

DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARY TO THE BIBLE



“BUT FOR YOU WHO REVERE MY NAME, THE SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS WILL RISE WITH HEALING IN ITS WINGS. AND YOU WILL GO OUT AND LEAP LIKE CALVES RELEASED FROM THE STALL.”
(MALACHI 4:2)

SECTION 8: “I will build my church!”**(Weeks 45 to 48)****Suggested reading plan:**

<i>Chapters</i>	<i>Completed</i>	<i>Chapters</i>	<i>Completed</i>
<u>Week 45: Acts 1-17; James 1-5</u>		<u>Week 47: 1-2 Corinthians</u>	
1. Acts 1-4	<input type="checkbox"/>	1. 1 Corinthians 1-6	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Acts 5-8	<input type="checkbox"/>	2. 1 Corinthians 7-11	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Acts 9-12	<input type="checkbox"/>	3. 1 Corinthians 12-16	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. James 1-5	<input type="checkbox"/>	4. 2 Corinthians 1-7	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Acts 13-17	<input type="checkbox"/>	5. 2 Corinthians 8-13	<input type="checkbox"/>
<u>Week 46: Acts 21-28; Romans</u>		<u>Week 48: Galatians – 2 Th.; Philemon</u>	
1. Acts 18-23	<input type="checkbox"/>	1. Galatians 1-6	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Acts 24-28	<input type="checkbox"/>	2. Ephesians 1-6	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Romans 1-6	<input type="checkbox"/>	3. Philippians 1-4	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Romans 7-11	<input type="checkbox"/>	4. Col. 1-4; Philemon	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Romans 12-16	<input type="checkbox"/>	5. 1 Th. 1 – 2 Th. 3	<input type="checkbox"/>



General Notes:

Jesus only mentioned the word "church" a couple of times in the gospels, and yet it is clear from the outset that he intended his disciples to form a community through which the love and power of the Kingdom of God could be expressed. The early believers called this community the "ek-klesia", or "called out ones" – the community of those called out of the world to be the people of God. This is what "the church" really is.

In this section of our reading, we follow the development of those early believers in Jesus. We have two sources to follow: the historical chronicle known as the Acts of the Apostles, and the various letters written by Paul and James to the early church. We break our study into two main time periods: the early period from the death of Jesus (around 32 AD) to around 45 AD, when the church was almost exclusively a Jewish sect operating in Jerusalem and surrounds, and the later period of expansion into the Gentile world, from around 45 AD to 62 AD. The letter of James probably relates to this former period, being a letter from the head of the Jewish church to his flock, so we will study this along with the first part of Acts. Most of the letters of Paul belong to the latter period, being written by the missionary Apostle from his mission field.

The modern western church is in danger of being marginalised in many communities. For many reasons, it used to be the central focus of communities, but now it is often viewed as an irrelevancy. This is sad for a number of reasons, not least of which is that the early church portrayed in the New Testament was definitely not an irrelevancy! We will read of miracles and arguments, martyrdom and falling into sin – the Bible, as usual, is refreshingly honest about the situations it describes. We will read of a bunch of people like you and me, people who were flawed and who made mistakes – but a bunch of people who nevertheless transformed their generation.

What is your church's impact in your community? Are you changing lives? Do you see yourselves as God's agents for transformation? May God re-ignite in you the vision for what the church can and should be as you read the story of these early Christian communities.



Specific Notes:

CHAPTER 28: - The new life (Acts 1 – 12 and James)

Jesus promised his disciples that they would be witnesses of him *"in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"* (Ac. 1:8). For about the first 15 years, the believers focused their activities in Jerusalem and Judea. This chapter of our study deals with that era of the church's life.

The first Christians were Jews, ministering to a predominantly Jewish audience. They already knew the character of God, and were familiar with his laws. What was the message they had for these people? An angel in Ac. 5:20 exhorted the apostles to *"tell the people the full message of this new life"*, and this is what they did. The gospel, therefore, is not predominantly a *religious* message, but a message of *new life*.

As we read the early chapters of Acts, we see that this was the emphasis of all the Apostles' activities. The Holy Spirit is promised and received; men like Peter who, only a few days before, had been timorous cowards were transformed into fearless preachers. Miracles are performed in full view of unbelieving secular and religious authorities; the church flourishes in the face of persecution and even martyrdom. We see incredible acts of generosity and brotherly love poured out as the early community deals with the practical problems of poverty. It is indeed an exciting time.

How do you see the Christian life? Is it a matter of keeping a set of rules and regulations, or perhaps the ethic of the teachings of Jesus? If so, you are not living in the same world as the earliest believers. Jesus talked about not pouring new wine into old wineskins (see Mk 1:22), and this indeed is the spirit in which the early church operated. The gospel is the "new wine", and the church and its members are the "new wineskins". God is calling out a group of people through whom to express this new life.

It was to such a community that James the brother of Jesus wrote, in what is perhaps one of the earliest of the New Testament writings. James' letter is full of practical wisdom for a community coming to grips with the social dynamic of this new life. Faith and wisdom, prayer and the power of the word of God – these are all themes of this letter. So also is the treatment of the poor. A gospel that transforms individuals also needs to transform the social dynamic of the community in which those individuals live.

Are you living the new life? Does your life demonstrate the power and love of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost? Does your church shine a beacon to the world around you of what it means to be a transformed community? These are all questions we need to ask as we read about the exciting days of the earliest church.

