

explore

Bible notes for adults

January – March 2010



In this issue

The 90 daily readings in this issue of *Explore* are designed to help you understand and apply the Bible as you read it daily. Sections in this edition include readings from Acts, Genesis, Mark, Ezra and the psalms.

It's serious!

We suggest that you allow 15 minutes each day to work through the Bible passage with the notes. It should be a meal, not a snack! Readings from other parts of the Bible can throw valuable light on the study passage. These cross-references can be skipped if you are already feeling full up, but will expand your grasp of the Bible.

Sometimes a prayer box will encourage you to stop and pray through the lessons—but it is always important to allow time to pray for God's Spirit to bring His word to life, and to shape the way we think and live through it.

We're serious!

All of us who work on *Explore* share a passion for getting the Bible into people's lives. We fiercely hold to the Bible as God's word—to honour and follow, not to explain away.

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How to use *Explore*

Find a time you can read the Bible each day



Find a place where you can be quiet and think



Ask God to help you understand



Carefully read through the Bible passage for today



Study the verses with *Explore*, taking time to think



Pray about what you have read



Welcome to
Explore—a
resource to help
you dig into, understand and
apply the timeless truth of
God's word to your life.

It can be a struggle to find a daily time to spend with God. Children, the busyness of life, special nights out, holidays, or just sheer exhaustion can all conspire to get in the way.

However, there is no substitute for just getting into a good habit. There are many patterns that suit different people, and yours may change over time.

Whatever you choose to do, guard your time with God jealously. If you come hungry to learn from the Lord, and to feed on the truth, it will be a place of nurture and growth, and a source of direction and strength for your daily life.

▶ **TIME:** Find a time when you will not be disturbed, and when the cobwebs are cleared from your mind. Many people have found that the morning is the best time, as it sets you up for the day. You may not be a 'morning person' so last thing at night, or, if you're free, a mid-morning break suits others. Whatever works for you is right for you.

▶ **PLACE:** Jesus says that we are not to make a great show of our religion (see Matthew 6 v 5-6), but rather pray with the door to our room shut. So, any-

where you can be quiet and private is the key. Some people plan to get to work a few minutes earlier and get their Bible out in an office, or some other quiet corner.

▶ **PRAYER:** Although *Explore* helps with specific prayer ideas from the passage, you should try to develop your own lists to pray through. Use the flap inside the back cover to help with this.

Often our problem is not so much *who* to pray for, as *what to pray for them!* That's why Bible reading and prayer are inseparable. We are reminded from God's word of what is truly important; it will shape what we pray for ourselves, the world and others.

▶ **SHARE:** As the saying goes: *expression deepens impression.* So try to cultivate the habit of sharing with others what you have learned. It will encourage both them and you. Using the same notes as a friend will help you encourage each other to keep going.

REMEMBER:

- **IT'S QUALITY, NOT QUANTITY, THAT COUNTS:** *Better to think briefly about a single verse, than to skim through pages without absorbing anything.*
- **FALLING BEHIND:** *It's inevitable that you will occasionally miss a day. Don't be paralysed by guilt. Just start again.*
- **IT'S ABOUT DEVELOPING A LOVE RELATIONSHIP, NOT A LAW RELATIONSHIP** *Don't think that 'doing your quiet time' is an end in itself. The sign that your daily time with God is real is when you start to love Him more and serve Him more wholeheartedly.*

Tim Thornborough, *Explore* Editor

God's action – our reaction

▶ **Reading:** Psalm 76

Friday 1 January

At the start of a new year, here is the psalmist in full 'praising the Lord' mode. After a mighty victory won, he is humbly reminding everyone that it was not the skill of the army that gave them the day, but God who fought for them.

▶ **Read Psalm 76**

Honoured

▶ **Read v 1-3**

In a way typical of Hebrew poetry, the psalmist makes the rhymes by repeating the same idea in different words. So, Judah and Israel are both names for the people of God. Salem and Zion are both names for Jerusalem.

- ❓ *What has God done to excite the psalmist's praise (v 3)?*
- ❓ *And what has it resulted in (v 1-2)?*

time out

I hope you realise that the Lord your God, like any human parent, is highly protective of His children. He may place us in situations that test us, stretch us and humble us, but He will never let you be harmed, and woe betide anyone who takes it into their heads to persecute you. They will have to deal with Father...

Unrivalled

▶ **Read v 4-10**

- ❓ *What makes God so formidable?*
- ❓ *What is it that prompts God to act (v 7, 9a, 9b, 10)?*

time out

God's purpose in judgment (v 9) is to punish those who oppose Him, and to rescue those who call on Him for help. It will be just the same at the last day.

Read Hebrews 9 v 26-28.

Feared

▶ **Read v 11-12**

- ❓ *If God is like this, what should people do (v 11a)?*
- ❓ *Who else should respond (v 11b) and why (v 12)?*

apply

Read Philippians 2 v 9-11.

One day, everyone will bow the knee to the Lord Jesus. Christians will do it willingly and gladly, because we know we were bought for a price. Others will do it grudgingly when they finally realise who He is.

- ❓ *What does Psalm 76 v 11 specifically say we should do?*
- ❓ *How can you do that, specifically, today?*

ACTS: False accusations

2

▶ **Reading:** Acts 6 v 8-15

Saturday 2 January

Today we start a new section in the book of Acts. The focus moves off the apostles and on to some other key figures in the early church.

Not just a waiter!

▶ Read v 8-10

- ❓ *What key phrase describes Stephen's character (also look back to 6 v 5)?*
- ❓ *How do some people respond to Stephen?*
- ❓ *In what way is this repeating what we have seen with the apostles earlier in Acts?*

Stephen was picked to look after food distribution because he was a godly man—but he wasn't only in charge of food; he also preached and performed miracles.

Notice the comment that Stephen's wisdom was given to him by the Holy Spirit (v 10). Ask God to help you speak wisely to those you share the gospel with.

