close familial relationship between Abram and Sarai – though the precise meaning of “sister” in this ancient culture is open to interpretation (and she was certainly also his wife!)

1. What appears to be Abram’s motivation in deceiving Pharaoh (11–12)? In light of the promises just given by God, what does this reveal about Abram’s faith?
2. What are the consequences of this deception – for Sarai and Pharaoh and for Abram?
3. What does this passage show us of both Abram’s flaws and God’s faithfulness?

Reflect: Perhaps you are in a situation now where the temptation to slightly “bend” the truth in order to “survive” seems overwhelming. Pray for wisdom to discern God’s will, courage and perseverance to obey his commands even when it is difficult, and trust in his purposes, despite setbacks.

In What Do You Put Your Trust?

Read Genesis 13

"Whoever trusts in his riches will fall but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf"

Proverbs 11:28

This chapter highlights Abram's unique relationship with the Lord which impacts his actions and decisions – in contrast to his nephew Lot, who appears motivated simply by acquiring the best deal for himself.

So far Lot has travelled with Abram and appears to have also accrued wealth in terms of livestock – but this abundance of possessions creates a problem (as increasing wealth and possessions in families often does).

We are not told what their herdsmen quarrel about – but Abram takes the initiative and offers Lot the choice of land. Although, as we have said, Abram is not perfect by any means, in this situation he shows both leadership and trust in God – since it appears that he is confident he will flourish wherever he goes. Lot on the other hand deliberately chooses what appears to be the best farming land – and seems to be complacent about living "among the cities of the plain" which have a well-deserved reputation for wickedness (as we shall see).

After the separation from Lot, the Lord reiterates his promises to Abram – this time being specific about the vast expanse of land – "all your eyes can see" – and enlarging the promises of time frame – "forever" – and descendants – "like the dust of the earth."

In v4 we saw that Abram (and not Lot who was with him at the time), arriving at the altar he had previously built to honour God, "called on the name of the Lord." The chapter now ends with him moving at the Lord's command again and building another altar. So, we see that despite his flaws, Abram's decision making is uniquely – for his time – based on his faith in God and his willingness to trust and obey him.

Reflect: What underlies your decision making? Do you look for the obvious "best" from your perspective – or do you lay your needs before God and ask for his guidance, trusting that his plans are the "best" for you?

Earthly Power and Heavenly Blessing

Read Genesis 14:11-24

Does it seem to you, sometimes, that what matters in this world is physical power and might?

1. Lot's choices in the previous chapter make him vulnerable to the violence of vested interests in the area. What does Abram's response (vv14-16) demonstrate?
2. Melchizedek is a mysterious, but important, figure – who appears only in this brief passage in Genesis, but is referred to again in Psalms and Hebrews. Amid the hostility and violence surrounding Abram, how does God use Melchizedek here – and how does Abram acknowledge him as a priest (vv18-20)?

(If you have the time now, or later, read Hebrews 7 where the writer uses Melchizedek (the king of “righteousness and peace” – and a priest who seems to have “no beginning ... or end”) to help us understand Jesus role as High priest of the new covenant)
3. How does Abram's response to the King of Sodom (vv22-24) highlight his dependence on God (and his difference to Lot)?

Pray: that you will seek to serve God and receive his blessing rather than being dependent on the approval of those in power in your world.

Wake Up God?

Read Psalm 10

David starts this Psalm by asking a question of God. He sees evil and trouble in the world and is asking God where he is in it all. Why does God seem to do nothing? Do you ever ask this question?

The evils David observes in vv2–10 are horrible and evil, the wicked go around, violent, deceiving, lying, preying on the weak and the helpless, full of pride. In v11 we see the heart of the wicked person revealed – the root of all their evil is that they have forgotten God. They think he will not see and so at the end of the day they think that no one can hold them to account, no one will judge what they have done.

The world we live in today may be different in many ways from the world King David lived in but this certainly has stayed the same. Today, the weak and vulnerable are preyed upon and neglected in nursing homes, online scams, abuse in special ed schools and child sex trafficking. We have entire industries such as advertising, social media, and politics, seemingly dependent on lies and deception. The root of all this evil and what makes our world a wicked place is that people have chosen to forget God.

In the face of all this, sometimes I find myself, like David, crying out to God – where are you?

But like David we have hope, David like us knows one day God will act. In vv12–18 David paints a beautiful picture of God’s justice for those who have forgotten him and his comfort for those who seek him. God will judge all evil one day. He will take all into account. The evil that is done against the weak and the vulnerable – that escapes all other’s sight – he sees and will judge. What a comfort! To those who have forgotten God it will be a dreadful day when they realise that there is one who will call them into account. To those who cry out to God, what a beautiful day it will be as the King of the universe wraps his arms around them, wipes all the tears from their eyes and washes them clean with the blood of his Son.

Pray with me, “Come Lord Jesus.”

The Nature of Faith

Read Matthew 17:14–20

What things in your life are you trusting God with now? Many things or little to nothing at all?

Today's passage covers two episodes, the first a public healing (vv14–18) and the second a private conversation sparked by this healing (vv19–20). It all starts with a father's love for his sick son that drives him to kneel and beg Jesus for mercy (v14). His son is suffering greatly (v15). The fact that he hasn't died yet likely showed the kind of care he had been receiving.

Someone seeking healing from Jesus isn't new, but the narrative takes a surprising turn as we learn that he has in fact brought his son to "your disciples, but they could not heal him." (v16). Jesus responds with a scathing critique not of the father with the sick child, but the disciples and the crowd – they are faithless and twisted (v17). Jesus clearly has the authority to heal as the son is instantly better (v18), but the disciples who were healing in his name failed.

So why did the disciples struggle? Jesus' power isn't the problem here, so what is? Jesus says it's their "little faith" (v19). In fact their faith couldn't even measure up to a mustard seed (that's a very small seed measuring 1–2mm). It appears they simply did not trust Jesus. If they had even a small measure of a real trust in Jesus – they could have moved mountains. *Nothing will be impossible for them.* They placed the weight and burden of healing this boy into their own hands, not into Jesus'. They failed to trust and lean on Jesus.

It is easy to point the finger at the disciples, but how often do the burdens of your life fall solely and only on your shoulders?

Reflect: Do a 'self assessment'. When you are worried, is your first instinct to turn to others, to yourself or to God? Think of your calendar, is your life filled with busyness to build a safety net so you never have to lean on God for anything? or does your life reflect actions born out of faith so you love, you serve, you obey and in the end you trust God's promises? Pray for God's help as he is abundant in love and compassion.

Jesus: The Son of Man, the Son of God

Read Matthew 17:22-27

Consider what you think Jesus is like. What are the top three words you would use to describe his character?

1. Looking back (and also at this passage), list out all of Jesus' predictions about what will happen to him? (16:21, 17:12, 17:22-23)
2. The temple tax was loosely based on Exodus 30:11-16. On one hand the tax was used for the upkeep of the temple, but in a deeper sense, the money was atonement⁴ money. It was a ransom⁵ Israelites paid for their lives (Exodus 30:12).
Did Jesus need to pay tax (vv25-26)? Why or why not? (See also 20:28)
3. But Jesus paid the tax anyway – why? What do we learn about his character?

Pray: Praise God for Jesus – the Son of Man and the Son of God. Give thanks for his **servant-heartedness** – he does not insist on his rights; for his **humility** – as he humbled himself to be our atoning sacrifice; for his **love** – that drove him to pay the ransom we can't afford to secure our forgiveness.

4 Atonement is the appeasing of anger. In Leviticus (e.g. 4:35, 5:6 – lots of places) when sins are committed God is rightly angry as those who are supposed to love him act against him. To appease/turn aside this anger, a sacrifice is offered – this sacrifice is an atoning sacrifice. Thus, atonement enables the turning aside of anger and forgiveness of sins.

