

Fiona Barnard works with students from around the world. Her experiences have given her insights that will help us over the next two weeks as she helps us to appreciate the Bible as literature.

Jie from China was a student in the UK. She wanted to learn about British culture and believed Christianity to be a huge part of it, but she knew nothing about the Bible. She started at Genesis but, by mid-Exodus, when faced with rules for wilderness wandering, she gave up. Did Christians really believe in burnt offerings and stone tablets?

Jenny from Canterbury was a new Christian. At first she was enthusiastic about daily Bible reading but then she got bogged down in Corinthians. There were references to tongues and prophecies, women covering their heads in worship and people eating food sacrificed to idols. Jenny has concluded that it is totally irrelevant to her.

Jan from California has been a Christian for years. She knows the story of the Bible; however, there are vast parts into which she never ventures. She avoids the 'ranting' prophecies in the Old Testament. She is suspicious of 'fantastic' books like Daniel and Revelation. She jumps over lists of names and numbers. Although she would never admit it, the Bible she actually reads is a whole lot shorter than the 66-book version.

The timeless truths of God and his salvation are rooted in historical particularity. Written over 1500 years in cultures, places and times vastly different from our own, the Bible is a library. It contains history and story, biography and testimony, poetry and proverbs, lists and letters, law and lament. If we want to dig deep and discover the wonders of scripture, we have to consider the original context of the writing, including the type of literature it is and how the words would have been understood by the original hearers or readers. Then we need to ponder how they might apply to us. In these next two weeks, we will be exploring the different types of literature in this amazing, life-transforming word of God. May we recognise afresh that 'every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful... Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us' (2 Timothy 3:16-17, *THE MESSAGE*).

Reading the start

First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don't see. Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss. God spoke: 'Light!' And light appeared. God saw that light was good and separated light from dark.

My mischievous friend spoiled the film *Billy Elliot* for me. At the very beginning, she whispered, 'He meets a sticky end.' As I hadn't read the publicity about this feel-good movie, I got myself ready to watch a tragedy. I experienced the whole story in the wrong frame of mind.

The beginning of any book sets the scene for us. It introduces the characters and themes. It provides the key to unravelling the plot. Genesis 1 opens in a blaze of poetry that starts with God: God initiates, creates, gives life and fills the world with goodness. The earth, along with the vegetables, animals, minerals and humans inhabiting it, are his wonderful idea, his amazing handiwork.

We're reminded at the start that humankind is not the centre of the universe: God is. Yet, in his overwhelming generosity, he shares creation with us, to enjoy and tend. He makes us like him in our ability to think and plan and be in relationship.

This book of beginnings also recounts our rebellion, our urge to be 'like God, knowing good and evil' (3:5, NIV). It shows the consequences of this terrible desire in broken relationships and violence, pride and self-seeking.

So the scene is set. Paradise is lost but the God who created order out of chaos makes and remakes. He calls imperfect individuals, and those who respond become part of his great rescue plan—that all the nations of the earth may be blessed. The plot of the Bible is inaugurated.

Forgive me, Lord, for considering how you can be part of my plans rather than how I am part of yours.

Read about Jesus' work in creation and recreation, in Colossians 1:15–23.

FVB

Reading the law

The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy... Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.”’

‘Marriage is just about rules—putting the lid on the toothpaste and food on the table.’ If that’s your view, you may be a cynic or you may have overlooked the best that marriage can bring. Similarly, if you read the Old Testament laws (found mainly between Exodus and Deuteronomy) and conclude that what God required of his people was strict rule-keeping, you may have missed the heart of the matter.

Covenant lies at the centre of these laws. God rescued the people from slavery. He courted them and demonstrated his love by providing for them in the wilderness. When they agreed to be his people, they promised to honour him as their God. Then came the nitty-gritty. As we read through Leviticus 19, we find laws about parents, idols, sacrifice, harvesting crops, stealing, lying, care of people with disabilities, gossip, grudges, anger, revenge, foreigners and more. God was establishing a society to reflect his kindness, rather than one based on selfish ambition and greed.