Accusations made

▶ Read v 11-15

- ❓ *What's at the heart of the accusation made against Stephen?*
- ❓ *Would there have been any truth in this?*

The charge is that Stephen speaks against the temple and the law (and so against God and Moses). What's he saying about them? Verse 14 is key—it is that Jesus will destroy the temple and change the laws.

Which of course, in one sense, is absolutely right! Jesus has indeed ended

the function of the temple and has changed the role of the law. But Stephen isn't against them; instead he sees Jesus as having fulfilled them. So their significance will now change dramatically but only because their time is up.

pray thru'

Some people oppose Jesus because of the change He brings—especially to treasured traditions or practices. Pray for people you know for whom that is true.

False accusations

Despite the element of truth in these charges, notice the words Luke uses to describe their tactics—they secretly persuaded people to accuse Stephen, and they produced false witnesses (v 11, 13).

apply

Many Christians are misrepresented and falsely accused. Maybe you have been. Pray for their (and your) godly reaction and faithfulness under such pressure. Remember Jesus' experience of being falsely accused and the words He spoke to His followers: "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15 v 20). Being misrepresented is horrible. Be encouraged that your Saviour knows how it feels, and went through it for you.

History lesson – part 1

3

▶ **Reading:** Acts 7 v 1-36

Sunday 3 January

Stephen has been falsely accused. Now we hear his speech in defence, and, perhaps surprisingly, he gives his accusers a lesson in well-known Jewish history. This is the longest speech in Acts so we'll look at it in three sections.

A reminder of the promises

▶ Read v 1-8

? *What was Abraham promised by God?*

? *How long would it take before these promises were fulfilled?*

This opening section lays out the ground for what comes next—Abraham and his descendants were promised the land where Stephen and his listeners are now living. But God's promise would only be fulfilled after an extended period of slavery followed by an act of rescue.

The pattern begins

▶ Read v 9-16

? *How was Joseph treated by his brothers?*

? *In God's plans, how would Joseph be used?*

Joseph was rejected, so much so that he was sold into slavery by his brothers. But that act became the way that God saved His people from famine. Stephen is starting to make the point that God's chosen saviour is rejected by His people.

The pattern repeats

▶ Read v 17-29

Notice that in v 17 Stephen reminds his listeners that the time was getting close for God to fulfil those foundational promises to Abraham.

? *What did Moses think would happen when he killed an Egyptian?*

? *What happened instead?*

We often read the account of Moses killing the Egyptian as him getting it wrong—but Stephen has another take on it. He says it was the start of the rescue of God's people—but they failed to realise it, and so rejected their rescuer (again).

The pattern driven home

▶ Read 30-36

? *How does Stephen drive home this lesson of rejection?*

Stephen retells the famous accounts of the burning bush and Moses coming to save his people, but notice his key phrase—this is the same Moses they rejected with the words: 'Who made you ruler and judge?' (v 35).

But the very one they rejected is the one that God Himself made 'ruler and deliverer for them' (v 35).

time out

Consider your own heart: do you agree you would have rejected God's Saviour yourself? Praise God for His graciousness—He continues to work to save His people despite our resistance and rejection.

History lesson – part 2

▶ **Reading:** Acts 7 v 37-43

Monday 4 January

Stephen's history lesson continues...

The promise of a second Moses

▶ Read v 37

❓ *Why does Stephen include God's promise of another prophet like Moses?*

Stephen emphasises that it is 'this Moses' to whom God made this promise, ie: 'the rejected-by-his-people-Moses'. The implication is that the prophet like Moses who will come will be similarly rejected. Luke has already told us that this prophet is Jesus (see Acts 3 v 17-23).

The rejection of God's word

▶ Read v 38-41

❓ *What is emphasised about the revelation Moses was given?*

❓ *What was the reaction of God's people to the revelation through Moses?*

Moses received God's living words to give to His people, but once again the response was rejection. They forsook Moses, and more importantly God, and in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, the place of slavery. The climax of this rejection is shown in their making an idol to worship.

The ongoing story

▶ Read v 42-43

❓ *How does God respond to their idolatry?*

What tragic words! God turns from His

people and gives them over to what they want to worship. (For a fuller example of this pattern read **Romans 1 v 21-32**.)

Stephen then goes to the book of Amos to drive his argument home. Through Amos, God is confronting the people of his day for their idolatry ('the idols you made to worship') and linking it back with the attitude of the people who made the golden calf. God sarcastically asks: 'Did you bring me sacrifices ... in the desert?' The answer is 'No' and the same attitude of turning away from God is repeated time and again throughout Israel's history.

Stephen has been addressing the charge that he is speaking against Moses and the law that came through him (6 v 11, 13). Stephen's answer is that throughout history God's people have rejected Moses and his law. His listeners need to recognise those same attitudes in themselves, shown in their response to Jesus (but more of that to come).

apply

Can you see this ongoing tendency to turn away from God in your own heart? Be warned—we'll also reject God's living words and make a more palatable version of God for ourselves given half the chance. Fear God's anger over this. Pray for a sensitive conscience, and don't duck from the force of God's word when you don't like what He says.

History lesson – part 3



▶ **Reading:** Acts 7 v 44-50

Tuesday 5 January

Stephen has been defending himself in front of the Sanhedrin. He's answered charges about speaking against Moses and the law; now he turns to the issue of the temple.

Reminder of the facts

▶ Read v 44-47

❓ *What are the important factors in the history of the temple?*

Once again, Stephen gives a summary of what has happened in Israel's history. It began with the tabernacle—the portable tent where the ark of the covenant was kept and which symbolised God's presence among His people. The tabernacle was made by Moses and carried into the promised land by Joshua. David wanted to build the temple to house the ark, but it was Solomon who did so.

Challenge about attitude

▶ Read v 48-50

❓ *What does Stephen now want to say about the temple, having reminded them of its history?*

❓ *What attitude is he challenging in his listeners?*

Just because God did indeed live among His people in the tabernacle/temple, it doesn't mean those structures contained Him. The quote from Isaiah 66 tells us that humans couldn't build a house for God even if we wanted to. Heaven is His throne and the earth is His footstool.

The context of the quote from Isaiah 66 is that of judgment. It speaks of people who offer all the right sacrifices, but whose heart attitude to God is wrong. They have 'chosen their own way' (**Isaiah 66 v 3**), rather than being those who 'are humble and contrite in spirit' (**Isaiah 66 v 2**).

Stephen is saying that the same is true of his listeners. They are bothered about the temple, but are not listening to or bowing before the God whose temple it is.

time out

- ❓ *Where might we focus on some truth about God but miss and even ignore God Himself?*
- ❓ *How might we take part in church life but have a wrong attitude toward God in not being humble before Him?*
- ❓ *Consider if your commitment to certain practices and places has more to do with choosing your own way, than humble worship of God.*

Learn the lesson

▶ **Reading:** Acts 7 v 51-53

Wednesday 6 January

Stephen's speech is wrapping up. Here comes the conclusion—and he's not going to pull his punches!

Necks, hearts and ears

▶ Read v 51

- ❓ *What attitude is Stephen accusing them of?*
- ❓ *In what way are his listeners like their ancestors?*

The phrases about stiff-necks and uncircumcised hearts and ears are common phrases in the Old Testament (for example, **Exodus 32 v 9, Deuteronomy 10 v 16; Jeremiah 6 v 10; 7 v 26**). They describe someone who resists God, pushes Him away and won't listen to Him or bow before Him.

That was the history of Israel from the incident of the golden calf onwards. And Stephen's listeners are repeating the sins of their forefathers.

Shoot the messenger (and the Messiah!)

▶ Read v 52

- ❓ *How did Israel's resistance to God show itself in practice?*
- ❓ *How did Stephen's listeners' rejection show itself?*

Israel repeatedly persecuted those who spoke God's word to them. They wouldn't listen to the prophets' calls to repent—to return to a right relationship

of humble obedience to God. Those Old Testament prophets always got it in the neck for their message. People didn't like the message so they shot the messenger.

The same thing has happened now—but this time it was the Righteous One (the Messiah) who came and spoke the truth. People revealed their true response to God when they betrayed and murdered Him.

Disobedient hypocrites

▶ Read v 53

- ❓ *Why does Stephen finish by describing his listeners in this way?*

Remember Stephen was charged with speaking against the law (6 v 11, 13). Stephen sums up his defence by saying that his accusers are the ones disrespecting the law. The religious leaders speak highly of the law and defend it—but they don't obey it! And in doing so, the true nature of their relationship with God is seen.

apply

These leaders spent their time doing things that looked as if they were serving God—studying His word and teaching it to others. But they avoided listening to God speak and even killed God's Son. The Bible is right when it talks about our hearts being deceitful (**Jeremiah 17 v 9**). Who are you serving when you take part in Christian activities? Do you submit yourself to God's words when you read them? Pray that God will reveal self-deceit in your own life.

Imitating Jesus

7

▶ **Reading:** Acts 7 v 54-60

Thursday 7 January

Stephen's speech is over—and his charge has been given (v 51-53). Here comes the reaction.

The vision to finish it

▶ Read v 54-56

- ❓ *How would you describe the reaction of Stephen's hearers?*
- ❓ *What does Stephen see?*
- ❓ *Why do you think God gives him this vision now?*

The Sanhedrin is spitting mad—at which point Stephen speaks of seeing Jesus standing in glory at God's right hand (the position of power and authority). In other words, Stephen's vision confirms to him and his listeners the rightness of all he has been saying: Jesus has been vindicated as the true Messiah by the Father.

The imitation of Jesus

▶ Read v 57-60

- ❓ *Why does the Sanhedrin stone Stephen?*
- ❓ *What is so significant about what Stephen says as he dies?*

The Sanhedrin decides it has heard enough. Blasphemy deserves death! The council members weren't in a good mood up to that point and this was the last straw. They rush as an angry mob at Stephen—a horrible and frightening scene. Notice how they cover their ears.

They absolutely refuse to listen to what he says.

Luke records two things Stephen says—both of which echo Jesus. For comparison see **Luke 23 v 34, 46**.

Stephen imitates Jesus in his trust—committing his spirit to Jesus in his death—and in his forgiveness of his executioners. Luke is showing us how Christians should speak the truth of the gospel to people boldly. But Christians must also be willing to suffer as Jesus did and respond to that persecution with trust and forgiveness.

Alpha

Isn't Stephen the kind of man you'd want to imitate? Take a moment to list the characteristics he exhibits in chapters 6 & 7. Here is a man who knew his Bible, trusted God, was prepared to forcefully challenge those who rejected Jesus—and yet was quick to forgive. Pray that the Holy Spirit, who was so much at work in Stephen, would be doing a similar work in your life. It may well have risky consequences but somehow I don't think Stephen is regretting it now.

See the mention of 'a young man named Saul' in verse 58. He'll start to be the focus of attention in the next portion of Acts.

Mourning and rejoicing

▶ **Reading:** Acts 8 v 1-8

Friday 8 January

Remember the key verse for Acts in chapter 1 v 8 spoke about the Spirit empowered witness to Jesus spreading out in ever widening circles. Well, the action so far has centred on Jerusalem but in this new section of Acts we see the first of those circles come into play.

The town turns ugly

▶ **Read 8 v 1-3**

- ❓ *How do you think the Christians were feeling at this moment?*
- ❓ *How does this fit with the growing reaction to Christians we've seen so far? (You could look back to **4 v 18, 5 v 17, 5 v 20, 6 v 11-12.**)*

The apostles have had a few run-ins with the religious authorities before, but Stephen's death seems to release the floodgates of opposition, and widespread persecution breaks out. Saul is a leading character—he's out to destroy the church—but the result isn't what he'd have planned.