- *QUESTION TO PONDER: What does it really mean to be part of the "called out ones", the people of the Kingdom of God, the vessels of the promised Holy Spirit?*
- *FURTHER READINGS: Ps.133:1-3; Jn 13:1-17,34-35; Eph. 1:15-23; 4:1-16; 1 Pet. 2:4-10*
- *MEDITATION: "There the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore" (Ps 133:3).*

**CHAPTER 29: - Expansion (Acts 13 – 28)**

After the conversion of Cornelius and his household, the early church got the vision of expansion into the Gentile world. The main character in this part of the story is Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee later known by the Greek version of his name, Paul. The next section of our study deals with the background to, and details of, this amazing man's three missionary journeys.

Saul was the last person you would expect to become a missionary to the Gentiles. As a member of a strict religious sect of the Pharisees, he prided himself on being exclusive. The young Saul would have had no dealings whatsoever with Gentiles. He despised those even among his own people who did not keep the law of God. But it was such a man as this that God chose to take the message of the new life – a life lived beyond the restrictions of the law – to the Gentiles.

And yet there were signs that Saul was eminently suited for the job. His knowledge of the Scriptures and the law of God meant that he understood how the Messianic age had transformed the people of God from a Jewish to an international community. His knowledge of both Aramaic and Greek built a bridge between the two worlds. And he possessed an asset that was of immense practical benefit in his journeys: Roman citizenship. He was definitely the man for the times.

Paul's missionary journeys were a time of high adventure. We can only imagine what it must have been like to live such a life, going to foreign places with no support apart from God, having no local Christian community to liaise with, and threatened at every turn with martyrdom, bandits and natural disasters. At times they were discouraged; at times they experienced extraordinary miracles from God. But, being guided by the Holy Spirit, they went, and the world has not been the same since.

What is your mission field? Where has God called you to take the message of this new life? It may just be your workplace, your school, your local community. But it may also be further away than that. Jesus commands us to go into *all the world* – what places are waiting for you to grasp the vision of what God wants to do through you?

- **QUESTION TO PONDER:** *Where is God calling me to go in his service?*
- **FURTHER READINGS:** *Is. 42:1-9; 49:1-7; Mic. 4:1-5; Hab. 2:6-14; 1 Tim. 1:12-17*
- **MEDITATION:** *"The world is my parish ..." (John Wesley).*



CHAPTER 30: - The heart of a missionary (Romans to 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon)

While on his missionary trips, Paul wrote most of the letters that bear his name. Many Christians do not realise it, but these letters are some of the oldest New Testament writings. Paul's letters to the Galatians, Thessalonians, Romans, and Corinthians were undoubtedly written well before any of the four gospels existed in written form. In these letters, we are getting one of the earliest insights into early Christianity.

These letters were written in the heat of passion, often under circumstances of dire emergency. What did Paul write about? In Galatians and Romans he focused on doctrinal issues; in the Corinthian correspondence, he was forced to defend his ministry and deal with some pretty horrendous moral issues. When writing to the Thessalonians, he was writing words of pastoral concern to some very new Christians. In the later letters of Ephesians and Colossians, Paul is dealing with more philosophical matters for the mature church. And in Philemon, we have a unique example of a purely personal letter.

All of Paul's letters follow the same pattern: he firstly brings people a revelation from the word of God, and then he gives them practical wisdom on how to apply it in their own individual circumstances. Surely there is a lesson there for us today. Some Christians are only interested in the "meat" of doctrine, others seek more "practical" teaching. But Paul exemplifies the approach which sees both as important. If God doesn't reveal something out of his word, it is unlikely to transform our lives; but if our teaching does not touch us practically, it is nothing more than *empty* words. Both theory and practice are vitally important for Christian growth.

Through all these letters, we see more than anything the amazing heart of this man Paul. He is sometimes rejoicing, but sometimes angry or despairing; there are moments of deep sarcasm, even boasting. This is a very *human* correspondence. We definitely get the impression that Paul would not have been an easy person to get along with – but geniuses in any field very rarely are.

Even today, Paul is a figure of controversy for many Christians. You either love him or hate him. In these letters, we can hopefully see the driving passion of the man used by God more than any other to shape the Christian church. Paul was a scholar, a missionary and a visionary – but most of all, he was a man who served God with his whole heart. If we follow in his footsteps in nothing more than this, we will also be effective in our sphere of ministry and influence.

- **QUESTION TO PONDER:** *What can I learn from the heart of Paul?*
- **FURTHER READINGS:** *Hab. 2:1-5; Ac. 9:1-18; 19:1-22; 2 Tim. 4:1-8; 2 Pet. 3:14-18*
- **MEDITATION:** *"I press on towards the goal to win the prize ..." (Php. 3:14). What goal? What prize?*



Personal Notes:



Personal Notes:



Personal Notes:



SECTION 9: Persevering to the end

(Weeks 49 to 50)

Suggested reading plan:

<u>Chapters</u>	<u>Completed</u>	<u>Chapters</u>	<u>Completed</u>		
<u>Week 49: 1 Timothy – Titus; Hebrews; 1 Peter</u>		<u>Week 50: 2 Peter; Jude; Revelation</u>			
1.	1 Timothy 1-6	<input type="checkbox"/>	1.	2 Peter 1-3; Jude	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	2 Timothy 1-4; Titus 1-3	<input type="checkbox"/>	2.	Revelation 1-6	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	Hebrews 1-8	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.	Revelation 7-13	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	Hebrews 9-13	<input type="checkbox"/>	4.	Revelation 14-18	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	1 Peter 1-5	<input type="checkbox"/>	5.	Revelation 19-22	<input type="checkbox"/>



Personal Notes: