

Daily Bible Reading



MARK
ISAIAH
PSALMS

St Paul's
Anglican

REAL
HOPE
JESUS

FEB-MAR 2026

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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

This booklet

On Monday and Tuesday, we will continue with the sermon series in Mark. From Wednesday through Saturday, we will begin a deep dive into the riches of the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Each Sunday, as always, we will meditate on a Psalm. Throughout the week, we will include a blend of commentary and reflection questions.

MONDAY, 2 FEBRUARY

MARK 8:27–9:1

Get Behind Me, Satan!

Have you ever caught yourself prioritising the wrong things?

1. What does it mean that people thought Jesus was Elijah? (Hint: Read Malachi 4:5–6, the last verses of the Old Testament)
2. Peter had seemed on the right track in verse 29. What does Jesus mean when he tells Peter “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns”(33)?
3. Today, the cross symbolises Jesus and the gospel. What do you think it symbolised for people at the time? How does that impact your understanding of Jesus’ call to follow him?

God’s plan is always good. But we cannot always see it. Let us pray that God will grow our trust and reliance in Him.

TUESDAY, 3 FEBRUARY

MARK 9:2–13

Jesus is Transfigured

Are there any historical figures who you greatly admire?

White represents purity, and Jesus' clothes being supernaturally white represents his supernatural purity. Though (being fully man) he was tempted by sin, he (being fully God) was able to resist.

I often wonder how the disciples recognised Moses. It's not like they would've seen pictures of him. Maybe they just knew instinctively. Maybe it'll be like that when we see Moses in Heaven. The disciples are likely feeling discouraged after learning that Jesus must die. But seeing Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus likely helped reassure them that Jesus' resurrection would happen as promised. It's hard to speculate on what they were talking about, and ultimately we don't need to know. But it may be interesting to ask them when we meet them.

Peter's suggestion to put up three tabernacles was well-intentioned but misguided. It suggests an equality between the three that doesn't exist. Jesus' glory is far greater than Moses' or Elijah's. It's also ironic because the tabernacle is meant to be where God dwells amongst his people. But he is already doing that in the form of Jesus. In a way, a tabernacle would be a downgrade.

Then, the presence of God appears as a cloud just as he did when leading the Israelites through the desert. But now, instead of pointing the way to Canaan, he points his people towards his son. Yet, at the end of it all, they still don't seem to understand – even about the role of John the Baptist/ Elijah (11) – and they continue to assume Jesus is speaking metaphorically when he promises to rise from the dead.

Jesus is not the flashiest or most spectacular person who ever lived, so sometimes we forget that he is the most glorious. Pray that you would truly give him the glory and honour he deserves.

Introduction to Isaiah

Isaiah has been called “arguably the most theologically significant book in the Old Testament” (Webb p13) and thus is very much worth reading for every Christian.

However, it is also a complex and lengthy book – with some difficult and confronting passages – and we have been very conscious of the challenge of dividing it into “bite size” pieces for a short devotion slot in someone’s day and also of giving sufficient, helpful commentary within our word limits!

So here are two pieces of advice:

- Where there are several chapters in one reading – feel free to skim or to just focus on the passages referred to in the notes
- If you have unanswered questions or want to delve further into this very rewarding book you may choose to turn to an actual detailed commentary. We have mainly used two in our preparation:
 1. *The Message of Isaiah* by Barry Webb in the *Bible Speaks Today* series edited by Alec Motyer
 2. *Isaiah* by John N. Oswalt in *The NIV Application Commentary* series

WEDNESDAY, 4 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 1

The Case Against God's People

"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God"
Micah 6:8

The book of Isaiah begins with a cosmic courtroom scene: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken" (2). What is at stake is not merely Judah's future, but the integrity of God's purposes for his people and the world. Isaiah 1 serves as both an introduction and a theological lens for the entire book. What follows is presented as a unified vision from the Lord. This vision exposes sin, announces judgment, and ultimately points toward God's redemptive purposes.

1. Why does God call heaven and earth as witnesses against his people?
2. How does Isaiah 1 challenge the idea that worship alone pleases God?
3. What does God's invitation in Isaiah 1:18–20 reveal about his character?

The problem Isaiah confronts is not limited to one generation. God's people were called to reflect his character to the nations, yet instead they lived in rebellion and complacency. Religious activity continued – prayers, sacrifices, and festivals – but justice was ignored. Worship without obedience had become hollow. Isaiah insists that such religion is offensive to God and will be judged. Yet even here, grace is offered.

Lord, help me to worship you with my whole life, humbly obeying you, acting justly and loving mercy as you do. Amen.

THURSDAY, 5 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 2

The Mountain That Draws the Nations

God's future is global and eternal – but he demands a response from his people now.

Isaiah 2 presents a sweeping vision of God's purposes for the world, moving from hope to warning. The chapter opens with a picture of the Lord's universal reign, as *"the mountain of the LORD's house"* is exalted and the nations stream to Zion to learn God's ways. This vision shows that God's plan has always been global: Israel is called not only to receive blessing, but to be the means through which God reveals his truth to all peoples.

As the nations come under God's instruction, conflict is transformed. Instruments of war are reshaped into tools for cultivation, and warfare gives way to peace (4–5). This famous image teaches that true peace flows from submission to God's righteous rule, not from human power, military strength, or political solutions. Peace begins with hearts reshaped by God's word.