The town is full of joy

▶ **Read 8 v 4-8**

- ❓ *What are people doing as they flee Jerusalem?*
- ❓ *Why is Samaria filled with joy?*

Philip (one of Stephen's crew, see 6 v 5) is empowered to perform miracles as the apostles did. These signs and wonders draw attention to the message of the good news about Jesus.

Here we see great contrast in the different reactions to the gospel. In one place, the gospel produces destructive anger. In another place, it produces great joy.

The plan advancing

Look back at **Acts 1 v 8** to see Jesus' game plan for His followers. In the light of this plan, do you think we should think of this persecution as a bad thing or a good thing, or both?

pray thru'

Pray for those you know of who are persecuted for their faith; pray that God's plans to witness to Jesus would happen through that persecution. Pray that great joy would come as a result of the spread of the gospel.

Simon says...

▶ **Reading:** Acts 8 v 9-13

Saturday 9 January

I expect you know how to play the children's game 'Simon says'. If someone says: 'Simon says, "Put your hands on your head," you do it, but if they don't say 'Simon says,' you don't. Not the world's most thrilling entertainment, but in Samaria everyone was playing a rather more serious version of the game.

The scene before

▶ **Read 8 v 9-11**

- ❓ *What does Luke emphasise about Simon's reputation in this city?*
- ❓ *Who is being influenced by Simon?*

Simon is a religious leader with supernatural abilities who completely dominates all Samaria. He boasts about how great he is, and everyone seems happy to agree with him! They even call him 'the Great Power of God'. Simon's got them in the palm of his hand.

time out

You might be feeling tempted to look down on these backward Samaritans, and think you wouldn't be so easily influenced. Give a few moments to consider which 'leaders' people in your peer group follow. If not individuals, what about groupings of people? Doesn't our society tend to unquestioningly follow celebrities, pundits or scientists? Where might such allegiance lead people?

The scene after

▶ **Read 8 v 11-13**

- ❓ *What changes in people's loyalties as a result of Philip's arrival?*
- ❓ *What changes for Simon himself?*

The preaching of the gospel, and the miracles of Philip, change everything. Now the Samaritans believe in the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus. They recognise that He rules and He saves. These followers are baptised, showing their change of thinking and their new loyalty to Christ. Most startlingly, in v 13 we are told that Simon himself believes. He is now the one doing the following and he is the one amazed!

apply

- ❓ *How did your loyalties change when you believed the gospel?*

pray thru'

Pray

- for your own change of direction because of the gospel
- for those you know captured by the world around to come to believe the gospel.

Lessons from of old

10

▶ **Reading:** Psalm 78 v 1-16

Sunday 10 January

This is a singalong history lesson which recounts how God saved and shaped His people from the Exodus to King David. If you have time, **read the whole psalm**; otherwise just the first 39 verses.

Telling God's truth

▶ **Read v 1-8**

- ? What reasons do verses 1-4 give us for paying attention to this song?
- ? Who might it be for especially (v 4)?

pray thru'

Teaching children the Bible is a vital task for Christian families and for the church. They need to hear not only specific stories, but also the 'big picture' over and over.

- Pray for Christian parents you know, that they would teach their children the Bible regularly and faithfully.
- Pray for those who teach children in your church—and take the time to thank and encourage them today if you can.

- ? Why is it especially important to listen to Israel's history (v 7-8)?
- ? What is the great danger for them, and us (v 7a)?

time out

Read 1 Corinthians 10 v 1-13

'Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on

time out

evil things as they did.' (v 6). The Old Testament was written for us, too! It's not just a story book for children, but a guide for life. We need to value it and heed its warnings just as we do the New Testament.

Rejecting God's law

▶ **Read v 9-16**

The history lesson starts, curiously, with a reference to the defeat of Saul (Ephraim was his home country) **see 1 Samuel 31**. Even though his army had the best bowmen (v 9a), they were defeated.

- ? Why (v 10-11)
- ? What lessons of history had they forgotten (v 12-16)?

apply

Forgetfulness is at the heart of faithlessness. It's why we daily need to remind ourselves of the truths of the Bible. It's why it is a good thing that we regularly remember Jesus' death in the bread and the wine. It is why we need to remind one another constantly about the grace of God in the gospel.

See 2 Peter 1 v 10-13.

- ? Is there something you need reminding of today?
- ? Is there someone else who needs you to remind them today?

Peddling the gospel



▶ **Reading:** Acts 8 v 14-25

Monday 11 January

It's fantastic to think that someone like Simon could be converted. But all is not right with this latest addition to the church...

The arrival of the apostles (and the Spirit!)

▶ Read 8 v 14-17

- ❓ *Why do you think the apostles sent Peter and John to Samaria?*
- ❓ *What is strange about the Holy Spirit not having come on any of those who had believed?*
- ❓ *Why might this be?*

This is a much debated section of Acts. It has led some to argue that the gift of the Holy Spirit comes as a second step in the Christian life following conversion. The problem with this argument is that virtually everywhere else in Acts people receive the Spirit when they believe. And the rest of the New Testament supports the view that every believer has the Spirit (eg:

Romans 8 v 9, 1 Corinthians 12 v 13).

The most likely explanation is that the arrival of the Spirit was delayed here so that the believers in Samaria could be authenticated as genuine Christians by the apostles. We need to remember that they were Samaritans. This is the gospel crossing significant racial and cultural boundaries. We will see something similar occur in Acts 10 when the first Gentiles believe the gospel.

Simon's wrong heart

▶ Read 8 v 18-25

- ❓ *What is wrong with Simon's behaviour and attitude?*
- ❓ *What lessons are there for us in our attitude to involvement in Christian ministry?*

Simon wants to be able to act like the apostles in distributing the Spirit. While seemingly converted, his heart still operates in its old ways—and so he offers money. Peter has no time for such a wicked attitude—and challenges Simon to repent.

It seems that Simon still wanted to be the big man who everyone else would think was important. But such attitudes can't exist in the church of the crucified Lord. Someone whose heart is so wrong before God cannot take part in service for Christ because that would discredit Him. Thankfully, Simon appears to respond humbly to Peter's rebuke (v 24).