5 Ransom is the cost of freeing something you have the right to so it belongs to you again. E.g. think kidnapping and ransom money paid to free your loved ones so they can come back to you, or ransomware that holds your documents hostage – and the ransom is cost paid to free your documents so they can belong to you again.

Doubt and Reassurance

Read Genesis 15

When are you most tempted to doubt God's goodness or lack trust in his plans for you?

Chapter 14 was action packed, establishing the hostile, violent environment in which Abram lived. This chapter, however, is an extended conversation between God and Abram, in which God graciously reassures Abram – answering his doubts, giving specific time frames and details of the land he will possess and some future events for his descendants... and even responding to Abram's continued questioning by engaging in a formal, visible covenant renewal.

Verse 6 is pivotal both for this chapter – and for the whole Bible. Despite his situation (his advanced age, an elderly wife, and no offspring) and the enormity of God's promises (descendants as numerous as the stars and vast tracts of already inhabited land) – Abram believes the word of the Lord that he will have a son through whom all God's promises to him will be fulfilled. Both Paul and James quote this verse (Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6, James 2:23) to emphasise the consistency of the Bible truth – we are (and always have been) saved through God's grace through faith and not by our works. Abram seeks further reassurance – not from a position of doubt but, in relationship, appealing for understanding – and God graciously provides a visible, memorable version of an ancient covenant ceremony, demonstrating his unwavering commitment to these promises. This type of ritual was common to confirm an important agreement – dividing sacrificed animals in two and walking between them to invoke the same fate on themselves should they break the covenant. But, in this instance, Abram is asleep, and God alone walks through (represented by the symbolic burning brazier and blazing torch). The message is clear – the fulfilment of God's promises depends on no one else but himself, and as he lives, he will fulfil his word. It is not based on who Abram is, but on who God is. The covenant will not fail – because God will not fail.

Pray: that when you begin to doubt – or falter – God will remind you of his promises and his sovereignty and you will take refuge in him and be equipped and encouraged to continue in his service.

The God Who Sees

Read Genesis 16

Reflect on your own role in your family. Are you a model of God-honouring behaviour?

Despite our knowledge that ancient customs were different, and that the practice of using the wife's maidservant as a "substitute" to acquire an heir was quite acceptable, this story still shocks us in the way the servant Hagar was treated by both Abram and Sarai. The chapter is full of "people behaving badly" – in ways we easily recognise from our own time when sex and power poison so many relationships!

1. How do Abram, Sarai and Hagar each "behave badly" in this passage?
2. What does God reveal about his plans in his response to Hagar's misery? How might they comfort her?
3. Ishmael means "God hears" and Hagar names the Lord "the One who sees me." How do these verses encourage us to respond to those for whom the world is an unjust and cruel place? What could we share about our Lord with them?

Human sinfulness will continue to impact the lives of this complex family – but God sees each of them and, always being true to his holy, righteous and compassionate character, continues to faithfully fulfil his promises.

Reflect: Are there people in your family who need the reminder that God hears and sees them in their misery – and that they can trust him to care for them? Pray for ways to share this good news with them.

Outward Signs

Read Genesis 17:1-16

What outward signs help others to know that you trust in and serve God? Are they matched by your inward commitment to him?

This chapter marks the fourth time God reiterates his promises to Abram – but this time the covenant is to be accompanied by a command of obedience and an outward sign to mark Abraham and his descendants as belonging to God.

In v1 God instructs Abram to “Walk before me and be blameless,” before he confirms the covenant. God then instructs Abram to change his name to one that represents the future – he is now “Abraham” – “father of many.” Sarai’s name will also change – signifying that she too is part of the fulfilment of this promise.

Then comes the command for all of the males in Abraham’s household to be circumcised – as an outward sign “of the covenant between me and you...” (v11).

Other Old Testament passages help us to see that this outward sign is always meant to be accompanied by an inward attitude to God. Deuteronomy 10:15-16 commands that the Israelites, in response to God choosing them above all the nations must “circumcise your hearts... and do not be stiff necked any longer” – and in Deuteronomy 30:6 we are told that as part of restoring his scattered people, the Lord will “circumcise your hearts.... So that you may love him with all your heart...”

The New Testament reiterates this idea of circumcision being an outward sign of a believer’s inward trust in God but goes further, in the context of many coming to faith from outside the Judaic tradition, by saying the physical act of circumcision is not necessary for new believers. Paul says 1 Corinthians 7:9 “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts.”

Pray: Ask forgiveness for those times when you may have gone through the outward conventions of faith, but your inner life has not matched up. Give thanks that we are saved by Christ’s death for us – not by our own goodness. Ask for the Holy Spirit’s help to be more like Jesus.

Miraculous Intervention

Read Genesis 17:17–18:15

“Is anything too hard for the Lord?” Are there some aspects of your life that you have – perhaps subconsciously – designated as too hard even for God?

In this section, we see Abraham and his large household acting in obedience to God’s commands, despite feeling as if their problems are insoluble.

1. How does God answer Abraham’s request to let Ishmael live under his blessing? (17:18–27)
2. Hebrews 13:2 instructs us “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” In vv1–8 how does Abraham respond to his unexpected visitors? (Keep this in mind as we read about the attitudes towards visitors in Sodom)
3. How does Genesis 18:9–15 highlight that the promise of a son to Abraham and Sarah will be a miraculous gift of God – beyond human understanding?

Pray: Bring before God – perhaps for the umpteenth time – any aspect of your life that you have thought is beyond – or not worthy of – his intervention. Cast your cares on him, because he cares for you.

Take Refuge in God

Read Psalm 11

Have you felt like the world is caving in on you – like it is all too much and all you want to do is run and hide?

This is how David felt – like people were lurking in the shadows out to get him.

He wanted to flee from his enemies and he wanted to despair. Others advised him to flee like a bird to the mountains, run and hide himself away. Instead of turning to despair, David remembers three truths about God which remind him that he can find refuge in him.

First, David remembers where God is. In v4, God is in his holy temple, his holy heavenly throne. God still rules – no matter what is happening in David's life. God is always in control.

Second, David remembers who God is. In v5, we see that nothing escapes God's sight and his anger burns against all wickedness, because the Lord is righteous and loves justice (v7).

Third, David remembers what God will do. In v6, we realise God will not leave the guilty unpunished. He will punish the wicked and do away with the evil. David remembers these things because he loves God and longs to see his face.

When all we want to do is to run and hide we can take refuge in Jesus. Jesus is sitting on the throne in heaven and rules over all things. Jesus is good and hates evil, nothing will escape his sight when he judges all things. Jesus dealt with all evil and wickedness (including our own sinfulness) on the cross. He died paying the price for all wickedness and when he comes again all will be set right.

Pray: Lord help me not to despair. Help me know that you are on the throne. Help me know you hate evil. Help me know that you will set things right. Help me long to see your face.

The Greatest in the Kingdom of God

Read Matthew 18:1-6

Lord, help me, for I am often lukewarm, unbelief mars my confidence, sin makes me forget you. Let the weeds that grow in my soul be cut at their roots. Grant me to know that I truly live only when I live to you. Forgive me and abide in me gracious God.

The last chapter started with Jesus transfigured to show his power and ended with him as the King's son exempted from tax. This all points to the fact that Jesus is King and he will rule a kingdom! So this prompted the disciples to ask... Who, then, is the greatest in this kingdom of heaven?

Jesus answers their question by calling a little child, putting him/her in their midst and using this little one as a 'live answer'. They need to turn and become like this child to, not simply be great, but to even enter the kingdom of heaven (v3) In the ancient world children were unimportant. "They could not fight...could not lead... they counted for very little."⁶ Babies were considered so insignificant that infanticide was common in Ancient Rome.

Jesus wanted the disciples to recognise their lowly state and dependence. This is the mark of those who belong to him, who are ruled by him. The embrace of such humility, in fact, makes them great in his kingdom (v4). So as you live before God today, at this moment, do you see yourself as a helpless child who needs to receive or more like an independent adult?