Verse 5 brings the future vision into the present with a clear call: *"O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD."* God's promised future demands a present response of obedience and trust.

The remainder of the chapter turns to warning. Judah is exposed for pride, idolatry, and misplaced confidence in wealth, power, and human achievement. Isaiah announces the coming "Day of the LORD," when all human arrogance will be humbled and the Lord alone will be exalted. The chapter closes by reminding readers of human frailty and calling them to abandon false securities.

Isaiah 2 teaches that God alone is supreme, peace comes through obedience to his ways, and God's people must live now in light of his coming kingdom.

Lord help me to have confidence in your purposes. Reshape my heart by your word and help me to live in the light of your coming kingdom. Amen.

FRIDAY, 6 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 3–4

When False Supports Fall

"He is no fool who gives away what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose." Jim Elliot

In this section the prophet continues to explain the meaning of "the day of the LORD." This day holds two realities together: it is a day of judgement, and beyond that, a day of glory. Isaiah 3 focuses on judgement as God removes the false securities Judah relied upon. Isaiah 4, however, makes clear that judgement is not God's final purpose. God's ultimate aim is salvation and restoration, not destruction. This aligns with the wider witness of Scripture: God confronts sin seriously, yet always with the goal of redeeming his people. Judgement clears the ground for renewal.

1. What false sources of security does God remove in Isaiah 3 (1–3, 4–7, 18–22) and how do similar temptations appear today?
2. How do the images in Isaiah 4 help us understand God's salvation now and in the future?
3. How does holding together judgement and hope shape Christian repentance and faithful living today?

Lord, you are holy and your judgement is righteous. Help me not to look for security or salvation in anything other than you, your love for me, and the forgiveness you offer in Christ. Amen.

SATURDAY, 7 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 5

The Cost of Arrogance!

'As long as you are proud you cannot know God'. C.S. Lewis

Isaiah 5 shows that when God's people live as if his purposes do not matter, justice collapses, pride grows, and judgment follows – yet the chapter also prepares us to long for and look forward to the restoration God will later provide.

1. What is the tension between what God intended and what actually happened (1–4, 7)?
2. Why is social justice treated as a core covenant obligation rather than an optional extra (7–10, 20–23)?
3. Why does Isaiah mourn the peoples' arrogant disobedience, and what is its outcome (18–19, 24–25)?

Lord, help me never to forget that sin, injustice and oppression make you angry. Thank you for Jesus who by his death freed us from enslavement to evil. Help us to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” Matthew 6:33.

SUNDAY, 8 FEBRUARY

PSALM 131

A Quietened Soul

"So be satisfied and quiet, be contented with your contentment. I lack certain things that others have, but blessed be God, I have a contented heart which others have not." Jeremiah Burroughs

Whilst the context of this Psalm is debated, the conviction with which David speaks is undebatable. When we sing to God we are worshipping him, but we are also reminding ourselves of who we are.

In David's song, he starts by making a statement of reflection on the status of his heart. A prideful heart can lead to an attitude of superiority and disdain towards others. Pride can lead us to fulfil selfish ambitions and can draw our eye away from godly ambitions.

Babies naturally depend on their mothers for milk. But once the babe is weaned from milk, what happens to the relationship with their mother? David draws the comparison of his heart being like a babe who chooses to rest contentedly beside his mother.

What does chosen dependence on someone lead to? Trust, peace, security? We learn from this Psalm that dependence leads to a sure and steady hope. My favourite verse in this short and punchy Psalm is verse 2. "Composed and quietened", implies many things but let's focus on two. The first implication is that David's dependence did not happen overnight, it has come with time and with learning. Secondly it implies that the soul can be changed, matured and transformed. The word "but" in verse two tells us that pride and selfishness are contrasted with peace and quiet.

When we worship ourselves, our achievements, our desires, what need do we have to spend with our God? Contentment starts within, acknowledging our need for God and choosing him every day.

Spend some time praying a prayer of thanks that God satisfies all our needs. Pray that he would use his Spirit to change your heart, to put him above the things of this world.

MONDAY, 9 FEBRUARY

MARK 9:14–32

Help My Unbelief

Have you ever prayed for a miracle? For something that should've been impossible?

At this time, Jewish exorcists believed that they needed to know an impure spirit's name in order to cast it out. So, a mute spirit would present quite a challenge. Often, the symptoms of possession closely resemble the symptoms of epilepsy or mental illness. But this does not mean that they are the same thing. In fact, it may be part of a spirit's evil cunning to disguise their possessions in this way.

Jesus' rebuke in verse 19 seems a bit harsh. We're not sure whether he's talking to the scribes, the disciples, or the father. But all three display a lack of faith. When Jesus says in verse 29 that this kind of spirit can only come out through prayer and fasting, he's implying that the disciples failed because they were not relying sufficiently on God's power.

The father's response in verse 24 is a good one, and demonstrates how, through prayer and petition to God, our faith can grow. "Help me overcome my unbelief" is a prayer we can all pray, asking God to strengthen our trust in him.

Jesus disciples seem ashamed of their failure to help the boy and it becomes clear that they still do not understand what Jesus has said about dying and rising from the dead. It's unfortunate that they were afraid to ask, since Jesus was clearly trying to prepare them for the difficult road ahead.

However great your faith in God is, it's still less than he merits. Let us daily ask him to grow our faith.