Alpha

Consider your own heart and potential desire to be seen as important. In what areas might you need to repent?

Pray for humility for Christian leaders you know.

Ideal evangelism

▶ **Reading:** Acts 8 v 26-40

Tuesday 12 January

Philip's been hard at work in Samaria and God now has a very specific job for him.

The ideal evangelistic candidate

▶ **Read v 26-29**

- ❓ *How is the Ethiopian described?*
- ❓ *What is significant about the way the encounter takes place?*

This Ethiopian is an important figure in a foreign government (in fact the term 'eunuch' may well refer to his position rather than his genitals). He was probably a proselyte—that is, a semi-convert to Judaism. He is devoted enough to have travelled a long way to go to the temple, and keen enough to be reading Isaiah on his journey home.

Philip is clearly told where to go—even where to stand—and so meets this Ethiopian. God is specifically guiding Philip so that the gospel can go to this man.

The ideal evangelistic opening

▶ **Read v 30-35**

- ❓ *What is striking about the eunuch's attitude?*
- ❓ *What is striking about Philip's explanation?*

The Ethiopian is happy to admit his ignorance and his need of a teacher. He doesn't know who Isaiah is talking about and what it all means (v 34). Philip is just the man for the job because he knows the Old Testament is all about Jesus!

time out Would you be confident explaining the gospel from an Old Testament passage like this? How convinced are you that the whole Old Testament leads up to Jesus and is ultimately about Him?

The ideal evangelistic outcome

▶ **Read v 36-40**

The Ethiopian comes to faith in Christ and, presumably having heard about baptism, asks to be baptised himself. He follows the same pattern as earlier converts in Acts who repented, believed, were baptised, and joined the new community of God's people (**Acts 2 v 41-47**). Philip then disappears but the Ethiopian goes home rejoicing.

Note: In this passage we see the gospel spreading beyond even Samaria now. God is fulfilling His plan of Acts 1 v 8.

time out Reflect on God's insatiable desire for the gospel to spread and his concern about individuals – No-one is too "other" for Him.

Think of the Ethiopian's desire to learn, his willingness to obey and his rejoicing in the gospel.

The great turnaround

13

▶ **Reading:** Acts 9 v 1-19

Wednesday 13 January

We first met Saul back in chapter 8 v 1-3, where he was persecuting the church. Not for much longer!

Full of opposition

▶ Read v 1-2

❓ *How would you describe Saul's attitude from these verses?*

Saul's not content with clearing the Christians from Jerusalem so he gets permission to hunt them down outside the capital. This is a man on a mission—against Jesus and against His people.

Stopped in his tracks

▶ Read v 3-9

❓ *How do you think Saul felt being confronted by someone called 'Jesus'?*

❓ *Why does Jesus say Saul is persecuting Him?*

Saul must have been flabbergasted! He was convinced that Jesus was a blasphemer who got the death He deserved. Now, this same Jesus appears and confronts Saul! Jesus speaks of Saul's actions against the church being against Him personally, revealing how strongly He identifies with His people.

Meeting the enemy

▶ Read v 10-19

❓ *Why is Ananias hesitant to meet Saul?*

❓ *How would you have felt?*

❓ *What does God say about Saul's future life?*

Note the unintentional humour in Ananias' response to God (v 13-14). Did Ananias really think God needed to be informed of these things? But God knows what He is doing: He has remarkable plans for Saul. This is both his conversion and his commissioning as an apostle.

It is clearly his conversion because he is baptised. But it is also Saul's commissioning because the focus is on the role he will have. The one who was opposing the gospel about Jesus will proclaim it; and rather than persecuting Jesus' followers, he himself will suffer for Christ's name. God completely turns him around.

Apply

❓ *What does this tell us about the power of God to bring people to faith?*

❓ *How does this encourage us in our own evangelism?*

❓ *What do we learn about God's plans and purposes?*

❓ *Why does God send a person as well as the vision to Saul?*

Persecutor to preacher

▶ **Reading:** Acts 9 v 20-31

Thursday 14 January

It's not called a 'Damascus road experience' for nothing! Saul's life has been completely changed. He is now a follower of Christ and has been commissioned by God to share the gospel with both Gentiles and Jews (9 v 15). Today we start to see what Saul's new life will look like.

Surprise turns to opposition

▶ **Read v 20-25**

- ❓ *How would you describe the Damascans' reaction to Saul?*
- ❓ *What might people be saying about him?*

Saul's visit to Damascus turns out to be very different from what he (and everyone else) expected. Rather than hunting down Christians, he's now trying to recruit more.

In yesterday's passage, we read about God's warning that Saul's preaching would lead to Saul suffering (9 v 16). It's less than a few weeks before there is a 'credible threat' to Saul's life (v 23). It doesn't look as if Saul is going to have a comfortable ministry! However, God has work for him to do, and with some ingenious thought from local Christians, Saul is able to escape.

A cautious welcome

▶ **Read v 26-28**

- ❓ *Was the church's hesitation reasonable or not?*

- ❓ *How did they come to their decision to accept Saul?*

The Christians in Jerusalem are understandably cautious—might Saul's 'conversion' be a trap? Barnabas steps in as go-between and, having examined the evidence, Saul is welcomed by the church. What a dramatic change from when he left! And what a difference in activities—Saul is now boldly proclaiming the gospel of Jesus.

Yet more opposition

▶ **Read v 29-30**

Saul talks to the Hellenistic (or Grecian) Jews in particular because of the similarity in background, but the opposition strikes up again. Twice in close succession Saul's life is in danger, and once again the Christians in town help him escape.

Summary time

▶ **Read v 31**

This is the second of Luke's summary statements (the first one was back in chapter 6 v 7). We've seen persecution go up a gear, but as a result the gospel has spread beyond Jerusalem. And then we've seen the conversion of the chief persecutor to spread that same message.