It is hard to see ourselves as we truly are, dependent and weak. We like to think of ourselves as able, independent and self-sufficient. But the reality remains, before God, we are as nothing. Sinful, weak, needy – all creation waits on him for their next breath, next meal, next dawn. Such is our actual state. And like a child we can't save or provide for ourselves. It is as we recognise this that we become able and ready to receive God's grace and be secure in his love.

Pray: Psalm 131

The Severity of Sin

Read Matthew 18:6–9

If someone offered you money for one of your hands, how much would you be willing to sell it for?

1. Who is Jesus condemning in vv6–7?
2. Thinking back to the opening question – how does the body imagery used in vv8–9 heighten the impact of this command about “cutting off whatever causes you to sin”? What is Jesus really telling the disciples to do?
3. How does the above square with your own attitude towards sin in your life? Given the reality of how damaging it can be to cause others to stumble or to live with sin that is making us stumble personally, what are the sins you know you need to “cut off and throw away”?

Pray: Psalm 51:1–10 which starts...

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.”

Wickedness and Righteousness

Read Genesis 18:16–19:11

What aspects of this world are you tempted to conform to?

The close relationship between God and Abraham at the beginning of this section – where the Lord reveals his plan to his chosen servant Abraham, Abraham feels able to put his case for mercy and the Lord responds patiently – appeals to us. We may be lulled into enjoyment of the apparent bargaining between Abraham and God at the end of Chapter 18 – as Abraham pleads for the protection of the righteous in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah – continuously re-adjusting his estimation of the number of righteous men who might live in those cities.

However, when we actually enter the city of Sodom, the horror of the wickedness of its inhabitants wipes the smile from our faces. Abraham based his appeals on his knowledge of God's character – surely the righteous judge of all the earth won't do anything unjust? We quickly see where the issue lies – Abraham is right about God's character – but he is completely wrong about the situation in Sodom.

Lot's hospitality at first seems to echo that of Abraham and Sarah towards their visitors – but then we see the dreadful truth. Lot has brought them into his house, because he knows what fate would await them in the town square. We are meant to see Lot as the example of the one righteous man living there (in 2 Peter 2:7–8 we are told he was "a righteous man" who was "tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard") – but we do wonder how he has been able to live in that place. We soon see that, although he behaves better than those around him, his own values have been tainted. The image of the violent mob at the door – their demands for the visitors... and Lot's shocking counteroffer of his two daughters – is truly horrific! It is the angels' intervention that saves Lot – not because he is righteous, but – as we later learn – for Abraham's sake.

Reflect: How can we discern and resist evil or wickedness in the society we are immersed in? Ask God to help you not to be "conformed to the pattern of this world" – but to be truly "transformed by the renewing of your mind" – so that you will be able to know and obey his "good, pleasing and perfect will" (Roman 12:2).

Destruction and Rescue

Read Genesis 19:12-38

Have you ever started off on a path or task you felt was given to you by God... but then faltered or turned aside... lost your nerve.... or lost your way?

Lot and his family allow themselves to be led out of Sodom – but their subsequent questions and actions reveal their lack of real trust in the Lord who saved them.

1. Why do you think Lot pleads to be allowed to stay in a town (rather than head to the mountains as instructed)? How might this link to Lot's wife's choice to "look back"?
2. Verses 27-29 remind us of Abraham's pleas for the righteous in Sodom. What do we realise about God's justice – and his mercy in these verses?
3. Lot and his daughters had been through a terrible ordeal, but not only had they witnessed the Almighty God's judgment on the cities, but also his mercy to them. How do vv30-38 highlight the consequences of acting in fear and not faith?

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the sea."

Psalm 46:1-2

Pray: that you will not be fearful of circumstances around you – but that you will trust God and obey him even in difficult times.

Not again!

Read Genesis 20

“What was your reason for doing this?” Ask God’s forgiveness for the times when you have unthinkingly disobeyed him or relied on your own solutions rather than sought his help.

This seems a strangely familiar repeat of poor behaviour by the now very old Abraham and Sarah – without the excuse of a famine to explain their deception (as in Genesis 12). Despite all they have witnessed and been promised, they don’t seem to have learnt to rely on God’s protection or to ask for God’s help – in fact, in this story, the pagan ruler – Abimelech – seems to be more committed to obeying God than they are!

What do we learn in this chapter?

- About Abraham – that although he has had the privileged position of being chosen and led by God (and even in this chapter is referred to as a prophet) he is still capable of cowardice – and of using his wife to protect his interests.
- About Sarah (somehow she is still attractive and desirable at 90+!) – that, although she has received the precious promise that she will bear Abraham’s son, she is willing to go along with Abraham’s plan, despite the obvious dangers involved in being taken to a ruler’s harem
- About Abimelech – that though not a believer, he was under God’s control and when he listened to and obeyed God in this particular situation, God was merciful to him.
- About God – again God is the “hero” of this story – speaking to Abimelech in a powerful vision, protecting Sarah from sexual assault and Abraham from being murdered, even ensuring they would leave this place richer than when they arrived. God preserves Sarah and Abraham – despite their lack of faith – so that his promises will be fulfilled – beginning with the birth of Isaac in the next chapter.

“In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.”

Proverbs 3:6

Pray: Ask God to help you to be so much in the habit of bringing all your concerns to him and obeying his commands, that when a crisis comes you will not fall back on your own inadequate ingenuity.

Some Problems Resolved

Read Genesis 21

After some tumultuous chapters, Chapter 21 seems to highlight a period of peace and the resolution of various relationships.

1. How does the meaning of Isaac's name ("he laughs") recall both Sarah's past doubts – and her present joys (vv1–7)?
2. How does God show his faithfulness to Abraham – and to Hagar – in the fate of Ishmael (vv17–21)?
3. Why does Abimelech seek out Abraham (v22) and what is the result? (vv32–34)

Although these relationships are resolved well (to an extent), both Hagar/Ishmael and Abimelech remind us of situations where Abraham acted on his own initiative, apparently to ensure, through his own plans, that his family line would survive.

Reflect: Can you think of times when, although your motivation was wrong, God rescued you – in spite of yourself – working "all things together for good" (Romans 8:28). Thank him for his mercy.

Trustworthy Words

Read Psalm 12

Our world is full of competing voices. With so many voices out there, it is so hard to know who to trust, to know what to believe.

This Psalm contrasts the words of man with the words of God.

We live in a world where we are told to look after number one and no one else. Influencers and celebrities flatter themselves with their lips lying to us, promising us that we can be just like their façade. Companies deceive us with the fine print promising things that they cannot deliver. The Internet is full of fake news lies and boasts. And from all these places we are being told what we should believe, what we should do, who we should be.

Perhaps now more than ever in history it is true that what is vile is honoured in the human race, but David also felt that “the godly are no more” and “the faithful have vanished” (v1).

In all these voices swirling around there is only one voice that is flawless and steady.

God’s voice is trustworthy and true. It is more valuable than silver and gold (v6). When God says something it is always true and when he makes a promise it is good as done.

He judges not just the words, but the actions of those who oppress the weak and needy – who promote themselves and belittle or ignore those who suffer in this world (v5).

When you have no idea who you can believe, who you can trust, what you should do, or who you should be, turn to God’s words and let his words be a lamp for your feet and a light on your path.

Pray: Lord, thank you so much that your words are flawless like silver purified in a crucible, like gold refined seven times. Please let me value your words as much as I should – and obey them.

God Sees the Little Ones

Read Matthew 18:10–14

Think for a minute about whose opinion of you matters to you, name their names.

Are they names of those that have authority or more like those who others have authority over? What is their 'status' in this world?

Again Jesus is addressing our relationship to the 'little ones', he commands us to be alert and pay attention that we don't despise them (v10). The little ones here could refer to children (18:2) or lowly disciples (18:4, 6). Either way, they are those that are humble and of lowly status.

In one sense Jesus has to command us to "pay attention" or "see" (v10) because it is really easy to not see those who are low in status. It's often the weak, needy and vulnerable that have no voice because they can be easily ignored without consequences. The strong, smart, beautiful, healthy and rich can be easily heard. Loving those people can result in personal gain whilst loving those in need is often costly with little in the way of personal benefit.

But Jesus is telling us a sobering truth: God himself, the Father, knows what's happening to each and every single one of these little ones. Their angels, the heavenly messengers and agents are before God's presence. And whilst we might feel the humble can be ignored or despised, that does not reflect God's heart. He is the God who will leave the ninety nine to search for the one (v12). God doesn't want even a single one of these little ones to perish. Such is the love, compassion and mercy of our God.

Reflect: God sees those who are of a lowly status. He cares for them, you may be one of them today feeling weak and vulnerable. Pray in thanksgiving that God cares for you. Or maybe you are struggling at the moment to pay the cost of honouring someone in your life who needs you and is of a lowly status, pray God will give you his heart and his grace.

The Truth in Love

Read Matthew 18:15–20

When was the last time someone spoke to you about something you need to repent of?

1. There are many ‘if’s in vv15–17. What scenarios do they cover and what does Jesus say to do in these scenarios?⁷
2. What are the two truths Jesus speaks of in vv18–20?
3. Putting the above together, what is the role of the individual Christian and the role of the local church in helping each believer’s walk?

Reflect: Do you have someone in your life that points out your sin to you? Are you comfortable with pointing out sin when you see it? Why/why not?

Pray: that you can be a blessing to others and live out the kind of love, interdependence and truth speaking that this passage encourages. Alternatively, try praying Jesus’ prayer – “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” John 17:23

⁷ It is worth noting here that the way we ought to treat pagans and tax collectors is to evangelise them.

Ultimate(?) Test of Obedience

Read Genesis 22:1-8

Think back to a time when God asked you to do something you found really hard. Did you trust and obey?

At first glance this “test” of Abraham seems not just shocking, but completely against God’s revealed character – in fact needlessly cruel. God initiates the intimate conversation by calling Abraham by name – and Abraham responds willingly. Then God emphasises that Isaac is not just Abraham’s son – but his “only son” ... and even more poignantly “whom you love” ...and we are reminded of the long years of waiting for this loved child – the child of the promise – to be born. This introduction makes the blunt command which begins the next sentence, “Sacrifice him as a burnt offering...” even more horrific. We (and Abraham surely) know that God abhors child sacrifice. He is not like the bloodthirsty pagan gods of the surrounding tribes. How could this be? Verses 3-7 increase our tension (and confusion) as we see Abraham obediently setting forth with Isaac – and going through the various stages of preparation. Isaac’s innocent, trusting query about the lamb is heartbreaking. But then Abraham’s answer in v8 reveals the depth of Abraham’s trust in God and knowledge of his character, “God himself will provide the lamb, my son.”

The New Testament writers praise Abraham’s obedient faith – especially in this particular event. James (2:20-24) cites this act of obedience as evidence that “faith and actions work together.” Hebrews 11:17-19 suggests that Abraham – continuing to trust in God’s promises that his one and only son, Isaac, would be the first of a great nation – also knew that God could raise the dead. On this side of the Cross, we see Isaac and the lamb as symbolically representing Jesus, the true “Lamb of God,” who was provided by God in our place as a sacrifice for our sin. But Abraham knew none of that and so we too should be amazed and humbled, especially after all we have read of Abraham’s frequent struggles to trust God’s promises – that he stepped out in faith, with his most precious, beloved son, and trusted God to provide – a trust that would be tested up to the final moment.

Pray: For most of us nothing approaching this kind of test will ever happen – but there may be times when we feel that God asks us to put precious, prayed for relationships or positions on the line for him or to leave places we love for his sake. Pray that when this happens to you, you will be able to trust in his good purposes and his promise to provide all we need.

God Himself Will Provide

Read Genesis 22:9–19

What does Abraham's obedience – to the final moment – model for us?

1. What does the miraculous (and timely!) provision of the ram confirm for Abraham about God (v14)?
2. What is established about the depths of Abraham's faith (v12) before the promises are reiterated in vv17–18?

Abraham is called "friend of God" in three places in the Bible. It seems, by this point, Abraham and God know one another – God knew Abraham would obey and Abraham trusted God to provide. It was a test God knew Abraham would pass, but his trust and obedience echo through the ages – and foreshadow that greatest act of obedient trust in Jesus' sacrificial death on the Cross.

3. *"Look the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* John 1:29 How do these verses in Genesis foreshadow Jesus – and help us to appreciate the depths of God's love for us?

Pray: Praise God for His precious Son who took our place, sacrificing himself to give us forgiveness, new life and hope.

Introduction to Ruth

The book of Ruth is a story foreshadowing God's redemptive plan for humanity played out in a tender, intimate account of the lives of two ordinary widows, Ruth and Naomi.

We see a crippling famine, displacement, grief, poverty, but also loyalty, courage and steadfast kindness leading to hope and redemption – all themes the modern reader can still relate to today.

One only needs to glance at the daily news to remember that the last few years have been full of hardship for many in our world. Israel in the time of the judges appears to have been no different, with God's people living in the promised land but living largely godless lives. It was a long period of turmoil and strife, with the Israelites continuing to fail to live with God as their King. This culminated in their request for a human king in their belief this would bring prosperity and peace to their nation, even as they rejected God as their King (1 Samuel 8:5).

In the time of Ruth, the particular affliction troubling the Israelites was famine. Famine is a terrible thing inherently but for the contemporaneous Bethlehemites, it would have been a bitterly ironic reminder that something was amiss in their "land with flowing milk and honey" (Deuteronomy 31:20) – Bethlehem means "house of bread/food."

As we read this book alongside Genesis, Psalms, Malachi and Matthew, it is also a reminder that God keeps His promises in his sovereignty. In the midst of human suffering, God is working out His plan to restore humanity to Himself and to establish a kingdom with lasting peace.

The Lord's Hand is Against Me

Read Ruth 1:1–13

Think of a recent time in your life through which you have struggled. What was your attitude to God at that time?

1. What choice does Elimelech make for his family in vv2–3? Who were the Moabites? (See Genesis 19:36–37, Deuteronomy 23:3–4) What happens to the family later in vv3–5?
2. Naomi knows that God provides for His people in His sovereignty (v6) but believes “the LORD’s hand has turned against me” (v13). Put yourself in the widows’ shoes for a minute. What kind of feelings or worries do you think would have been going on in their minds, especially from what you know of their social context? What do you make of the relationship between Naomi and her daughters-in-law?
3. In v6, Naomi hears that the LORD had come to the aid of His people and that food (“lekhem”) had returned to Bethlehem, our first hint that God’s restorative plan is at work. She is keen to return home. However, at this point in the story, she believes that the only way to restore the family’s fortunes is through “levirate marriage.” Read Deuteronomy 25:5–10 and write down your own summary of what this custom involves (we will need to refer back to it in our later chapters!)

Reflect/Pray: Romans 8:38–39 reminds us that for those of us who trust in Jesus, nothing can separate us from God’s love. Pray for God’s help to cling to these promises whenever you find yourself feeling that your situation seems overwhelmingly desperate.

Your God Will Be My God

Read Ruth 1:14–22

Have you ever had to make a choice to separate yourself from friends, family or familiar places to follow God?

Today's passage starts with another difficult choice and a tearful goodbye. Naomi cares for her daughters-in-law and is aware that from a worldly perspective, Ruth and Orpah's prospects would be better in Moab than in Bethlehem (1:8–13). Naomi even urges Ruth to follow after Orpah, who is "going back to her people and her gods" (v15). We see that the years of grief have hardened Naomi as she tells those who once knew her that she is a different woman now. She left as Naomi (pleasant) and she has come back as Mara (bitter) (vv20–21).