TUESDAY, 10 FEBRUARY

MARK 9:33–50

Anyone Who Wants to be First...

Jesus asks us to do a lot of hard things. Which do you find the hardest?

1. What would it look like for you personally to ‘welcome little children’ and ‘be a servant of all’?
2. Why couldn’t someone who truly did a miracle in Jesus’ name then say something bad about him? (39)
3. Do you think Jesus really wants us to cut parts of ourselves off (43–47)? Why does he use this illustration?

Living the way Jesus tells us to is really hard. In fact, it’s impossible without the Holy Spirit’s help. So, let us pray for his help.

WEDNESDAY, 11 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 6

Undone and Sent!

Encounter with God precedes mission from God.

1. How does encountering the holiness of God change Isaiah's understanding of himself – and why is this essential for true spiritual renewal (6:1– 5)?
2. What does Isaiah's cleansing teach us about grace, and why is it important that God – not Isaiah – takes the initiative (6:6–7)?
3. How do judgment and hope come together in God's promise of a faithful remnant (6:9–13)?

Lord help me to be so overwhelmed with your holiness and so grateful for your grace, that I am willing to go wherever you send me, with the good news of salvation in Jesus. Amen.

THURSDAY, 12 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 7

At the Crossroads

"Hope breaks in not when fear ends, but when God speaks". Russell Moore
(Director of the Public Theology Project at *Christianity Today*)

This chapter begins with Ahaz, the king of Judah, torn between two fears. He is facing the invasion of Syria and Israel, but he is panic-stricken by the possibility that these two forces will coerce him to join them to fight Assyria. Isaiah offers him a solution. Ignore the others and trust only in the Lord (7–9).

1. How did Isaiah's words to Ahaz warn him that he was about to compromise himself and his country?

While the ultimate fulfilment of verse 14 is in Christ, the interpretation in the immediate context is that by the time the child grows up the land will be devastated by Assyria, but the two countries he is anxious about will be deserted. The two themes running in parallel in this chapter is that the Lord is sovereign and the absolute necessity of relying only upon the Lord.

2. How is the sovereignty of the Lord expressed in this passage?
3. What does Isaiah say will happen to the wealth, riches and everything valued by the people of Judah. Why will this happen?

"Walk by faith, not by sight" 2 Cor 5:7, means living life trusting in God's unseen promises and guidance, rather than relying solely on physical sight, logic, or immediate circumstances. Ask for God's help to trust and obey.

FRIDAY, 13 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 8–9:7

When Fear Rules

"So do not fear, for I am with you" Isaiah 41:10

This section continues the events of chapter 7 and further unfolds the promise of *Immanuel* first given to Ahaz (7:14).

1. How does the repeated reference to *Immanuel* (8:8,10) shape our understanding of both judgment and hope in this passage?

This section contains a series of prophetic messages delivered by the Lord to Judah, via Isaiah, during a time of fear and political instability. Isaiah is warned not to share in the fears of the people but to fear the Lord alone (8:11–13).

2. What do fear and crisis reveal about the difference between trusting the Lord and rejecting his word? The latter will always be a temptation.

A shift occurs at 9:1. Isaiah looks beyond immediate devastation to a future marked by hope, light, and joy. This promised restoration echoes earlier visions of God's redemptive purposes (2:2–4; 4:2–6) and reaches its climax in the birth of a righteous ruler whose reign will establish justice and lasting peace (9:6–7).

3. How does Isaiah's shift from darkness to light (9:1) help us live faithfully while waiting for God's promised deliverance?

Thank you Lord that your promise of Immanuel, God with us, is fulfilled in Jesus. Thank you that he is the light in our darkness and the Prince of Peace. Amen.

SATURDAY, 14 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 9:8–10:4

Time still to listen

Repeated warnings are themselves an act of mercy.

The book now returns to the present realities, the sad condition of the people of the northern kingdom: arrogance, bad leadership, civil strife and oppression. Although the demise of the northern kingdom took place almost 140 years before that of the south, Judah (southern kingdom) was already infected with the same evils. There is a progression from moral decay (9:9,17) through social disintegration (9:20–10:2) to national collapse (10:3,4).

1. What is the Lord seeking to do by this destruction (13–14)?
2. God has relented before. What is the chilling effect of the recurring refrain in 9:12, 17, 21, and 10:4 *‘for all his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still’*?
3. Isaiah shows how attitudes and actions over time can shape the health of a society. What features of this passage help us reflect on our own context today, and how might God be calling us, his people, to respond with humility, care for others, and renewed trust in him?

Lord, help me to listen to the warnings you give in Isaiah. Help me be alert to my own pride and also alert to injustice and oppression of the vulnerable. Amen.

SUNDAY, 15 FEBRUARY

PSALM 132

The Anointed One

Messiah: anointed one, set apart and chosen leader.

1. It is well known that King David was the greatest King of Israel. Yet even in his greatness, he had many troubles and imperfections. Verses 1–5 highlight the sacrifices that David made in order to find a dwelling place for God. Despite David's suffering and past afflictions, he chooses to prioritise God before his own personal comfort. Why do you think the singer wants God to be reminded of David's afflictions? What comfort does this bring us?
2. Through Jesus Christ, we know that the "oath he will not revoke" (verse 11), has been fulfilled. What is the significance of verse 10, particularly the word servant?
3. If this is your first time reading the Bible, the parallels between Jesus and David may not be particularly clear in this Psalm. The focus, at first glance, in this Psalm appears to be on finding a place for God to dwell and to reign. But with a wider view, we can see that it is not about a place. It's about a person. God fulfilled his promise to David and to Israel. What is the significant of verse 18?