- ❓ *How does all this encourage or challenge you?*

Jesus at work!

15

▶ **Reading:** Acts 9 v 32-43

Friday 15 January

We left Peter back in chapter 8 when he was in Samaria. Now we pick up on his travels.

A miracle and conversions

▶ **Read v 32-35**

- ❓ *What strikes you about this episode?*
- ❓ *What is significant about Peter's words to Aeneas?*

Peter is travelling round the country and visits groups of believers (the Lord's people) in a town called Lydda. We are told very simply about a paralysed man. Notice the details of his condition, and how Peter heals him with a word. We should really say how Jesus heals him—notice how Peter points to Jesus in what he says.

The result? Many people turning to the Lord in faith. This is a repeat of the sorts of events we saw with Peter in Jerusalem. And so we are reminded of the gospel spreading.

Another miracle and more conversions

▶ **Read v 33-43**

- ❓ *What details does Luke give us about Dorcas that makes this story so poignant?*

Dorcas was a disciple and one who gave herself to helping others—she was 'always doing good and helping the poor'. She was clearly greatly loved and valued in her town.

time out

The centrality of proclaiming the gospel is not to be set against loving those around us, especially those who are needy. Rather, as we speak the gospel, we love and care for those we speak to. Is this inclusion of 'good works' something you or your church need to reflect on?

- ❓ *In what ways is this story a repeat of what we have just seen?*

Peter prays (showing his dependence on God) and then speaks a word which brings Dorcas back to life. The result? Joy for the church and evidence for the community which brings many to faith.

Jesus still at work

- ❓ *Can you think of events in Jesus' life similar to these two?*

Luke told us of how Jesus healed a paralytic and raised a girl from death (**see Luke 5 v 24; 8 v 54**). Jesus is still at work through His apostles giving evidence that the gospel about Him is true, and bringing people to faith.

Visions and menus

16

▶ **Reading:** Acts 10 v 1-23a

Saturday 16 January

This passage starts a long section in Acts—it is all about the inclusion of Gentiles into the church. It all revolves around the apostle Peter and a Roman centurion called Cornelius.

God speaks to Cornelius

▶ Read v 1-8

- ❓ *What details are we given about Cornelius?*
- ❓ *What importance have Cornelius' prayers and gifts had?*

Cornelius is what is usually called a 'God-fearer': a Gentile who knows about the God of the Jews and worships Him, but hasn't fully converted to Judaism. So he's an example of an earnest seeker and someone who has responded to what he does know of God. God does take notice of people's behaviour: Cornelius' prayers and gifts have come up as a 'memorial offering', or a remembrance. That's a way of saying that God approves of what He sees.

However, Cornelius doesn't believe the gospel. While he has responded well to what he knows of God, he isn't saved. But God is organising for that to be remedied.

God speaks to Peter

▶ Read v 1-23a

- ❓ *Why does Peter respond to the vision the way he does?*
- ❓ *What is God trying to teach Peter in his vision?*
- ❓ *How does this fit with the people arriving at his door?*

God's people were kept separate from nations around them in a variety of symbolic ways—including what they were allowed to eat. And so, as a self-respecting Jew, Peter has never eaten 'unclean' food and doesn't intend to start!

But God is now showing Peter that those barriers are being dismantled. The point is not so much about the food (although that does change) but about people. Look ahead to verse 28 and see what conclusion Peter draws.

time out

- ❓ *In what ways might we make distinctions between people that God would disapprove of?*
- ❓ *What cultural assumptions or preferences might He challenge?*

Sinful rebels

17

▶ **Reading:** Psalm 78 v 32-72

Sunday 17 January

We continue with Psalm 78's singalong history lesson of Israel. The writer, Asaph, has reminded them of God's powerful acts which saved them from Egypt (v 13), and kept them through the wilderness (v 15-16). So what comes next is a shock... or is it?

▶ **Read v 32-72**

Hard-hearted

▶ **Read v 32 & 56**

The refrain comes again and again: in spite of all the Lord has done for them, they rebel, they test Him, they sin, they disbelieve. This ungrateful hard-heartedness is made all the more poignant by the writer's focus on how gracious, loving, kind and forgiving God is.

pray thru'

How distressing it must be to God to see our ingratitude and self-centredness.

Those of you who are parents will know how angry we feel towards 'spoilt children', who, despite being (on a world scale) rich, having full stomachs, plenty of friends, and an embarrassment of toys to amuse them, spend their time complaining and whining for something more.

❓ *Is there something you need to say to your heavenly Father?*

Full provision

▶ **Read v 54-55**

Not only did God bring them out of slavery, and destroy the Egyptians (v 42-45), not only did He guide and provide for them in the wilderness (v 20-29), but He brought them into the promised land—fulfilling His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He gave them a home.

❓ *And what did they do now (v 58)?*

What will stop them?

▶ **Read v 56-66**

Even in God's place, under God's rule, there is something more that the wayward people of God need: they need God's King. Verses 60-61 refer to the loss of the ark of the covenant from the centre of Israel's life (**1 Samuel 4-6**). Israel's first king, Saul, is then rejected (v 67), but there is hope at last because God has chosen another to rule His people in Saul's place. David is the great hope for the future (v 70-72).

time out

David 'shepherds' God's people with a right heart, and with consummate skill (v 72). But flawed David points us to the ultimate answer to God's problem with His wayward people: our great King Jesus is the Good Shepherd who will guide and guard our souls and bring us home to heaven.

Give praise as you read John 10 v 11-16.

God's blind date

▶ **Reading:** Acts 10 v 23b-35

Monday 18 January

God gave both Cornelius and Peter a vision and has organised them getting together. He's got them on a blind date! Now we see how it goes...

Peter's dawning realisation

▶ **Read v 23-29**

Cornelius has got a crowd together to meet Peter. When Peter arrives, Cornelius falls at his feet (after all, an angel had organised the meeting). Peter, however, knows he should only be treated as just another person.

