

Oct 1-7

Week 40

After a brief wrap-up of the Old Testament story in day 1, we will move into the New Testament, in which Jesus established a new covenant (see Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:7-13) between God and people. We will begin the third and final Act of the Bible's grand story, "God's New-Covenant People."

As you read this week, think about ways Jesus fulfilled the longing for God's true King that we saw in the Old Testament. From the reactions of those around him, we will also see that Jesus came as an unexpected Messiah—people of his day did not expect the Messiah to do things the way Jesus did.

It will take us about six weeks to work our way through the four Gospels. Tracking with the parallels in these wonderful books will seem choppy at points as we skip to various passages in Matthew and Luke. We are using Mark as our base, so our trek through the third Gospel will be more orderly. As you read, look for common themes and unique emphases in the different Gospels. Ask God to speak to you through the life of Jesus.

Day 1

Read Nehemiah 11-13; Psalm 126

Act 2 - Scene 9 - Reading 15

The remainder of Nehemiah tells of the resettling of Jerusalem and further reforms initiated by Nehemiah. Now that the wall was rebuilt, people needed to reoccupy the city. The genealogies in this section built a sense of identity for the Israelites as a distinct people and continued to demonstrate that the priests and Levites, who would serve in temple worship, were legitimate. They dedicated the rebuilt wall in Nehemiah 12:27-43, and 12:44-47 tells how the Levites and priests were provided for.

After being in Jerusalem for twelve years, Nehemiah briefly returned to the court of King Artaxerxes in Babylon. Coming back to Jerusalem, he found that the people were not being careful with the instructions provided in the law. Notice the various ways in Nehemiah 13 that the law was being violated. Nehemiah concludes the story of Israel's restoration to the land and the renewal of the covenant.

Psalm 126 celebrates this restoration and echoes the celebratory atmosphere we have seen at times in Ezra and Nehemiah.

Using Psalm 126, pray a prayer of celebration to God, thanking him for times of renewal you have experienced in your life.

God's New Covenant People - Act 3

A story is only as good as its conclusion. To craft a truly satisfying conclusion, an author must resolve the threads of conflict that run through the narrative, and key characters must be vindicated or overthrown in accordance with justice. “They lived happily ever after” is not just for fiction; it is the conclusion we want for all real-life stories. In Act 3 God brings the Bible narrative to the most magnificent ending possible for those who have placed their faith in Christ (Revelation 21:1-4; 22:1-4).

The Settings for Act 3

The setting begins in the land of Israel. The first focus is Galilee and Judea, where Jesus is born, lives, and dies. Jerusalem and the temple are also featured, and these remain prominent even after Jesus's followers begin to spread all across the map to share the good news. In the book of Acts as well as the Letters (epistles) the setting expands to provinces of the Roman Empire and even to Rome itself. In Revelation, the scope goes global, reminding us of the worldwide perspective found in the opening of Genesis. When the story ends, the setting is “the holy city, the new Jerusalem” (Revelation 21:2).

Main Characters of Act 3

God—Ironically, the holy God who is justly offended by human sin is also the One who works to bring us salvation. He sends his Son to redeem fallen humanity. God rules from heaven's throne and brings all evil beings into defeat and judgment through the power of love alone. After the new creation, he lives with his people forever in joyful blessedness.

Jesus—He is God incarnate, fully human and fully God. His life story is recorded in the narrative four times (the Gospels). Similar to Adam and Eve, he is known by words and deeds rather than by any description of his appearance. He preaches the kingdom of God both by his words and by his actions. His death and resurrection are the climax of the entire biblical story. At the end of Act 3, it is foretold that he will return to earth in glory as King of kings in the end times.

Satan—The tempter of old appeared only sporadically in Act 2. In Act 3, he shows up to tempt Jesus and to try to thwart God's purposes. In Revelation, he is again alluded to as the serpent, but he is judged by God and sent to utter ruin, destroyed in the lake of fire.

The Virgin Mary—Her willingness to become Jesus's mother, at great personal cost, is a startling example of humanity at its finest. On the one hand

she receives divine grace: “You have found favor with God” (Luke 1:30). On the other hand, she models willing submission to an angel’s announcement: “May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

The Apostles—The twelve that Jesus chooses as his ambassadors figure large in Act 3. They are ordinary men with ordinary abilities, but become extraordinary as the foundational preachers for the church. Of the Twelve, three contribute to the writing of the New Testament: John, Peter, and Matthew.

Paul—Gloriously converted to Jesus while traveling to Damascus, Saul the persecutor of Christians becomes Paul the Christian apostle. Largely due to his tireless church-planting ministry, the church breaks out of its Jewish-only mentality. Because of his inspired letters, we can better interpret the meaning of Jesus’s death and resurrection.