Naomi believes God has brought judgment on her (v21). She recognises the sovereign hand of the LORD in the situation – "the LORD brought me back empty." Ruth the Moabite's faith is in contrast to Naomi's bitterness towards God.

As we have learnt in our previous study, the Moabites were one of Israel's enemies in war. Hence Ruth's claim on Israel's God as her own God – "your God my God" (v16) is surprising – she calls him by his personal name "the LORD" (v17). Ruth knows the personal cost of following Naomi and is willing to sacrifice her own prospects out of love for her. She follows through her love with a declaration of faith in the LORD.

The passage ends with a glimmer of hope. They have arrived at the end of the famine at the beginning of one of the first harvests of the year (v22) (barley season historically was in April/May, at the end of winter). The famine is over and God shows His faithfulness even as His people despair. God's faithfulness stands in contrast to His people's faithlessness as the Israelites worship other Gods. The nation's despair is reflected in the personal lives of two women, who seemingly have lost everything. It is a "foreign" woman's faith, her steadfast love, that will set the way for God's redemption of this poor, grief-stricken family and eventually the whole of humanity through Christ (Matthew 1:5).

Reflect/Pray: Ruth turns from her own people and gods and entrusts herself to Naomi's God. Pray that you might trust in the faithfulness of God in choosing to do what is right – even when it may mean separation from all that is familiar.

How long, Lord?

Read Psalm 13

Is it shocking to see David cry out in anger to his very creator? What right does he have to do this?

The fact that this prayer and many like it are included in the Bible, shows us something of how God wants us to relate to him.

David is in the depths of despair. He feels completely overwhelmed and overcome, utterly exhausted and on the edge; defeated, in the dark and fearing for his very life. He feels like God has forgotten him. As we know, David's journey to the kingship he had been promised by God, was full of violence and betrayal. He cannot see where God is in all of this, why God is letting all this happen to him. So, David cries out to God in frustration, agony and even anger.

Our God wants to hear our feelings and thoughts. He wants us to tell him when we're hurting – not because he doesn't know, he knows all things before we tell him – but because he wants to live in relationship with us. When we feel overwhelmed, downcast, exhausted and in the dark, we can't see where God is in our lives. But we can talk to our Father in heaven and tell him how we are feeling. He already knows, but he wants to walk through the darkness with us.

As we cry out to God like David in our anguish and frustration, there is one thing we must remember and come back to in our prayers. God's love is unfailing and his salvation is sure. In David's anguish, he trusted that God's love always comes through, that God's love leads to action and salvation. And we have so much more reason to remember this now in our anguish – no matter how bad things get we can always look back to the Cross. As we cry out to him in distress, we remember that his love means salvation. We can really rejoice in this.

Pray: Are you feeling far from God? Cry out to your Father telling him your thoughts and feelings. Then remind yourself of his unfailing love and rejoice in his goodness to you – perhaps through a song you love.

Forgiveness: a Way of Life

Read Matthew 18:21–22

“If a man commits a transgression, the first, second and third time he is forgiven, the fourth time he is not forgiven.” Babylonian Talmud⁸ (Yoma 86)

Having spoken about hidden grievances in 18:15, Jesus now turns to the topic of forgiveness. Peter comes and asks Jesus how many times he must forgive a brother or sister who sins against him – and Peter offers an estimation that was above those of his contemporaries: not three times, but up to seven times!

But Jesus’ answer is radical. He immediately rejects Peter’s notion of putting a limit on the times you must forgive. Instead he says: seventy-seven times or more literally “seventy times seven.” That’s to say: an unlimited number of times.

In church life, there will always be grievances as v15 has shown us. We are commanded to speak the truth to one another in love – to point out sin, but even as this happens – forgiveness is key. We have to point sin out with a willingness to forgive when true sorrow/repentance is expressed (v29). Forgiveness isn’t something to practise in moderation, but something to excel in. It needs to be our way of life.

This is often so much easier to say than to do – because we hurt even as we hurt others. And forgiveness requires us to bear the cost of someone else’s sin. The pain, betrayal, agony – even physical/emotional/psychological/financial consequences. When sorry is said and meant – the cost still must be borne. We need to be reminded of Jesus’ forgiveness, his bearing of our great sin which empowers us to forgive – an unlimited number of times; to bear the cost of someone’s mistake and extend forgiveness, when mercy is asked for and true contrition seen.

Reflect: When someone apologises to you, or when you confront someone and they recognise their sins – what happens next? How do you often feel and act? Maybe you need to take one step back, maybe you are prone to minimise the problem and hide the grievance, even when it really matters and you have been hurt? Pray for Jesus’ help to forgive others as you have been forgiven.

⁸ Central text of rabbinic Judaism – contains rabbinic debates on teachings of Torah (Law)

Showing Mercy

Read Matthew 18:23–35

Thinking back on your days here on Earth, where do you see God’s mercy in your life?

1. The linking word ‘therefore’ in v23 shows that this parable is directly linked to Jesus’ word on forgiveness in 18:22. Compare what happens in vv23–27 and in vv28–30.
 - a. What was similar in the story?

 - b. What was different?

2. How did the other slaves and the master react? (vv31–32) – why? (v33)

3. The consequences for the slave was dire, do you think he could have repaid his debt? (v34) How does this serve as a warning for us (v35)?

Prayer: The Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13)

Note vv14–15 “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins your Father will not forgive your sins.”

Refuge

Read Ruth 2

Think of a time when you've been surprised by God's providence – when what God provided was different to or better than what you thought you needed.

At the start of Chapter 2, Naomi and Ruth are in a place of neediness. We have just learnt they have lost their homes, husbands, sons and sense of self. Now, it is their empty bellies that drive their need. A surprising series of events, in God's providence, lead to greater needs being fulfilled.

1. What do vv3–4 say of God's providence?
2. Read Leviticus 23:22. What do they tell us about God's character? How do Boaz's actions in vv8–16 and v22 compare or contrast to these legal requirements?
3. Read v12 and take note of Boaz's blessing to Ruth that will become prophetic with time. For now, what blessings have come about in chapter 2 to Ruth, the one who has sought refuge under the wings of the LORD, the God of Israel?

Reflect/Pray: In our last study, we learnt about the faithfulness of God. Today, we have reflected on the loving kindness of God towards those who seek refuge in Him. What do you need to repent of today? Pray that you might put such things behind you and seek anew His mercies every day (Lamentations 3:22–23).

Rest

Read Ruth 3

Our world tells us that being busy today will guarantee peaceful prosperity for your future. What do you define as true rest or peace?

Today's passage starts off with Naomi taking initiative to secure a future for her beloved daughter-in-law Ruth. She is energised by hope after experiencing Boaz's kindness, a stark contrast to her bitter, hopeless attitude earlier in the book. In v1, she seeks "rest" for her (ESV translation, HCSB translation "security"), a state that all of us can relate to. We have already witnessed how marriage was one of the only states in which women could find security and how their widowhood left Naomi and Ruth in a precarious social and financial state.

Ruth follows through with the plan and makes a bold proposition to Boaz. Her humble but bold request in v9 mirrors Boaz's words to her earlier in 2:12. Boaz trusted in God's provision for Ruth and is now challenged to be the one who fulfils that providential blessing.

Boaz's response is full of graciousness and also appears to be a desire fulfilled. He is pleasantly surprised by her interest in him and is impressed by her noble character, suggesting that this was an outcome that he had wished for himself. He acts with integrity, ensuring that Ruth's honour is preserved (v14). As a sign of his promise, he gifts her with a large amount of barley, saying "don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed." This is a direct reversal of Naomi and Ruth's fortunes in 1:21, when they returned "empty" to Bethlehem and is a sign of greater things to come. Boaz's symbolic promise to cover Ruth with the corner of his garment is a reflection of the LORD's love for his people in Ezekiel 16:8, when the LORD takes compassion on his people and enters into a covenant of love and protection.