- ❓ *What does Peter say he has been taught by God through these events so far?*
- ❓ *Why is this so significant?*

Peter realises that the vision of the animals and the command not to call anything that God has made 'unclean' is really about people. But his whole life has involved thinking of Gentiles as 'unclean'. He says to them that he is breaking the Jewish rule book by even being in Cornelius' house.

All becomes clear

▶ **Read v 29-35**

- ❓ *What does Cornelius explain to Peter that is so significant?*
- ❓ *What does Peter finally realise?*

Cornelius explains the previous day's activities and how God has organised this meeting. 'Now,' he says, 'we are here to

listen to everything that the Lord has commanded you to tell us' (v 33). God has sent Peter so he can tell them the gospel!

Peter finally gets it! 'Now I realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism' (v 34). God not having favourites was a well-known truth (**Deuteronomy 10 v 17; 2 Chronicles 19 v 7**). But Peter hasn't realised how true that was. Now he sees that God accepts people from 'every nation' (v 35). In other words, people's background is no disadvantage to them.

When Peter says God accepts people who fear Him and do what is right, he isn't meaning people are saved apart from the gospel—that was the reason he was there, so he could tell them that the gospel was for them as well.

time out

- ❓ *In what subtle ways do we limit who we think the gospel is for?*
- ❓ *If we say the gospel is for everyone, does that show in practice?*
- ❓ *How might we think God actually does show favouritism?*

Judge and Saviour for all

19

▶ **Reading:** Acts 10 v 36-43

Tuesday 19 January

Peter has finally realised that God has got him together with Cornelius and the family so he can tell them the gospel—and so that is what he does.

The story of Jesus

▶ **Read v 36-41**

❓ *Note down the key elements of Jesus' life that Peter points to.*

❓ *How would this compare to the elements you would pick?*

Peter begins with Jesus' baptism, when He was anointed with the Holy Spirit. He speaks about His life of care, healing and liberation. Peter and the others saw all that Jesus did. And then this life was ended by crucifixion but God raised Him from the dead and organised witnesses who saw that His new life was real.

These are things that Cornelius and the others know about—but they didn't know it had any relevance for them. As Peter says in v 36, the good news was sent to the people of Israel.

The challenge and promise of Jesus

▶ **Read v 42-43**

- ❓ *What challenge and promise does Jesus now bring?*
- ❓ *Who are these for?*
- ❓ *Why are both these elements essential for the gospel?*

Jesus is now the one appointed by God as judge of everyone—living and dead! But He is also the one through whom forgiveness of sins is offered. And this offer is for 'everyone who believes in him' (v 43).

The challenge of Jesus as Judge goes hand in hand with the promise of Jesus as saviour. If He isn't Judge, then there is no need for forgiveness. If He doesn't offer forgiveness, then the gospel is bad news, not good news.

time out

For yourself:

- ❓ *How do you feel knowing that Jesus is the Judge of 'the living and the dead'?*
- ❓ *How do you feel knowing you are offered 'forgiveness of sins through his name'?*

In speaking to others:

- ❓ *Which elements of Jesus' life might we not emphasise appropriately?*
- ❓ *Which elements of the gospel might we not emphasise appropriately?*

God's confirmation

▶ **Reading:** Acts 10 v 44-48

Wednesday 20 January

God has organised the meeting between Peter and Cornelius, and He has shown Peter that the gospel is for everyone. Now we see God's confirmation that these Gentiles are truly part of His church.

No second-class Christians

▶ **Read v 44-46**

- ❓ *How did the Jewish believers know the Holy Spirit had come?*
- ❓ *Why are they 'astonished' at the gift of the Spirit?*

While Peter is still speaking, the Holy Spirit comes on those listening—as shown by their speaking in tongues and praising God. This is a repeat of what happened when the Spirit first came in chapter 2. The point is that these Gentiles are given the Spirit in exactly the same way as the Jewish believers.

The Jewish believers who came with Peter are astonished though. They can't believe that Gentiles would be full recipients of God's gifts, just as the Jews were. This might seem odd to us, but we haven't had centuries of thinking that the Jews alone were God's chosen people. The early Christians still hadn't realised God's plan was to equally bless all nations in the way He had blessed them (**see Genesis 12 v 3**).

No barriers to any Christian

▶ **Read v 47-48**

- ❓ *Why does Peter say what he does in v 47?*
- ❓ *What does baptism symbolise here?*

Being equal recipients of God's Spirit means they are equal members of God's new community, the church. These two go hand in hand. Because God welcomes them fully, so should His people. And this new status with God and inclusion in the church is now shown in baptism.

time out

This section shows the equality of all those who believe in Jesus. Ask yourself:

- ❓ *What does this mean should happen in the life of the church?*
- ❓ *What does this mean should not happen in the life of the church?*

pray thru'

Pray for genuine inclusion of all true believers in your church.

All truly included

21

▶ **Reading:** Acts 11 v 1-18

Thursday 21 January

Peter has learned his lesson that the gospel is for all people. Now, though, he needs to convince other people.

Criticism

▶ Read v 1-3

- ❓ *Why were the Jewish believers so critical of Peter?*

Peter had said earlier that it was against their law to visit a Gentile (10 v 28); that is what these believers are worried about. They still think they should keep separate from the 'unclean' Gentiles. They are bound by their tradition, not realising God wants them to break free from it.

Explanation

▶ Read v 4-17

This is simply Peter's account of the events of chapter 10. Look through and consider the following questions:

- ❓ *How does Peter understand the timing of the different events?*
- ❓ *What does he say Cornelius was told about him?*
- ❓ *What important comparison does Peter make about the Holy Spirit?*

Acceptance

▶ Read v 18

- ❓ *What is striking about the reaction of these believers?*

We probably find it amazing that they were so slow to see that God was including the Gentiles. However, we should probably be equally amazed how quickly and readily they changed their mind. Working out how the Gentiles are included in the church, however, was going to be an issue that would be discussed again and appears in several letters in the New Testament.