‘Will you love her, honour her, comfort and keep her as long as you both shall live?’ When a dewy-eyed couple make their wedding vows, they don’t resent the impossible demands made of them. They risk everything in a world of fickleness and selfishness because, in getting to know each other, loving trust has grown. The public promises provide a protective framework around frail human affection.

Washing up and keeping the household accounts are not everyone’s delight but when we feel that by doing them we demonstrate our care and commitment to our spouse, the drudgery can be transformed. Then we understand God’s plan for his covenant.

Remind me, Lord, when discipleship is hard, of all that you have done for me. Then help me to love you more.

Read John 14:23–27 to remind yourself of everything you have through the new covenant.

FVB

Reading wisdom

What is the best thing to do in the short life that God has given us? I think we should enjoy eating, drinking, and working hard... Life is short and meaningless, and it fades away like a shadow.

Chris couldn't believe in God or angels. He didn't cling to a wishful hope of an afterlife as he lay on his death bed. So his funeral in a crematorium and the champagne reception that followed celebrated his life—as a devoted husband, a successful academic, an enthusiastic sailor, a lover of good wine, a man of friendship with a discerning palate. By all accounts, he had lived well.

That 'goodbye' seemed very final and reflected something of the philosopher's outlook here in Ecclesiastes: enjoy life; get the most out of it, because death comes to good and bad alike and wipes it all away. This fatalism indicates a practical type of atheism, a life lived without any meaningful reference to God. It's the life choice of a huge number of people in the world: 'This is how I am going to live now, grabbing what happiness I can, because I can only be sure of today.'

Why is a book like this included in the Bible? It seems to go against so much of the rest of scripture's teaching. Well, that is precisely why it's there. It reminds us of the futility of chasing after material success and nothing else. It demonstrates the emptiness of living only for pleasure. It holds up a mirror to contemporary philosophy and asks, 'Is this it? Is this enough? Can this really satisfy?' Biblical wisdom reflects on daily realities for believers trying to make sense of it all.

The last words of the book come as a stark wake-up call: 'Respect and obey God! This is what life is all about. God will judge everything we do' (12:13–14).

Help me, Lord, to live by your values and priorities, so that what I do today will count for eternity.

Read Matthew 6:31–33 to see God's care and God's call on your life.

FVB

Reading proverbs

Train children in the way they should go, and when they are old they will not turn from it.

‘Quick—I need help and I need it now!’ In a world where we require wisdom but don’t have time to acquire it, proverbs seem the perfect solution. They are short enough to fit on a cushion or calendar, funny enough to be enjoyable and memorable enough to be effective. No wonder the book of Proverbs has been popular with busy people.

The nuggets of advice are not always comfortable, though. I remember inward childhood groans when my mother mentioned ants and sluggards (6:6) in relation to an untidy bedroom or an incomplete task. As I grew older, dripping tap jokes (19:13) were no longer funny, and the good wife in Proverbs 31, who could do all things effortlessly, became someone I would never like to meet.

It is worth remembering that, although these biblical proverbs do contain truths, they don’t enshrine the whole truth; nor are they theological statements. Showing how to behave well in the world, they give good advice, especially to young people. Exceedingly practical and pragmatic, their poetry and punch are often exaggerated and deliberately one-sided to make the point.

On the surface, today’s verses might look like promises of reward for decency and punishment for foolishness. Yet we know that this is not always—not even often—the way things work in this life. Good parenting does not guarantee perfectly formed adult offspring. Respect for God does not automatically bring long life and wealth. This is why it is important that we balance proverbs with each other and read them in the light of the rest of scripture. Each is indeed a pearl, but a necklace needs many pearls. It must be held together by strong string and a firm clasp, encompassing the wider truth of the Bible and the lived-out experience of God’s people.

Show me, Lord, how I might ‘live well’ today, not to gain celestial Brownie points but for your glory and honour.