Reflect on the marvel that is the reality that God fulfills his promises to us in Jesus.

MONDAY, 16 FEBRUARY

MARK 10:1–12

Living in a Fallen World

“No Fault Divorce” was made legal in Australia in 1975, and with it came easy divorce. How does that compare with what Jesus says in this passage?

The Pharisees come to Jesus with a fake question. If they were hoping to trip Jesus into relaxing the Mosaic Law about divorce, they were disappointed. Instead, Jesus goes on to explain that while the Law allowed a man to divorce his wife (Deuteronomy 24:1), this provision was only made because of the hardness of people’s hearts. God’s ideal is of a lifelong union between a man and a woman – a divine union not to be separated.

But Jesus also acknowledges that divorce was a necessary response to human sin. In our sinful, broken world, God’s ideals aren’t always possible just as we recognize that we regularly miss the mark in other areas. Our society recognizes that a person (usually the woman) should not stay in a marriage where there is domestic violence, or where a marriage partner just leaves with no intention of returning. And most Christians support this.

The really difficult part is what Jesus later says to his disciples in verses 11 and 12. This needs to be compared with Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:32. Maybe Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase is helpful when he writes “...a woman who divorces her husband so she can marry someone else commits adultery”. Other commentators maintain that remarriage after “wilful divorce” constitutes adultery.

Whatever the situation a Christian is in, they must seek the best solution in our fallen world. *But that doesn’t mean that we should downgrade God’s lofty ideal as our society generally does.*

“Forgive us, Lord, for our eagerness to find the easy way out, and our fear of facing up to your full demand. Restore to us and to our society the vision of marriage as you meant it to be.” Dick France

TUESDAY, 17 FEBRUARY

MARK 10:13–31

A New Set of Values

How much is the ticket to Heaven? The answer, of course, is “nothing”. But are there certain heart attitudes that are necessary?

1. In encouraging and blessing the children who were brought to him, how did Jesus react to the disciples’ rebuke and why? What heart attitude was Jesus looking for in entering the kingdom of God?
2. It’s possible that the rich young man was sincere in his claim to have kept the commandments. Do you sense he understood that rule-keeping wasn’t the way into God’s kingdom? What idol had he put before love for God?
3. When Jesus compares a camel going through the eye of a needle with how impossible it is for a rich person to enter God’s kingdom, is he saying therefore that wealth is sinful in itself? Or spiritually dangerous? Or what? What other things in our lives could hinder us from entering God’s kingdom?
4. What promise does Jesus give his disciples for those who follow him? What do you think he means by “many who are first will be last, and the last first”?

Father, we thank you that with you all things are possible. So we ask you to show us what in our lives hinders us giving you first place. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, 18 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 10:5–34

God's Judgment on Assyria

Are you fearful of the impact of some powerful and proud nation?

We see in this passage – full of imagery – that although God is using Assyria as a weapon to punish his faithless and disobedient people (5–6), Assyria itself will be judged for its pride and ruthlessness.

The Assyrian king intends utter destruction (7) and he foolishly equates Jerusalem's God with the idols of other nations (11). He attributes his success to "the strength of my hand"(13). The ease with which he has conquered nations is portrayed by his image of stealing eggs from an abandoned nest (14). But, as we saw earlier, he is actually being used by God ("my rod", "the club of my wrath") and so his pride is treated with scorn – he is like a weapon or tool (axe, saw, rod, club) which boasts itself to be more powerful than the hand which wields it (15–16). His utter defeat will be humiliating, at the hands of the "Light of Israel" – no mere flicker, but a powerful, consuming fire (17).

The Lord reassures his people, that there will be a faithful (but sadly small) remnant who will return. He cries out to his own chosen people not to be afraid (24). Fittingly as they are freed from the yoke of the oppressors (27), the Lord will subdue their enemy – sending them fleeing from destruction. The final image – of a huge tree being toppled– returns to the earlier imagery of tools, but this time God is wielding the axe against Assyria in all its pride.

Father God, thank you that we don't need to be afraid of powerful, proud rulers and nations. Help us to live always, in obedience to you, not resting in our own strength or wisdom, but in yours. Amen.

THURSDAY, 19 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 11

The Branch of Jesse

A powerful tree was lopped down at the end of Chapter 10. Now we see what looks like a mere shoot coming from a stump – but oh! how this will change the world!

1. How do verses 1–5 foretell Christ? (You may find Isaiah 61:1–3, Luke 4:18–19 and Ephesians 6:14 helpful.)
 2. How do verses 6–9 show a vision of the impact of Christ's coming on all creation?
 3. Verses 10 –16 show the scattered remnant of the Lord's people being gathered in (11–12) and Israel being no longer divided (13). How does verse 10 open up this glorious vision to all the nations – and therefore to us?
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Lord, thank you that Jesus fulfilled this ancient vision. Help us to trust in him as our Saviour, and, like him, to fear you and put on righteousness and faithfulness. Help us to hold on to the hope of the new heaven and new earth, now, through Jesus, open to people from all nations who trust in him. Amen.