The passage ends with Boaz springing into action. It is through Boaz's selfless lack of rest – "the man will not rest until the matter is settled today" (v18) – that Naomi and Ruth hope to secure their own secure rest.

Reflect/Pray: How has God provided rest for you? How might you seek God's rest in your life? How might you seek it if it's elusive at the moment?

Love Beyond Law

Read Ruth 4:1-10

Have you ever had to “step in” on someone else’s behalf? Has anyone ever intervened to save you from dire consequences? Was it law or love which motivated you?

Previously we looked at levirate marriage, in which a man would marry his brother’s wife in the event of his brother passing. The firstborn son would be given the late brother’s family name, to ensure his family name would endure. Today, we look at another related tradition, that of the redeemer, that Boaz appeals to to help restore Naomi and Ruth’s family fortunes. The redeemer was a next-of-kin who was to act on behalf of the family in case of certain misfortunes (Leviticus 25:25, Leviticus 25:47-49). The redeemer was to buy out (redeem) the land or family member.

1. How does Boaz shrewdly negotiate the outcome he desires? Why do you think the other redeemer ends up declining to buy the land (v6)?
2. The act of redemption involves an exchange, or a cost, to the redeemer. What is the cost of redemption for Boaz (symbolic, material or otherwise)?
3. The Bible also refers to God as a redeemer. Read Galatians 3:13-14 and Galatians 4:5. What is the goal of this redemption? What is the cost of redemption?

Reflect/Pray: Praise God for His covenant of love, that even when it came at such a personal cost to Jesus, He followed through with it to redeem us from slavery to sin!

Looking Forward to Blessing

Read Ruth 4:11–22

In our daily experiences, we often forget that life and all its activities are under the sovereign provision of God.

The birth of a baby in Bethlehem could easily be passed over as one of tens of thousands of births that occur daily. Births happen all the time as millions of people go about their daily lives. Yet the passage reminds us that the sovereign hand of God is working in our ordinary lives to orchestrate something greater than we can imagine. The LORD gave Ruth conception (v14), and Naomi is blessed with a grandson, her symbolic redeemer who improves her financial, social and emotional state. Perhaps more importantly to Naomi's community, her family line has also been redeemed. What a stark difference this is to her grief stricken hopelessness at the start of our narrative when she claims the LORD's hand is against her!

Thanks to the sovereign kindness of God, the blessing does not stop there. The elders and people gathered at the gate pronounced a blessing on the union of Boaz and Ruth, that the union would build up Boaz's family line and "be famous in Bethlehem" (v11). Tracing the blessing a few generations later, we see Obed becomes the grandfather of King David (v22) who was indeed renowned all throughout Israel. As we found out in our study of Matthew, we can trace Boaz's family line many generations later ultimately to Jesus (1:1–16), the true restorer of life (John 1:4).

The book of Ruth is a beautiful story of love and redemption played out in the lives of two insignificant women in their lives. One might walk away from the story and believe that it is simply a heartwarming little story, perhaps even a moralistic lesson to be kind like Boaz. Yet the book is clearly stamped with the sovereign hand of God. It is the sovereign hand of God and his loving kindness, his faithfulness, that propels the story. It is His provision that redeems Ruth and Naomi, and ultimately Israel and the whole of humanity.

Reflect/Pray: Praise God for orchestrating this beautiful story of redemption in history that ultimately points us to Christ, our redeemer! Pray that we would joyfully submit to His sovereignty in all things in our own "little" lives.

Optional Activity: fill in the table on the next page to track how God kept his promises to Ruth's family over time.

Passage	What is the blessing/ redemption?	Who is blessed?	How does the blessing/ redemption happen? What is the cost of redemption?
Ruth 2:12			
Ruth 4:9			
Ruth 4:10			
Ruth 4:13-15			
Matthew 1:5-16 Galatians 3:13 Galatians 4:4-5			

We're All Fools

Read Psalm 14

Are you saddened by the foolishness of those who refuse to acknowledge that there is a God?

A fool fails to acknowledge God. He says "There is no God." Fools live their life as if God does not exist and has no say over the world or their own actions. They do not seek God out or look to find him despite his glory being clear in creation for all to see. The fool is corrupt because they live as if there is no one who will hold them to account. They prey violently on the vulnerable for their own gain, for they think they have no defender. They exploit the poor and lowly for their own amusement for they think there is no one who cares for them like a father. They have no interest in God.

This fool is no distant character. This fool is you and is me, for as v3 says "there is no one who does good, not even one!" and as Paul quotes later in Romans 3:11 and expands "there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God!" No one – we are all fools, who don't want God to have anything to do with us.

What is the fate of us fools? Well, v5 warns that we should be overwhelmed with dread! God has every right over our lives and when we fail to seek God and acknowledge that right his righteous anger burns against us and is terrifying.

But God brings salvation to the fool, when (v7) salvation does come out of Zion and the Lord restores his people! On our own, we are fools who ignore God, but God restores his people by seeking them out! He came down to us in our likeness, died on a cross to pay the price for our foolishness and gives us a new heart and put a new spirit in us; he will remove from us our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26), a spirit and a heart that means that we can seek God and can find refuge in the Lord.

Pray: Lord sorry for the times past present and future I live like a fool. Thank you for seeking me when I would not and could not seek you. Thank you I can now seek and find refuge in you.

The Two Become One

Read Matthew 19:1-12

As you consider divorce: which side of the spectrum do think you lean towards? Divorce is never an option? Or divorce is generally the lesser of two evils?

In the first century, there was a wide range of rabbinic thought on Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and what grounds men had to file for a divorce. Some thought it could be over something as small as a spoilt dinner, whilst others said adultery was the only reason for divorce.⁹ So they asked: can a man divorce his wife for any and every reason?

Jesus doesn't answer them with a yes or no – he doesn't even start by listing various grounds for divorce, but he goes back to the beginning and casts our vision to the original intent for marriage. God is the one who has joined a man and a woman in marriage. And what God has joined together, "let no one separate" v6. The sanctity of marriage is strongly upheld by Jesus. Does this surprise or bring comfort to you? Why?

The Pharisees now see an opportunity to put Jesus on the spot. Isn't he contradicting the Law? But here is where they have misunderstood God – Jesus reminded them: Moses allowed for this (v8) but it wasn't a command, it was simply permitted. In fact, it is because of the presence of sin (hardness of heart) that divorce happens.

Given the reality of divorce in our world, it is easy to grow numb, to feel that this is a natural occurrence. However, like all broken relationships, divorce should elicit grief in us as it violates the original intent of God and reminds us of our fallen world. Whether we are single or married, there is an opportunity to encourage proactive faithfulness and seek to help one another overcome and work on whatever difficulties we, or our brothers and sisters in Christ, may be facing in marriage. This passage also acknowledges the reality that marriage can fail at times, particularly when sexual immorality is involved.

Reflection: If you are married, how can you grow in your God given marriage? For everyone, how can you encourage your married brothers and sisters to grow in their marriages? Pray for God's wisdom and grace as you wrestle with the above questions remembering James 1:5-8

⁹ Leon Morris' commentary on Matthew p.485

Let the Little Children Come

Read Matthew 19:13–15

What is your attitude towards children in general, why is that the case?

We had learnt in 18:1–6 that children are of lowly status.

1. What did the people do in v13? How do you think these parents/carers feel about the children?
2. What did the disciples do (v13)? What did this show about them, and their view of Jesus, themselves, the parents and the children (despite Jesus earlier teaching)?
3. What is Jesus's answer and action in vv14–15? What does this teach you about him?

Pray: Psalm 145, in particular meditate and pray on v4, vv14–21.

Introduction to Malachi

The Book of Malachi (written approximately 460–420 BC) – the last book of the Old Testament – fittingly looks back over the relationship of God to his people Israel and forward to a coming change.

Malachi means “my messenger” and we see that this is a prophetic word from God. In fact, the book has a unique structure, being a dialogue between God and his people. God levels accusations of faithlessness and disobedience against his people – who respond, not with repentance but with arrogant, self-justifying questioning.

We see that they have strayed from God in their hypocritical and half-hearted worship. We know from our reading of the Old Testament that this was not just the sin of one generation. We have read of the cycle of faithless disobedience, righteous judgment, repentance (sometimes grudging) and generous forgiveness.

We wonder if God’s patience has finally been exhausted.

But at the end of the book, despite all that has gone before, the Lord promises that for “those who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings.”

Faithful believers (like Simeon and Anna) were still holding onto these promises 400 years later when the promised Son arrived.

I Have Loved You

Read Malachi 1:1-5

Are you ever tempted to question God's love for you?

As the book of Malachi starts, the personal name of Israel's God is used – “the LORD” (capitalised to represent Yahweh) – and so we are instantly reminded of the long history of relationship with this God whose character has been revealed throughout his dealing with his people.

We are told that this is “An oracle, The word of the LORD” – so we are on notice that this is not just a human commentary, but – as we have seen throughout the prophetic books – an important message from the Creator and Redeemer to his people.

Despite the fact that this message is delivered to the people known as Judah – the southern kingdom – they are addressed as “Israel” – to denote the whole chosen people of God. And Malachi – whose name actually means messenger – is the man chosen to deliver it as other prophets have done throughout the Scriptures.

The opening message – and the question and answer which follow – are fairly confronting. The Lord initiates the dialogue, proclaiming love for his chosen people – by symbolically referring to the blessing of Jacob (and his descendants) – but they, by their very questioning, show themselves unworthy of this continued blessing. Then God proceeds to (in a sense) prove his love for “Jacob” by proclaiming his certain and devastating judgment of “Esau” (the other nation – not chosen).¹⁰

Taking v1 and v3-5 together, we can see that these opening verses reinforce how shocking the question in v2 really is. Israel, God's chosen people, should have known beyond any doubt – because of the long history of God's proven faithfulness and power, abundant provision, and undeserved mercy towards them – that the Lord loved them.

Reflect: On this side of the Cross, we have even more reason to be certain of God's love for us. What causes you to question God's love? Remind yourself of all that God has done for his people – and then look at this mercy and grace in your own life story.

¹⁰ Jacob & Esau story: Genesis 19:25-27:40

Only the Best Will Do

Read Malachi 1:6-14

Are you ever tempted to give to God what is left over, saving your “best” for use elsewhere?

1. Why was adherence to this sacrificial system important? How would offering blemished animals as sacrifice show contempt for God’s name?

If you are not familiar with the original sacrificial system you may need to refer back to Leviticus 1-7 which is full of detailed instructions for different types of offerings – and specifically Leviticus 22:20-22 which forbids the offering of blemished animals.

2. How does v11 emphasise the shocking behaviour of Israel’s religious leaders towards the Lord Almighty?
3. What did the sacrificial system symbolise and foreshadow? (1 Peter 1:18-19)

Reflect on those times when you have forgotten that you owe worship and honour to the Almighty God, Lord of the nations – and have been half-hearted in your giving or service. Ask for forgiveness and pray for church leaders – and yourself – to always offer your best to him.

Rebuke!

Read Malachi 2:1–9

What do you think is the greatest responsibility of our church leaders?

God is angry – violently angry – with those who have misused their positions as priests. It is hard for us to read of God cursing them and threatening to spread offal (or dung) on their faces – so we need to ask ourselves what is it that could have made our loving, patient God this outraged?

In vv5–7 we read what the relationship between priest and God should have been. It is a wonderful picture of peaceful, intimate fellowship and obedience based on awe and reverence. The priest, then, acting as the Lord's messenger, would be able to teach with truthfulness and integrity, blessing and guiding the people by imparting his knowledge of the Lord.

Verse 8 starts with "But you..." and there follows the terrible indictment. These priests had themselves turned away from God – and, worse, had "by their teaching caused many to stumble." They will be humiliated and despised for this disobedience.

Jesus echoes these words – and God's righteous anger – in his fierce denunciation of the Pharisees (Matthew 23). This is a sobering rebuke for anyone who has taken on the responsibility of being a leader or teacher in the church. They must be careful always, only, to know God's word thoroughly and to teach it truthfully.

Although these words are specifically directed at priests – and we should interpret them as a particularly stern warning to our church leaders and teachers – it is worth considering that in the New Testament we are also all members of "a royal priesthood" – and that our job is to "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into light" (1 Peter 2:9). Malachi's words foreshadow Jesus' equally forceful pronouncement that for someone "who causes these little ones to sin" it would "be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck!"

Pray for our church leaders – and for yourself in all those areas of life where you lead and teach others – that based on our own reverent relationship with the Lord, our own lives will be shining examples of godliness and that we will teach truth and not cause others to stumble.

Breaking Faith

Read Malachi 2:10–16

In our readings in Genesis, we focused, frequently on the faithfulness of God compared to the lack of faith of his people. Here Malachi highlights this lack of alignment between God's character and that of his people.

1. Judah is accused of breaking faith (v11). What have they done and why is it "detestable" in the light of the 2 questions asked at the beginning of v10? (and Exodus 20:1–3)
2. In v14 the people question "why" the Lord does not accept or even pay attention to their offerings. What are they doing and why does this anger God and make their outward show of faith unacceptable to him? (vv14–15)
3. There are various translations of v16. Below are just two of the more recent ones. How do these verses help you to understand God's attitude to divorce?

NIV: The man who hates and divorces his wife,' says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'does violence to the one he should protect,' says the LORD Almighty. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful.

ESV: For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.

Faithfulness to our promises in relationships does not just apply to marriage. Consider the command to "Guard yourself in your spirit and do not break faith" (v16). How would you put this command in your own words and how might it help you when you are tempted to "break faith" with anyone?

Who Can Live with God?

Read Psalm 15

Who can live with God? Who can enter his presence?

That's the questions David asks and answers in this Psalm and the list of ten qualifying characteristics is pretty impressive.

The person who can live with God is blameless, righteous, a truth-teller, kind with their words, a good neighbour, not a gossip, not vile, fears the lord, keeps their word, is generous, and has integrity. The person who can live with God sounds great, sounds like the type of person I would want to live with. The problem is I have not met anyone who is always like that and the fact is I never will.

To enter the Holy God's presence requires perfect sinlessness and there is only one man in history who has lived a perfect sinless life.

Reading these verses I could not help but think of Jesus. These verses paint such a beautiful picture and each line points us to the life of Jesus. He is the only one who has lived a life like this and has the right to enter God's presence and live with him.

Thank God Jesus, for our sakes, gave up what he had every right to, being in God's presence. In Philippians 2:7–8, we are reminded that he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Jesus gave up the right of being in God's presence to come to earth to take on human likeness and to die on a cross being completely separated from the Father, so that we who are sinful could be counted as sinless therefore gaining access to God's presence and a life forever with him that will never be shaken.

Who can live with God? We can – through our Saviour's sacrifice on our behalf!

Pray: Thank Jesus for his sinless life and sacrifice. Thank God that we can enter his presence and live with him forever. Ask the Spirit to make you more like your sinless Saviour

Something Precious

Read Matthew 19:16–22

What is the one precious thing for which you are thankful to God? Could you give it away?

Do you sometimes feel something is missing but you can't put your finger on what it is? This is what the young man is feeling in this passage. He approached Jesus looking to figure out how to enter the kingdom of God. He already knew that keeping the law was a part of the answer which was why he had 'kept' all the laws (v20). Despite feeling convinced that he has kept all the laws, he still felt something was missing (v20).

Knowing this Jesus speaks to the heart of the problem faced by this young man. Jesus starts with "If you would be perfect" (v21) knowing fully well that the man's wealth had become a barrier to him receiving 'eternal life' (v16). Earlier in Matthew we heard Jesus using the Parable of the Sower to highlight that one of the dangers to those wanting to follow him is "the deceitfulness of wealth."

The young man may have liked "giving to the poor" as a part of following the commandments. However, Jesus challenges the young man to sell all his possessions and give to the poor. It is here that it becomes apparent that the young man was unable to exchange the god of wealth for following Jesus.

Jesus brings to light the truth that obedience to God isn't simply just externally conforming to a list of commandments but a transformation of the heart. The ultimate answer to "What good deed must I do to have eternal life" (v16), was to place full dependence on Jesus (v21).

Reflect: Thinking back to the starter questions, if you lost what is most precious to you today – or were asked to give it away – how would you respond? Know that God has granted us all good things and we are not entitled to these things.

Pray for God to transform your heart and find peace in knowing that all things are a "loss compared to the immeasurable gain of knowing Christ" (Philippians 3:8).

Illusions of This World

Read Matthew 19:23–30

What is the next big thing you are planning and working towards?

1. How does the imagery of the camel and the eye of a needle (v24) help us understand it is seemingly impossible for the rich person to enter the kingdom of God?
2. The disciples are shocked by Jesus' pronouncement (v25) as they saw wealth as a sign of God's blessing. How does Jesus' response in v26 and vv28–29 give them comfort?
3. Jesus says "many who are first will be last, and the last first" (v30). What does this mean? Why would many in the world today find Jesus' teaching here controversial?

Reflect: The world often tells us that money can buy convenience and comfort. We are told that if we worked a little harder and saved a little more we would be able to enjoy all these things. But we are warned (1 Timothy 6:9) that "people who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them in ruin and destruction."

Thinking back to the 'next big thing' you have on your mind, how would you change these plans in the light of Matthew 19:29–30? Pray for guidance.

Refiner's Fire

Read Malachi 2:17-3:5

Are you tempted to ignore evil around you?

We start this section with another instance of Israel questioning God – and showing their complete lack of understanding of how serious the situation is. This time the Lord is tired of the people not just tolerating evil, but somehow claiming that those who do evil are actually approved by God! For many of us this will resonate with what sometimes seem the completely topsy turvy values of our society. For others it may appear – as for these people – that God is absent (or doesn't care about injustice).

God promises that he will send a messenger and then he will come – but warns us that the day of his coming will be terrible to those who have thought to tame or belittle him – or who have deliberately twisted his commands or misrepresented his character.

The messenger is like a “refiner's fire” or a “launderer's soap.” These are similes which are unfamiliar to us – but we can get the message that cleansing and purification will not be a painless process! Only after this is done will the offerings be acceptable.

There are many lists in the Bible of particular types of sinners who come under God's judgment. In this one, the one sexual sin is adultery (already dealt with) – but all have to do with breaking faith and injustice, destroying relationships. Both the sorcerer and the perjurer trick and deceive. Poor treatment and exploitation of the vulnerable are also highlighted. Systemic or institutionalised injustice may sometimes be less obvious to us, but these are still sins against the community of faith.

God will judge, but in the following verses he calls to his people to return to him – to live like the covenant people they really are.

Do we long for the God of justice to come and to judge? When we look at ourselves and our attitudes to the evil around us – would we be ready for him?

Robbing God?

Read Malachi 3:6-12

Have you thought through your giving lately? What temptations do you face?

1. What is comforting – and confronting – about the fact that “the Lord does not change?” (v6)
2. The Lord invites Israel to return to him – but what have they done and what must they now do? (v10)
3. The Lord promises abundant blessing if they are obedient. What is the purpose of this blessing? (v12)

There are differences in blessing now in the New Testament, as we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 1:3) and poor but faithful Christians abound (in fact Paul – 2 Corinthians 6:10).

Reflect: In what way might you be “robbing God” like these Israelites? How does blessing follow our giving back to God?

Pray: 2 Corinthians 8:9

Is Serving God Worth It?

Read Malachi 3:13-18

There are those who like to paint the Christian life as joyless and constrained by rules and, occasionally, even to us, all the effort we put in to serve our Lord may seem futile. Is this you at the moment?

Sometimes, in this world – and in fact in every age – it does seem as if “the evildoers prosper and those who challenge God escape.” As we read in Ecclesiastes earlier this year, it appears that “All share a common destiny – the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not.” (Ecclesiastes 9:2)

And of course, if we are only looking at this life – and not beyond – this has a ring of truth.

However, when we think of the riches God lavishes on us – his love, compassion, and faithfulness – it is no wonder that he finds the criticisms or doubts of his people “harsh.”

We also – unlike Malachi – have the evidence of God’s great love for us in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection and the sure hope of eternal life with him. Yet, the doubts raised by God’s people possibly echo our thoughts on those days when we focus on what we are doing for God, rather than what he has done for us. It is extraordinarily gracious of the Lord, then, to listen and respond to those who fear him and honour his name – and to promise that they will be his “treasured possessions” – and even more than that – his sons.

The Lord’s reassuring promise – to those who love and serve him – is that, despite the wickedness of this world and the doubt and disobedience of those who should have worshipped and honoured him, we are safe and secure and belong to him even on that final day.

Remind yourself again of all God’s blessings to you and the promises and reassurances which you can hold onto whenever you begin to feel that serving him is “not worth it.” Be encouraged by v18, God’s final vindication of those who trust in him. Look for an opportunity to encourage someone else in God’s service.

Looking Forward

Read Malachi 4:1-6

We come to the last words of the Old Testament. How do these, somehow, prepare our hearts for Jesus coming some 400 years later?

1. What does the imagery suggest about the fate of the wicked and the fate of those who revere God's name (vv1-3)? How does this make you feel?
2. In v4, we are reminded to "remember the law of my servant Moses." Think back over the doubts and sins addressed in this book. How do they show what happens when God's people don't remember Moses' law?
3. God promises to send the prophet Elijah. How is that promise fulfilled? (Matthew 17:10-13)

Note – it is interesting to note that at the Transfiguration it was Moses and Elijah who talked with Jesus before God declared "This is my Son, whom I love..." (Matthew 17:1-5).

Pray: Praise God that Jesus came and fulfilled God's promises to his people. Praise him for the miracle of the Bible – made up of books written so many years apart, and by different human authors – yet with a constant and consistent focus on God's salvation story and his gift to us in Christ's death and resurrection.

Joy in His Presence

Read Psalm 16

Are you tempted to be discontented with your “lot” in life? What brings you joy?

David is praying with confidence in God, “for in you I take refuge” (v1) “You are my Lord, I have no good thing but you” (v2). And he warns others that looking to idols for these good things will end in disappointment and suffering. He claims only God is his portion (real wealth) and cup (real pleasure).

Today we might not need to be warned against pouring out blood to wooden statues, but more than ever we look to things that are not God for our pleasure, our ultimate good. Wealth, beauty, sex, money, power, sport – David would warn us that seeking ultimate good and pleasure in these things leads to suffering. These things fade, are unreliable and disappointing; seeking ultimate pleasure and good in these things will come up empty and leave us in sorrow.

Instead, David praises God for all that he has been given in this life and the life to come. We know that David’s life was, at times, tumultuous – yet he can still be thankful for the parameters of his life – which have fallen in “pleasant places,” and the security which he has in his “delightful inheritance.”

The LORD is close to him, counselling him and at his right hand (v8). If we seek to know and trust in God that will lead us down a path of life and to pleasures forever more, because true pleasure is found in living this life in relationship with God and in an eternal relationship with God in heaven.

Jesus died and rose for us and sits at God’s right hand advocating to the Father for us so that we will not be abandoned to the dead. Jesus will make sure that we will not see decay. He is the one who will (v11) “fill me with joy in your presence.”

That is what he made us for and where true treasure and joy is found.

Pray: Use this prayer of David as your own prayer. Ask for help to remind yourself – when you are tempted to look elsewhere – of your true, unchanging, source of joy and security.

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