Plot Summary for Act 3

One way to understand the plot for Act 3 is to see it as answering a dilemma raised by Act 2: How can the prophesied Prince of Peace also be the Suffering Servant? Answer: the promised messianic King comes twice, first in humility; second in glory. Between these comings, he builds his new covenant people, the church, as the Spirit calls and equips servants of the gospel.

The plot for Act 3 can be summarized in three phases:

- ▶ First Coming
- ▶ The Church
- ▶ Second Coming

First Coming—The Gospels describe events from the announcement of Jesus’s birth to his ascension to heaven, a span of perhaps thirty-five years. The action rises from Jesus’s birth and ministry to his suffering and execution. This catastrophe is not the end, however. God reverses death and raises his Son as living Lord. Before his enthronement at God’s right hand, Jesus promises to send his Spirit to empower his followers.

The Church—Before his death, Jesus had promised to build his church. At his Last Supper, he had announced the “new covenant [established] in my blood” (Luke 22:20). In death He bore the intrinsic consequences for human sins. This becomes the basis for spreading the good news and building churches all over the world with the power of the Holy Spirit. The events in the book of Acts and the Letters cover the last two-thirds of the first century AD.

Second Coming—Jesus had predicted his return. Revelation describes the

events leading to the second coming as a growing torrent of evil set forth against Jesus and his people (*rising action*). Then Jesus returns victoriously, defeating Satan and all of God's enemies (*the climax*). There is a final judgment, the world is created anew, and the righteous live forever (*falling action*). Finally, "The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads" (Revelation 22:3-4) (*denouement*, or "satisfying conclusion").

As you read, use the lens of "God's new covenant people" to help interpret God's story as it develops in Act 3.

NOTE: The difference between the *Old Covenant* and the *New Covenant* is quite simple.

The *Old Covenant* is a promise: it says Messiah (Jesus) is coming, and this is how you put your trust in him and receive forgiveness and salvation before he actually comes. The *Old Covenant* is detailed through the tabernacle/sanctuary/temple and its sacrifices, services and feasts.

The *New Covenant* is a reality, an irreversible fact: it says Messiah (Jesus) came, fulfilling all the promises of the "old covenant," and by putting your faith in Jesus and what he has accomplished you receive forgiveness and salvation. The *New Covenant* is detailed through Jesus: his life, death, resurrection, ascension, reign and return.

The *Old Covenant* says, "He is coming." It's a promise.
The *New Covenant* says, "He came!" It's in the bank.

Scene 1

Christ's Coming: God's True King Arrives

The inspired explanation of this scene comes from the apostle Paul: "When the time came to completion, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law" (Galatians 4:4). Everything is ready. The announcement of the King's birth comes first to the virgin Mary and then to Joseph, her betrothed. Jesus's genealogies show that he descends from Adam (as we all do), but through his adoptive father's lineage he is David's royal heir as well. He is fully human; he is also fully God: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Jesus grows up in obscurity; then he begins his ministry by being baptized by John.

Day 2**Read Psalm 106; John 1:1-14****Act 3 - Scene 1 - Reading 1**

Today as we move into Act 3 of the Bible's grand story, we find ourselves at a pivotal moment in history. The first scene of this Act is titled "Christ's Coming: God's True King Arrives." Psalm 106 is a historical psalm that presents an overview of Israel's history from its exodus from Egypt to the dispersion among the nations. The psalm recounts a history of disobedience and consequences. Yet notice the longing for salvation in this psalm.

John 1:4-14 overviews the coming of Christ, who answered the cry for salvation. As you read about Jesus's glory, think about the Shekinah glory we saw in the Old Testament story (for example, when God filled the temple in 2 Chronicles 7:1). The Greek term translated "dwelt" in John 1:14 means "to pitch a tent." Think about the presence of the Lord coming on the tabernacle, the holy tent, in the old-covenant story, and about Jesus, the Lord, becoming flesh and dwelling among us. God's presence among his people, such an important theme in the Old Testament, came to a new realization in Christ.

Tell Jesus what his dwelling in you means to you today.

Day 3

Read Matthew 1; Luke 1:1-2:38

Act 3 - Scene 1 - Reading 2

Matthew's book seems to have been written to communicate the gospel to a Jewish audience. Matthew built on the foundation of the Old Testament, demonstrating that Jesus fulfilled what the Scriptures had promised about the coming of the Messiah. The genealogy of chapter 1 begins with Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. The perfect balance of fourteen generations from Abraham to David to the exile to Christ shows that Jesus came at just the right time in God's providence and began a new era in Jewish history. As you read about Jesus's birth in Matthew, observe the way that Gospel focuses on the fulfillment of Scripture.

The virgin birth emphasizes Jesus's divine nature as the Son of God. Joseph, the focus of the birth account in Matthew and Jesus's adoptive father, would have been considered Jesus's legal father through whom Jesus's right to the throne of David was passed.