FRIDAY, 20 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 12

Songs of Praise

In praising your Lord, what special words do you use? He is your _____?

Before we embark on what will be many chapters of prophesied destruction as nation after nation is judged for their hostility to the Lord, we take a moment to remind ourselves that “in that day” (that is when Christ returns) all those who have trusted in God as their salvation will be full of joyful praise. For Isaiah and his readers/ listeners this reassurance in the midst of crises must have been even more of a comfort than it is for us... who have seen Christ’s death and resurrection.

This is a very personal song of praise – the Lord is “my strength”, “my Salvation”, “my song”. His anger has turned away from me – he has comforted me and I will trust and not be afraid (1–2). We have an allusion to Jesus as the water of life (3) – we can drink from it joyfully and “never thirst”, because we know we are saved and safe.

Our response and responsibility is also personal. We are to make him known among the nations – proclaiming what he has done to all the world. It reminds us that though we have a tendency to hold our own salvation close to our heart, like a private treasure, we need to share the good news of Christ and the salvation he offers to all – both neighbours in our street and the vast numbers of people around the world who have not yet heard his word.

Lord, I praise you for your wonderful salvation – that you love and forgive me through Christ. Help me to share this good news in every way possible – and to support others who work to make your name known throughout the world. Amen.

SATURDAY, 21 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 13–14:27

Prophecy Against Babylon (Part 1)

"Pride comes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall." Proverbs 16:18

N.B The judgements in the following chapters are both historical and geographical – but they are also, on a larger scale, examples of the judgement on all who, in pride, usurp God's sovereign rule over the world... and also of his mercy to those who turn to him.

Over the next few days, when we cover 2–3 chapters per reading, you may choose to skim or just focus on the passages referred to in the questions/ notes.

1. What aspects of this "cosmic, larger than life"(Webb p81) – and pretty confronting – oracle hint that this is not just a judgement on one proud nation, but anticipates the eventual fall of all nations that oppose God (13:1–22, focus on 9–13)?
2. What hope is held out to God's chosen people – both Jacob/Israel and the nations who will join them (14: 1–2)?
3. What is the king of Babylon's great sin (13)? What humiliation indicates that he will be even less than other past kings (14:3–23, focus on 12–18)?

Lord, I may not be an ancient mighty king, but I know I am often proud, putting myself on the throne of my life, instead of honouring and obeying you as my Lord. Please, in your great mercy, forgive me and help me to change. Amen.

SUNDAY, 22 FEBRUARY

PSALM 133–134

Unity and Praise

"Magnify the Lord with me; let us exalt His name together". Psalm 34:3

1. Oil was used in many ways in the Middle East. It was a symbol of honour and blessing amongst priests, a hospitable sign of welcoming for guests, and a sign of joy and healing. Aaron was the first High priest of Israel, his beard would be a frequent reservoir of oil. The word down is written twice in this Psalm. What link is David trying to make here between the goodness of Christians living in unity and the blessing that can be reaped?
2. Because we are united by Christ and receive many blessings through our shared salvation, we are called to praise him! Whilst verse 1b may be a specific shout out to the Levitical singers mentioned in 1 Chronicles 9, it is more importantly a call to praise God whenever and wherever we are. Why does the singer specifically mention God as Maker of heaven and earth?

We as Christians, can quickly fall into the trap of minimising the joy we find in relationships with each other. These two Psalms share God's attitude toward the blessing that is 'togetherness', the blessings that flow because of unity and our call to respond to him in praise.

Pray for someone at church or another Christian that you struggle to connect with. Pray that God would work powerfully in both of your lives to work towards peace and unity.

MONDAY, 23 FEBRUARY

MARK 10:32–45

The Path of Humility and Self Sacrifice

"Go labour on; spend and be spent, Your joy to do the Father's will. It is the way the Master went; Should not the servant tread it still?" Horatius Bonar, 1808–89

While Mark previously recorded Jesus' activities in the Galilee area, he now moves into the area of Judea, heading to Jerusalem (1). And for the third time, Jesus tells them of his forthcoming death and resurrection, this time with more detail. Again, they don't understand.

The request by James and John for recognition and status adds a jarring note to what Jesus has just said about his suffering. They seem absorbed with power and prestige. Maybe they thought that Jesus was about to establish his kingdom, despite what he'd said, and they wanted to get in first – something that the other 10 disciples were later indignant about!

Before we roundly criticise them, let us be aware that we too can be guilty of selfish ambition.

Jesus gently deals with this request reminding them that glory comes through humble service. In amazing humility, he points out that his loving submission to the Father means he isn't the one to dispense such honours of sitting at the right and left hand of the Lord. What a contrast with the "Sons of Thunder" as James and John were called!

Instead, Jesus points out to ALL his disciples that even he *"didn't come to be served, but to serve and give his life a ransom for many"*.

Lord God, teach us your ways.....We confess that we too can be guilty of wanting to be first, of selfish ambition, and of envy. Create in us a true understanding of what it means to serve others in humility and submission to you, as Jesus did. Amen.

TUESDAY, 24 FEBRUARY

MARK 10:46–52

Let the Light Shine

"I am the light of the world" John 8:12

Jesus is beginning the last leg of his journey, leaving Jericho for Jerusalem. He knows that he will be arrested and condemned to death there (32–34) but he stops to give sight to a blind beggar.