FVB

Reading the parables

‘One day someone came to visit the rich man, but the rich man didn’t want to kill any of his own sheep or cattle and serve it to the visitor. So he stole the poor man’s little lamb and served it instead.’

‘Tell me a story!’ Do we ever stop asking for stories? You don’t have to be an avid reader or a soap devotee to be telling and listening to stories. If you share a home with others or rub shoulders with colleagues, if you keep in touch with friends or watch the news, if you write a diary or have dreams in your sleep, you know something about storytelling.

Stories get under your skin. You identify with particular people, feeling their happiness and pain, excitement and frustration. You enter another world. Your defences are down and you are free to see things differently. You are satisfied or outraged or surprised by the story’s conclusion.

David had just taken another man’s wife and had him killed. As far as he was concerned, he was king and could do what he wanted. He had covered his tracks and would have countered anyone who challenged him. It was the story of a pet lamb, adored by a poor man and his children, that shattered his defences. He was furious: how could the rich man, who had so many sheep, steal the one little lamb from that heartbroken family?

‘You are that rich man!’ replied the prophet Nathan, and immediately David recognised his wrongdoing: ‘I have disobeyed the Lord’ (v. 13). Suddenly, he felt the emotional impact of what he had done, and could grasp the huge injustice of his self-serving actions. The pet lamb had reached him in a way that sermons rarely can.

Parables, like advertisements, are meant to elicit a response in the hearer. Have you stolen someone’s pet lamb recently? Have you mistreated something or someone precious in pursuit of your own ends?

Lord Jesus, thank you that you love me enough to show me where I have hurt you. Please open my eyes, and forgive me!

Read Luke 15:1–7 for another sheepy tale.

FVB

Reading poetry

Listen, God! Please, pay attention! Can you make sense of these ramblings, my groans and cries? King-God, I need your help... Every morning I lay out the pieces of my life on your altar and watch for fire to descend.

What do I do with the pain when my friend lets me down or an illness rages through my body? Where can I put the anguish and anger when colleagues whisper against me or when a project that gave me great satisfaction is snatched away? Where do I go when someone who promised to love me betrays me and it seems as though God himself has disappeared?

Poetry has been a medium, over the centuries, through which people have poured out their hearts on paper, in song and in prayer. It allows us to express something of our crushing, larger-than-life emotions—and in ‘getting it out’ we find a measure of relief.

By including laments and songs of thanksgiving, hymns of praise and songs of trust, salvation-history psalms, wisdom psalms and songs of celebration, the Bible expresses the whole rainbow of human emotion and experience. Individuals and whole communities respond to the unfolding of life. God is part of it all and dignifies our cries of agony and ecstasy by including them in his word.

Sometimes we can feel guilty about the strength of our feelings, especially if they are negative ones towards other people. Yet those who wrote and then prayed the psalms, including Psalm 5, incorporated their fury in their prayers. Perhaps they were saved from sin by handing the need for revenge over to God.

I may feel as though my life is in bits, shattered by circumstances or cruelty. There is something very beautiful in the picture of coming to God with the broken pieces of my life, laying them out before him and waiting for him to transform them, somehow, into a sacrifice.

Write your own psalm to God today.

If you are finding it hard to praise God, use the words of Psalm 146.

FVB

Reading the prophets

‘I will write my laws on their hearts and minds. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they have to teach one another to obey me... I will forgive their sins and forget the evil things they have done.’

Toothache, hunger pangs, bathroom scales and mock exams all jog me to take action. They remind me of dental check-ups or lunch; they warn about too much chocolate and not enough study. Important matters can slip away in the busyness of life: the things that shout most loudly for attention are not always true priorities. I need prompts to remind me to care for vital issues of well-being.

The biblical prophets were like that. Mostly active between 760 and 460BC, their role was to remind God’s people of their promises to him, and his promises to them, as they built homes and families, traded in the marketplaces and faced threats from foreign powers. Out of gratitude, they had agreed to follow his ways. They were to embody his goodness and care.

