

EPHESIANS

Ephesians is a letter of encouragement; after a warm greeting, Paul affirms that believers in Christ have been showered in God's kindness, chosen for greatness, marked with the Holy Spirit, filled with the Spirit's power, freed from sin's curse and bondage and brought near to God. As part of God's 'house' we stand with the prophets, apostles, Jews, Gentiles and Christ himself

Paul then challenges believers to function as the living body of Christ on earth and to use their spiritual gifts. They should have the highest moral standards. For the individual this means rejecting pagan practices and for the family, this means mutual submission and love.

Paul reminds believers that church is in a constant battle with the forces of darkness and that they should use every spiritual weapon at their disposal. He concludes by asking for their prayers, commissioning Tychicus and giving a benediction.

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Bible Reading Challenge

**WHAT IS IN THE BIBLE READINGS
FOR JUNE?**

ECCLESIASTES

The author of Ecclesiastes, King Solomon once asked God for wisdom and became the wisest man in the world. Kings and leaders from other nations came to Jerusalem to learn from him, but with all of his practical insight on life, Solomon failed to heed his own advice and he began a downward spiral. Near the end of his life, Solomon looked back with an attitude of humility and repentance. In this profound book, sometimes referred to as Solomon's written sermon, he takes us on a reflective journey through his life, explaining how everything he had tried, tested or tasted had been meaningless. It may have been written 3,000 years ago but the insights and applications of his message are strikingly relevant to our time.

SONG OF SONGS

This book was also written by Solomon, probably in his youth. It is a moving story, drama and poem. Song of Songs features the love dialogue between a simple Jewish maiden (the young woman) and her lover (Solomon, the king). They

describe in intimate detail their feelings for each other and their longings to be together. It is thought to be both a literal story about married love and an allegory of God's love for Israel and/or for the church. On one level, we learn about love, marriage and sex; and on the other level, we see God's overwhelming love for his people.

ISAIAH

The book of Isaiah is the first and longest writings of the prophets in the Bible; it was written around 740-680 B.C. Isaiah was probably born into a powerful, aristocratic home. When he started out he was popular, but like most prophets, he became unpopular because his messages were so difficult to hear. He called on people to turn away from their sin and warned them of God's judgement and punishment. Isaiah had an active ministry for 60 years before he was executed during Manassah's reign.

The book is often divided into three sections reflecting three historical periods and at least three authors:

First Isaiah Chapters 1 – 39

Isaiah lived in and around Jerusalem at some point during the seventh century B.C. This is during a time when the Assyrians were victorious in their assault against the northern part of the country. The first five chapters summarize the prophet's message. Isaiah denounces Israel's prejudice and foolish trust in rituals, and he calls the people to repent. He evaluates the sins of Judah comparing them to a fine vineyard that produces only wild grapes. God calls Isaiah through a vision. In chapters 6 to 8 he tells King Ahaz not to fear Israel and Syria for they will fall at the hand of the Assyrians.

Chapters 40—55

Isaiah reveals that God will lift up a blameless king and judge the nations that resist Israel. Jerusalem is delivered from the Assyrians through the power of God and God heals King Hezekiah even though his trust was placed in the Babylonians.

Chapters 56—66

The people of Israel have returned to Jerusalem and the emphasis turns to the promises of God, justice and the observance of the law.

GALATIANS

In his letter to the Galatians Paul proclaims the reality of our liberty in Christ – freedom from the law and power of sin and freedom to serve our living Lord. Many of the first converts and early leaders in the church struggled with a dual identity. Their Jewishness constrained them to be strict followers of the law, their new found faith in Christ, invited them to celebrate a holy liberty. This proved a contentious issue for the early church.

Paul first acknowledges the issues before demonstrating that salvation is by faith alone. He does this by referring to his own conversion, appealing to his readers own experience of the Gospel and describing what the Old Testament teaches about grace. Next he explains the purpose of God's laws and the relationship between law, God's promises and Christ. Having laid the foundation Paul builds his case for Christian liberty. We are saved by faith, not keeping the law, our freedom means that we are live to love and serve one another, not to do wrong to each other.