His disciples, despite time spent with Jesus, act similarly to the growing crowd of pilgrims joining Jesus on the way to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. They all treat the beggar with rough rejection until Jesus calls for him. They then change to encouraging support. Blind Bartimaeus demonstrates his faith that Jesus can heal him by persisting in calling to him despite the opposition. He further shows his faith by a clear, definite request to Jesus (51). When healed he follows Jesus on the way despite permission to leave (52).

Mark wants his readers (including us) to understand from this event that the ways of Jesus' kingdom are often different to the ways of our culture or our ideas (Isaiah 55:8–9). Did his disciples and the crowd think that Jesus should not be distracted from concentrating on reaching Jerusalem? Hadn't they learned that he always had compassion on those the culture ignored? They had recently been rebuked for trying to stop little children being brought to Jesus (13–14). Were they just rejecting another vulnerable, powerless, unimportant person?

Can we also be so involved with "important" spiritual tasks that we fail to recognise and support a needy person? Or we may currently be in a time of darkness and need. Mark also shows us that Jesus is able and willing to meet our need if we call upon him. He may comfort us by his Spirit or enable us to get support from a trusted Christian friend.

Lord, shine your light into our lives, revealing your ways, banishing despair and strengthening us to grow in our love for you and for others. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, 25 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 14:28–17:14

Prophecies Against Philistia, Moab, Damascus

How do your neighbours see your faith demonstrated?

These chapters make their way through Israel's neighbours – west, east and north – nations either hostile to God (and them) or pursuing prosperity, worshipping both God and idols and tempting Israel into alliances against more powerful nations. All will fall under God's judgement – although we see the tone change when addressing those near neighbours who have had strong ties with Israel.

The Philistines (14:28–32) are warned that God will give his people refuge (32), but that their enemy Assyria – referred to in a string of increasingly nasty images (the rod, snake, viper, venomous serpent) – will return (31) to punish them.

There is a different tone for Moab (15:5–9). Moab had always had closer ties with Israel, but again her pride and idol worship is her downfall and her flourishing, wealthy, agricultural society is shattered, her people fleeing across mountains and rivers, looking for safety. However, Moab's destruction is depicted with great sadness. In verse 15:5 even God weeps for the fugitives. In 16:3–4 there seems to be a plea to give shelter to the refugees and then there is a promise of a just and righteous ruler when destruction ceases (16:5). As we return to the prophecy, Isaiah also weeps over the silencing of the joyful harvest celebrations (16:9).

When we turn to Damascus (17:3–10), there is another change. Ephraim (the northern kingdom) is included here, because of an anti-Assyrian pact that the two allies had tried to lure Israel into. Judgement will fall, as they have forgotten God their Saviour and Rock, and turned to altars in the high places and Asherah poles, but there is hope too that a remnant will be saved.

Lord, we too are surrounded by people who worship other gods. Help us to give you only all the glory and honour and praise – and to live as your beloved children, despite the other voices offering tempting options. Amen.

THURSDAY, 26 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 18–20

Prophecy Against Cush and Egypt

Do you look to God first for help – or only after other avenues are exhausted?

N.B. Chapter 18 is a transitional passage into the prophecy against Egypt. In Hezekiah's time an Ethiopian (from Cush) dynasty was very powerful in Egypt. Egypt itself was a powerful country and Israel was tempted to make alliances with it.

1. In Chapter 19, the destruction of Egypt is complete. What areas of life are covered in these sections: a) 2–4, b) 5–10, c) 11–15?
2. What hope is held out for those in Egypt who turn to the Lord (19:19–20)? The prophecy of verses 23–25 seems a long way from today's Middle East conflicts. Remember with the Lord nothing is impossible! How does verse 25 show that it is all God's doing (and not man's efforts)?
3. What graphic warning to the people is God giving when he asks Isaiah to walk around "stripped and barefoot" (Chapter 20)?

Lord, we are tempted to ally ourselves with people who seem to have power or influence. Help us to single-mindedly serve you and only rely on you in times of trouble. Amen.

FRIDAY, 27 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 21

Prophecy Against Babylon (Part 2), Edom and Arabia

When storms or conflict swirls around you what are your coping strategies? Who are your “go-to” people?

This chapter returns us again to the fate of Babylon and also into Israel’s futile search for powerful allies within a world churning with great nations in conflict, rising and falling, where smaller nations are seemingly befriended at one point and then carelessly or cruelly crushed. One can feel the insecurity of life in that world.

The fate of Babylon is seen first in the ironic title – where the great flourishing city on rich verdant plains is referred to as a Desert. This vision of Babylon’s destruction is so dreadful it is physically painful for Isaiah (3–4). He warns Israel against an alliance with Babylon – even if they look as if they are regaining power. Babylon is in fact defeated twice – first by the Assyrians (689 BC) and then after a brief resurgence, by the Medes and Persians (539 BC).

Edom/Dumah and Arabia/Kedar (a generic term for the desert tribes) have allied themselves with Babylon and so their fate is also sealed. We are given the image of the watchman, futilely watching but unable to stop defeat approaching (11–12) and the warriors of wandering tribes who must hopelessly seek water and food (13–17).

Although this passage deals with nations and national alliances, it reminds us again that when we are in a position of weakness, we need to resist the temptation to scheme our way out of trouble, allying ourselves with those who we see as strong, even if they, themselves, are opposed to God’s rule. God himself is our strength and refuge.