They had short memories, though. They were preoccupied and anxious. They were attracted to more exciting religions. God’s way was too hard and they were unfaithful—so God sent prophets. We have 16 collections of their words as Old Testament books, expressing sorrow and love, anger and pleading.

Everything we read in the prophets is tied to specific historical situations, which can make it hard to interpret for ourselves. Nevertheless, here in Jeremiah, we can rejoice with the Israelites not only that our sins can be forgiven but also that, by God’s Spirit, we know how to please the Lord. His laws are not ‘out there’ but in our hearts. By his grace, we want to please him, and when we don’t, forgiveness is available through Christ.

What reminders do you need today about God’s priorities for your life?

For one of God’s priorities, read Micah 6:8.

FVB

Reading narrative

‘Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape... And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this.’

Mid-life crisis, for me, meant blowing out 40 candles and wondering what on earth I had done with my life. Weighing all my idealistic longings and determination to change the world for Jesus against the reality of a very unspectacular life left me gloomy, to say the least. How did my boring story fit in with God’s magnificent story?

Interestingly, the Bible spends a lot of time dealing with just such a question. Over 40 per cent of the Old Testament is story—told on three levels. It describes the unfolding of God’s universal plan, the account of Israel’s history, and the telling of many individual narratives. Take, for example, the beautifully crafted story of Esther. This young, submissive Jewish girl is chosen to be queen, wife of a foreign despot. We hold our breath as she is burdened with the responsibility of pleading for the lives of her ethnic-minority people, who are to be exterminated by the egocentric Haman. We marvel as she blossoms into a woman of authority and nerve.

The beauty treatment, the whispered messages between her cousin and servants, and the banquets prepared for her husband and Haman are the details of Esther’s life, which have huge consequences for the Jews—indeed, for their very survival. These incidents are also part of God’s sovereign plan as he preserves a people from whom Jesus, the Saviour of the world, will be descended.

Poignantly, the name of God never appears in the book, and yet his presence is everywhere. We may feel very insignificant and unaware of God’s activity but we can be encouraged that, as God’s children, we are part of his story, which one day we will be told in full.

Lord, help me not to be so caught up in my own story that I forget the greater narrative you are weaving in the world.

Read Luke 1:26–38 for another story of a woman whose costly ‘yes’ changed history.

FVB

Reading genealogies

Jesus Christ came from the family of King David and also from the family of Abraham. And this is a list of his ancestors... Judah and his brothers (Judah's sons were Perez and Zerah, and their mother was Tamar)... Boaz (his mother was Rahab), Obed (his mother was Ruth)... Solomon (his mother had been Uriah's wife)... Joseph, the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is called the Messiah.

Lists can be very boring, unless you spot a familiar name—a prize winner in a competition, an actor in a play or a guest at a meal. Most people are glad that film credits roll quickly, but the dotting mothers of the sound recordist or the stunt driver read every word to glimpse their loved one's name. It all depends on perspective.

Our society is becoming fascinated with genealogies as research becomes easier. We are beginning to realise what many cultures throughout the world have understood for millennia—that our identity is caught up in our history. Somehow we know who we are better when we know where we have come from.

The genealogies in the Bible carry treasures that impatience can cause us to miss. Matthew 1 is not just an assortment of names. It grounds Jesus in history. It places him as a true Jew—a descendant of Abraham, the hero and father of the Jewish faith. Jesus is also the true Messiah, the promised one in the line of King David. His coming is the climax of Jewish longing.

Shockingly, there is no attempt to hide skeletons in cupboards. David's adultery, the murder of Uriah, the deceit of Judah and Tamar and the wickedness of Manasseh are almost underlined. Jesus identifies with sinful humanity. Unusually for a patriarchal society, four women are included, all probably non-Jews. Faithful Ruth from Moab and pragmatic Rahab from Jericho are no longer outsiders. They are integral to the family. In Christ, there is a place for all.

Thank you, Lord, that I'm not just an insignificant name on a list. I'm part of your family of sinners and saints. Hallelujah!

FVB

Reading the Gospels

Mary was engaged to Joseph from King David's family... When Jesus was born... Herod was king. During this time some wise men from the east came to Jerusalem and said, 'Where is the child born to be king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.'

'Why have you come from Japan to do a PhD in the UK?' I asked Poro. We were enjoying soup and sushi soon after he'd arrived. 'During the Second World War,' he replied, 'the Japanese were required to show their allegiance by worshipping the emperor. Some Christians wavered and complied; others resisted and died. I have come to study what Matthew says about Jesus as king, so that when we are in that situation again, I will have prepared my congregation.'

Poro referred to this passage, where God inaugurates his kingdom on earth. Jesus, descended from King David, is king of the Jews. He is also worshipped by wise foreign 'pagans'. Fearing political threat, King Herod tries to destroy Jesus but God saves the Saviour through Joseph.

Why do four Gospels tell more or less the same story of Jesus' life? These 'memoirs of the apostles' recall what Jesus said and did—but the accounts were selected and shaped with particular communities in mind. 'Remember that God is sovereign and only Jesus is Lord—even when it doesn't feel like it!' That's Matthew's message to persecuted believers, so he includes Jesus' promise: 'When someone arrests you, don't worry... you will be given the words to say... They can kill you, but they cannot harm your soul' (10:19, 28).

Many early Christians faced martyrdom for denying that Caesar was Lord. How comforting for the original readers to know that Jesus understood! What a challenge for persecuted Christians today to confess that only Jesus is Lord!

I may not face severe persecution, but how do I acknowledge Jesus as king in my daily life?

You could use 2 Corinthians 1:2–11 to pray for Christians facing persecution.

FVB

Reading history

Jesus... said, 'Everything is done!' He bowed his head and died... We know this is true, because it was told by someone who saw it happen... Mary Magdalene then went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord.

This Good Friday, Jing from China came to an all-age service. She had never been to church before and was trying to make sense of what she was hearing. Over coffee and hot cross buns, I struggled to explain what seems like the 'unfairness' of Jesus dying in our place, taking the punishment for our sins. After I'd spoken as clearly as I could for a few minutes, she asked, 'But did Jesus exist in history?'

Our Christian faith stands or falls on certain historical facts. If the Gospel accounts in the Bible are just good stories, we are complete fools for living our lives for Jesus. If it is all a figment of someone's imagination, we are wasting our time.

Non-biblical historians confirm that Jesus lived and died. The Gospel writers describe what happened based on the testimony of eyewitnesses, and those who wrote the epistles explain, on reflection, the meaning of the events: 'Christ died once for our sins. An innocent person died for those who are guilty. Christ did this to bring you to God' (1 Peter 3:18).

What about the resurrection? Isn't that incredible? The early disciples certainly thought so. The Gospel accounts acknowledge their bewilderment and fear: this was not what they were expecting. Yet the empty tomb, the absence of a body, the encounters of the risen Jesus with different people and their transformed lives, all point to something astonishing: Jesus really did rise from the dead. His bodily resurrection not only confirms that God has accepted his sacrifice but also points to our future hope. Death is not the end of life.

Lord, I am staking my life on you. You died to forgive my sin. You rose from death because you are the Lord of life.

FVB

Reading testimony

'As I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, "Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" I asked. "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting", he replied.'

'I was there. I saw it. I heard it. It was like this...' There is something utterly compelling about personal testimony, whether from a witness to an accident, a journalist in a distant land or a Christian speaking of God's intervention in her life. We sit up. We take note. This is real.

When Luke wrote the history of the early Church in Acts, he did not produce a dry, dusty account of statistics, dates and principles of ecclesiastical governance. He gave an account of how God the Holy Spirit revolutionised the lives of native and Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem, as well as Samaritans, Gentiles and people at 'the ends of the earth'.

Fascinatingly, the passages beginning 'we' underline the fact that Luke is not relying on hearsay, years after the events. He travelled with Paul and saw what happened. If he wasn't present, he knew those who were and made sure he took note of the details.

So we read how Luke was there to hear Paul narrate his conversion as the crowds bayed for his blood. Paul recalls his persecution of Christians, and then the moment when God intervened, not only to change the course of his life but also to give him the special task of telling the nations about Jesus.

Each of us has our own unique story. We can't conclude, just because we didn't experience lights and voices, that our encounter with Jesus was deficient. God deals with us in different ways. The important thing is that our sins have been washed away as we called on his name (v. 16) and that our lives are facing Godward.

'Always be prepared to... give the reason for the hope that you have' (1 Peter 3:15, NIV). Practise so that you're ready!

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7–9 for another testimony of God's power in the face of weakness.

FVB

Reading letters

I beg you to help Onesimus! He is like a son to me because I led him to Christ here in jail. Before this, he was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me... To me he is a dear friend, but to you he is even more, both as a person and as a follower of the Lord.

I remember trying to decipher my father's handwriting. Did it really say 'Keep the mince to yourself'? And if so, what did it mean? Correspondence between the UK and Brazil in the early 1980s could take up to ten days each way, so sometimes I received comments on remarks I'd forgotten I'd made. It was only some time later that I remembered spilling some dinner on the envelope and writing 'Here is some mince' next to the smudge.

It's worth noting that the 21 letters in the New Testament are each only one half of a conversation, separated from us by time and geography. Written to individuals and churches, they emerged from very particular situations, relationships and challenges. It is dangerous to draw timeless principles for church practice from the text when we don't know the whole historical context. Yet we can't dismiss them as historical curiosities because they are still God's word.

On the face of it, what is the relevance to us of a very personal letter between friends, asking a slave owner to welcome back an escapee rather than have him killed as an example to others? We don't have slaves: we believe slavery is wrong.

Our society still values hierarchy and status and power. It's easy to fall into the trap of comparing ourselves with others and considering some people more worthy of our notice. The church is no place for titles and name-dropping. Paul's letter emphasises equality: each Christian is 'a person and a follower'. While Paul did not campaign against slavery, this revolutionary belief in a common humanity in Christ undermined the practice.

Paul's letter demonstrates God's particular care for individuals and relationships. Is there a letter, email or call you can send today to demonstrate his love?

FVB

Reading apocalypse

I am John, a follower together with all of you. We suffer because Jesus is our king, but he gives us the strength to endure. I was sent to Patmos island, because I had preached God's message... The Spirit took control of me... I heard a loud voice... 'Write in a book what you see. Then send it to the seven churches.'

Every week, I walk along hotel corridors cluttered with broken furniture, coffee urns and busy noticeboards. I spend two hours in a stuffy, windowless room teaching English to exhausted, low-paid overseas staff. They have worked at boring jobs since early morning and they live in a world where they don't really belong, not least because of the language barriers. I can almost feel the sense of hopelessness. Sometimes we have to use another room in the hotel, and en route we meet another world: the one the guests inhabit. Opulence and grandeur and comfort hit me. It is like a parallel universe, where, for a second, an open door gives me a glimpse into other possibilities.

Revelation is an open door into a realm we don't see. Its apocalyptic visions, its symbolism and cryptic language, familiar in the first century, can bemuse us today. Many unhelpful interpretations and preoccupation with detail have distracted Christians from the letter's intent: to encourage downhearted, weary, persecuted believers to persevere. How? By feeding their imagination. John, himself imprisoned for his faith, sees visions of the crucified, conquering Jesus; he witnesses heaven open, brimming with multicultural worship; he observes the judgment and defeat of God's enemies; he admires the new heaven and earth where there is no pain and God is present.

'Look at this! Have a peep!' John writes. 'Let these fantastic images help renew your commitment to Christ. He has suffered like you but is now triumphant. There is so much more behind the scenes. God is in control.'

Lord, when the discouragements of my life make me want to give up, remind me of your eternal certainties and keep me faithful.

Let the broad brushstrokes of your future destination encourage you: read Revelation 21:1-7.

FVB