Luke begins with the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah. Mary is the focus in the story of Jesus's birth. Luke 1–2 is peppered with angelic proclamations and songs that sound like Old Testament psalms. Notice the focus on salvation in these songs.

Today thank God for the coming of Jesus the Savior.

Day 4

Read Matthew 2; Luke 2:39-52

Act 3 - Scene 1 - Reading 3

As you read Matthew 2, think about the promises of the coming King we saw throughout the Old Testament. Herod was a powerful but paranoid puppet ruler under the governance of the Roman Empire. Of mixed ancestry rather than Jewish, Herod ruled by political force.

The wise men, in following the star, pointed to someone at work who was bigger than the Roman Empire—the God who rules the stars. The star and the Old Testament Scripture came together to witness to Jesus’s birth as Messiah, the true Jewish King.

The reading from Luke focuses on the only recorded event from Jesus’s years as a youth. Notice Jesus’s awareness of his identity as the Son of God.

Meditate on the amazing fact that God, in the person of Jesus, entered the world as a human.

Day 5

Read Matthew 3; Mark 1:1-11; Luke 3; John 1:15-34

Act 3 - Scene 1 - Reading 4

The Gospel writers described John the Baptist's ministry as having been foretold in Malachi 3:1 (Mark 1:2) and in Isaiah 40 (all four Gospels). John's ministry was one of preparation. When a king came to town in the ancient world, one way to prepare for the arrival was to smooth out the road coming into the town, filling in the holes and smoothing down the bumps. Notice in Luke's fuller quotation of Isaiah 40 that the road John prepared was cosmic in size: valleys were filled in and mountains smoothed down. The Lord of the earth was coming to bring salvation. John's preparation involved calling people to repentance so that their hearts would be ready to receive the Lord's message.

Jesus, though he had not sinned (see Hebrews 4:15), was baptized because it was right for him to stand with this movement of God (see Matthew 3:15). The baptism also placed God's approval on Jesus and the ministry on which he was about to embark (see Matthew 3:17).

As you read Luke 3, notice the tangible social concerns to which John pointed in calling people to repentance. What fruit do you need to produce in keeping with your repentance?

Scene 2

Christ's Ministry: God's True King Manifests His Kingdom

How electrifying it would have been to witness the events of this scene! Jesus's ministry includes astonishing displays of God's power: he heals all kinds of diseases; he casts out evil spirits; and he demonstrates power over creation by walking on water and turning water to wine. His teaching catches everyone's attention as well. He talks mainly about the kingdom of God, which can be translated "the reign of God." People flock to him. He calls them to be his disciples and invites them to believe in him. He also says his mission is to go to Jerusalem, and predicts that he will be tortured and crucified there.

Day 6

**Read Matthew 4:1-22; Mark 1:12-20; Luke 4:1-15; 5:1-11; John 1:35-2:12;
Matthew 13:54-58; Mark 6:1-6; Luke 4:16-30**

Act 3 - Scene 2 - Reading 1

In today's readings we move into Act 3, scene 2, which focuses on Jesus's earthly ministry.

The passages have three main focuses:

- ▶ Jesus's temptation,
- ▶ The calling of the first disciples,
- ▶ The beginning of Jesus's ministry in Galilee (locate the province of Galilee on a map at the back of your Bible).

As you read the temptation accounts, notice that the Old Testament accounts of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness form the backdrop. In terms of bread (think manna from heaven), worship, and testing God, the Israelites failed miserably. But Jesus overcame temptation and moved into his ministry in the power of the Spirit.

As you read about the first disciples, watch for patterns beginning to develop. The disciples were surprised at Jesus's abilities and were in a process of discovering Jesus's identity.

Early in his ministry in Galilee, Jesus preached in his hometown. Luke's account especially focuses on Jesus's proclaiming his ministry as Messiah through Isaiah 61:1-2, but next he told listeners his ministry would be very different than they expected.

Do your best to read the Gospels with fresh eyes. What surprises you about Jesus?

Day 7

Reading Summary for Week 40

In this week's readings we have made the transition from Act 2 (which closed with Malachi's rebuke of God's people for specific violations of the covenant) to Act 3. We have read the Gospel accounts of Jesus's incarnation and birth and growth to adulthood. And we have further observed him launch his ministry, first being baptized and tempted, and then calling people to be his disciples as he proclaimed the coming of the reign (kingdom) of God.

Prayer/Meditation

Lord Jesus, you came and fulfilled Malachi's prophecy as "the sun of righteousness [who rose] with healing in its wings" (Malachi 4:2). How can I ever understand what it means that you, the eternal Son of the Father, took on human flesh? I bow before you as the One in whom the hope of all the ages has been realized. Thank you for proclaiming the message of the reign of God and inviting me to be part of that reign by submitting to you as the true King, Israel's Messiah. Amen.