Lord, help me to remember that you alone are the Rock on which I can stand safely, whatever storms surround me. Amen.

SATURDAY, 28 FEBRUARY

ISAIAH 22

Prophecy About Jerusalem

"God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed." Ecclesiastes 3:17

1. How is the title "an oracle concerning the Valley of Vision" ironic when referring to the response of the people of Jerusalem (1–11)?
2. What seems to be unforgivable about this response (11–14)?
3. Shebna and Eliakim were both court officials of King Hezekiah. How are their fates different – and why (15–24)?

Lord, whatever position of authority I may hold, help me to act always in obedience to you. Confident in Jesus as my Saviour, help me to follow his example so that my integrity and steadfastness in times of trouble, gives glory to you. Amen.

SUNDAY, 1 MARCH

PSALM 135

Praise the Lord

"God has two dwellings; one in heaven and the other in a meek and thankful heart." Izaak Walton

"Praise the Lord", is not something we probably say in our everyday life. It is sadly more commonly used as an exaggerated rhetoric when something good has happened. "Praise the Lord Dylan has turned up on time for work!". This Psalm is not literally a command to sing Praise the Lord (although that is a great thing to say), but more a cry of encouragement to praise him for who he is and what he has done.

What does "Praising the Lord" look like? I believe it can look different for everyone. This Psalm is filled with accounts of many good things that he has done, his almighty power, divine will and enduring character as King over all. Part of praising God is remembering all that he has done and acknowledging his worthy place of honour on the throne.

We worship a speaking, a seeing and a hearing God who is alive and active throughout the whole world. He is far greater than anything made by man. Praising the Lord is pleasant, both for us and for God. He is worthy of our praise and we were made to delight in him.

Listen to your favourite Christian song and spend some time being still and praising God for all he is, all he has done and all he promise us.

MONDAY, 2 MARCH

MARK 11:1–25

Welcome... But Not Welcome

Are you ever tempted just to “join the crowd” without too much thought?

Here we have two very different crowds. The pilgrims who had come with Jesus welcomed him. Those in authority in Jerusalem feared him and wanted him dead. Within a few days they would stir up another crowd to call for him to be crucified.

1. Jesus had not previously allowed any public declaration that he was the Messiah (see 8:29–30). How does Zechariah 9:9 show that Jesus was now revealing that he was Israel’s Messiah?
2. The people expected a military Messiah who would free them from Roman domination. How does Jesus demonstrate the nature of his kingdom and kingship?
3. What is the purpose of cursing the fig tree? Do you think it is a pointless display of Jesus power? Or is it an acted demonstration of the fate of Jerusalem (especially the temple) which was not producing fruit for God?

What features of our Lord’s character are especially seen in the incidents of today’s reading?

Lord Jesus, help me to daily welcome you as my King. Strengthen me by your Spirit to humbly serve in your kingdom. Amen.

TUESDAY, 3 MARCH

MARK 11:26–12:12

Authority of the Son

Jesus said: "If you love me, keep my commands" John 14:15

Jesus' action in clearing the temple courts (15–16) was a direct challenge to the chief priests. They controlled the business dealings going on and corruptly made a handsome profit. By describing them as robbers, Jesus clearly claimed an authority over them which they could not tolerate. So next day they assembled a high-level delegation to confront Jesus (27). They angrily demanded to know what authority Jesus had to act as he did and who had given him this authority.

Jesus answers by giving them a question which links his authority to that of John the Baptist (30). So whatever conclusion officialdom comes to about John's authority must apply to his own. They must have known that John was God's prophet (Malachi 4:4) but had refused to believe. Caught between the consequence of either answer they feigned ignorance, which meant Jesus refused to state his authority.

The parable of the tenants is a parable of judgement but also shows Jesus' authority. A Jewish audience would be reminded of Isaiah's song about a vineyard which failed (Isaiah 5:1–7); the owner is the Lord Almighty, the vineyard is Israel and the vines are the people of Judah. In Jesus' parable the many servants sent to collect the owner's share of the harvest are the prophets God sent who were badly treated or killed. The son is Jesus, the last sent one who is thus prophesying his own death. So, the parable shows Jesus had authority to pronounce judgement. His adversaries knew that it was about them and started planning how to arrest Jesus.

Jesus then quoted Psalm 118:22–23 about a rejected stone. What has been rejected by human valuation may be the very thing God has chosen.

Lord, help us to recognise your authority and follow your commands. Help us to welcome your Son into our lives. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, 4 MARCH

ISAIAH 23–24

Judgement on the Whole Earth

Do you find the idea of divine judgement comforting or frightening?

Chapter 23 brings to a close the prophecies against individual nations – and leads into Chapter 24 – destruction of all nations. Tyre represented commercial wealth – and so may have been chosen here to finish off the section started with Babylon – which was known for military might and cultural achievements. Webb (103) says Babylon and Tyre sum up *“all that impressive and alluring in the world”*.

In Chapter 24 we see comprehensive destruction – so vast that it is clear it is not a simple, single moment in the flow of Israel's history – but a prophecy focused on the ultimate “day of the Lord”. This destruction will impact all types and classes of people (2), the whole earth – both the country and the city– (3–13), and even the heavens (18–23)! It is a horrifying picture –“all joy turns to gloom”(11), the earth itself falls, never to rise again, “ so heavy upon it is the guilt of its rebellion “(20), “the moon will be abashed, the sun ashamed” (23).

But even in this vision of total destruction there is a note of hope. Somehow there is a remnant (14–16) who give glory where it is due – to the majestic Lord of all. They are not situated geographically in Israel, but praise the Lord from the west, the east, the islands and the ends of the earth. Webb reminds us (p107) that the final goal of judgement is the glory of God, the visible display of his character.

Lord, I know that in that final day all people will be judged...and on my own I would be condemned. Thank you that Jesus took my penalty, that the price has been paid, and that I can trust in your mercy and forgiveness when I stand before your throne. Amen.

THURSDAY, 5 MARCH

ISAIAH 25

Praise to the Lord

Take a moment to praise God for his faithfulness and for his plan of salvation.

1. Look at the contrasts in verse 2–5. Various structures (city, fortified towns, strongholds) are ruined. But who finds shelter and restful silence?
2. What does the Lord do in verses 6–8 which leads to the praise of the saved?
3. Moab is singled out for humiliation. What seems to be their besetting sin (11)?

Thank you Lord that we can say “*This is our God, we trusted in him and he saved us*”. Help us to truly find joy in our salvation through Christ and in your perfect faithfulness to us who are so undeserving of your love. Amen.

FRIDAY, 6 MARCH

ISAIAH 26

A Song of Praise

Is it possible to praise God when things have gone wrong and especially if it's your own fault? Is God bigger than our sins and errors?

After previous chapters describing the judgements of both Judah and the nations, we read that a song will be sung in Judah because God is going to deliver her from all her oppressors and make Jerusalem a strong and secure city.

Verse 2 speaks of "the righteous nation". Surely the prophet, Isaiah, can't mean Judah? And yet, as throughout the whole of God's word, here is a God who is acting with great grace towards a sinful nation. In fact, in verse 7, God smooths the path of "the righteous" because they are now walking in the way of God's laws and God's "name and renown" is the desire of their hearts.(8)

A by-product of this is "perfect peace"(3) because Judah is once again trusting in God. She has learned that God is like a solid Rock, trustworthy and unfailing. She has also learned that God's common grace to all is not accepted by all. The wicked don't learn righteousness or respect God's majesty. In fact their rulers are now dead and forgotten.

By contrast, God's people have peace, a recognition that God has accomplished salvation for them (12) and has gained glory for himself.

And yet....God's people also recognise that their past distress has been the consequence of their sin. God's discipline has meant that, at times, "they could barely whisper a prayer"(16) But this song of praise ends on a note of hope. In the midst of God's judgement of the earth his salvation for his people means a "waking up... to joy"(19b) and for the Christian, a foreshadowing of resurrection in the Lord!

If there are times in your life when you can "barely whisper a prayer", remember that "*in all things*, God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28)

SATURDAY, 7 MARCH

ISAIAH 27

Looking Forward ...to Home!

Do you have hopes and dreams of what God can do in your life or in other's lives? Are you in the midst of difficulties and trials right now? Hope in God!

1. What phrase is repeated in verses 1–2 and 12–13? What “day” do you think Isaiah is talking about? What is God going to do “in that day” in order to come to Israel’s rescue? (Leviathan was a mythical sea monster able to wield great power and representing evil.)
2. What image of Israel is used in verses 2–4 and 6? (See the same image used in Isaiah 5:1–7.) Who takes the initiative to care for Israel?
3. Although Israel’s enemies will suffer total destruction, Israel, for now, will be purified through “warfare and exile” (8). What will be the purpose of her limited punishment? (9)? In what way does this show God’s grace?
4. What promises does Isaiah say God will fulfil in verse 12 and 13? What will going home mean for the people of Israel?

Lord God, we have sinned and need your forgiveness. Cleanse us, and bring us together in Christ, that we may worship you aright and know your blessing. Amen.

SUNDAY, 8 MARCH

PSALM 136

God's Covenant Faithfulness Never Ends

*"Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done."* Rev. J Oatman

There are many calls in God's Word to remember – remember who God is, remember what he's done, remember who we are. This Psalm is one such psalm, with an opportunity for the congregation to participate and sing the refrain.

The psalm is arranged in groups of three verses except for verses 19 and 20 which provide a break in the rhythm, probably to relieve the monotony of such a regular pattern. In Jewish tradition, this psalm is used in the Passover Service. It is a call to worship God as Creator of this world and King over all rulers and gods. Only a great God could do what he has done in creation.

From verses 10 to 22 the psalm speaks of God as the Rescuer of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Not only that, but by amazing miracles, he led them through the Red Sea and provided for their needs as they wandered through the desert. He also defeated their enemies, Sihon and Og (Numbers 21:21ff and 33ff) and fulfilled his promise of giving them their own land. He is a covenant-keeping God.

The only right response is one of grateful praise as the psalmist continues to outline God's present love to all his creatures in the here and now. God is the *"One who remembered us in our low estate"* – a thought which Mary echoes in her song in Luke 1:48.

God remembers the needs of his people because his love is a covenant-keeping faithful love that "endures forever". This should encourage us to be steadfast in our love for God.

Lord God, we offer you grateful praise because your love endures forever. Keep us ever remembering what you have done for our salvation in Christ and for all things. Amen.

Notes