The apostle Paul later writes: *'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one Christ Jesus'* (Galatians 3 v 28, TNIV).

pray thru'

Consider the words of the hymn below by Charles Wesley that speak about the unity achieved by the gospel. Pray they would be true of your attitude and your church.

*Many are we now, and one,
We who Jesus have put on;
There is neither bond nor free,
Male nor female, Lord, in You.*

*Love, like death, has all destroyed,
Rendered all distinctions void;
Names and sects and parties fall;
You, O Christ, are all in all!*

Boundaries being crossed

▶ **Reading:** Acts 11 v 19-30

Friday 22 January

Having given us the specific example of the inclusion of Cornelius and his family, Luke now gives more examples of the gospel spreading to the Gentiles.

Gospel growth

▶ Read v 19-21

Remember the persecution that started back in chapter 8? We pick up some of the effects of that again.

- ❓ *What is significant about the different groups the dispersed Christians are talking to?*
- ❓ *What does verse 21 tell us about their efforts?*

We know that Jesus' plan of Acts 1 v 8 is God's plan for His world. So He blesses these efforts of Christians in speaking the gospel to Greeks. We don't know if they knew of Peter's experience, but Luke has structured his account so we see the progression of including non-Jews. [There is some debate about exactly who this group is: it is most likely they were Greek-speaking God fearers—rather like Cornelius].

pray thru

Pray for boldness to speak to those others would shy away from. Ask God for an opportunity to do so this week.

Church growth

▶ Read v 22-26

- ❓ *What did Barnabas see in Antioch?*
- ❓ *What does he encourage people to do?*
- ❓ *Why does he get Saul to join him?*

Barnabas is so encouraged to find evidence of the grace of God—presumably people believing in Jesus. So he teaches and encourages them, and the church grows further. He thinks this would be a great setting for Saul to operate in as he is from a Greek-speaking background. So Barnabas brings Saul over and they form a pair of teachers within the church.

pray thru

Pray for your church leaders, that they would be like Barnabas in his character and ministry.

Church care

▶ Read v 27-30

- ❓ *What is impressive about this church's reaction to the news of the famine?*

These guys didn't know the Christians in Jerusalem—but becoming a Christian changes all these things. Now we care for each other as brothers and sisters.

pray thru

Pray for brothers and sisters you don't know who are in need elsewhere in the world. What can you do practically to be involved in helping them?

Herod versus a praying church

23

▶ **Reading:** Acts 12 v 1-19a

Saturday 23 January

We've seen the wonderful spread of the gospel. Now Luke takes us back to the opposition expressed against Christians. Throughout the book of Acts, witness, growth and persecution go hand in hand.

In the red corner

▶ Read v 1-4

- ❓ *What is Herod's motivation here?*
- ❓ *What powers does Herod have at his disposal?*

Herod happily does whatever raises his popularity ratings among the Jews. He sees that killing one Christian leader goes down well and so plans to kill another. He can do so easily enough with his authority and soldiers. As you read on and see Peter's wonderful escape, remember that James was killed—God's protection is not guaranteed.

In the blue corner

▶ Read v 5

- ❓ *How do you think Peter and the rest of church felt at this point?*
- ❓ *What powers do they have at their disposal?*

This is a case of the power of prayer against the power of the ruler. Luke writes it in such a way as to set up these opposing forces against each other: Herod plans to kill Peter, but the church is praying...

The knock-out

▶ Read v 6-11

Read through this section slowly and picture each action within it.

- ❓ *Why does Luke describe Peter's feelings during the rescue?*

Herod's guards and plans mean nothing to God—He does as He pleases, and now He's pleased to rescue Peter. See how Peter summarises in verse 11: he is 'rescued ... from Herod's clutches and everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen'.

The realisation

▶ Read v 12-19

- ❓ *What is funny about this section?*
- ❓ *What are we supposed to feel as a result of this story?*

This is divine comedy! Rhoda forgets to open the door and the people in the prayer meeting don't believe their prayers have been answered. But it is all to make us realise that the powers of this world are nothing compared to God and so we should pray. What do you think this church's prayer meetings were like after this?

time out

- ❓ *Do we really believe God is in control and can intervene in events around us?*
- ❓ *Do we really believe God answers prayer?*

Don't dare mess with God

▶ **Reading:** Acts 12 v 19b-23

Sunday 24 January

This incident finishes off the story from last time. Herod had fought God and lost—but he hadn't learned his lesson.

Sucking up from people

▶ **Read v 19b-21**

- ❓ *What are the people of Tyre and Sidon after from Herod?*
- ❓ *What sort of occasion is described in verse 21?*

This is the classic sucking-up moment. This group need Herod on their side to get their food supplies running again. They've managed some inside dealing with a servant of the king, and now here's the public deal-signing.

Herod is presumably enjoying the moment—he's dressed up in his royal robes, sitting on his throne and making his speech.

Condemnation from God

▶ **Read v 22-23**

- ❓ *What are the people trying to say about Herod?*
- ❓ *Why does God act as He does?*

The people's cry to Herod exalts him as high as they can go. It is the highest flattery they can manage. And Herod accepts it—rather than correcting them and acknowledging the true God.

- ❓ *Why do you think God doesn't strike down everyone who has this attitude?*
- ❓ *Why do you think He did so here?*

As Luke has placed this straight after the incident with Peter, we should read this as part of the ongoing battle between Herod and God. God won't stand for people persecuting His people and taking His place. We see that in Herod's life—ultimately, the whole world will see it.

time out

Consider these words from Isaac Watts, about the fate of those who oppose God:

*Think, O my soul! the dreadful day,
When this incensèd God
Shall rend the sky, and burn the sea,
And fling His wrath abroad.*

*What shall the wretch, the sinner do?
He once defied the Lord;
But he shall dread the Thund'rer now,
And sink beneath His Word.*

*Tempests of angry fire shall roll
To blast the rebel worm,
And beat upon his naked soul
In one eternal storm.*

The start of 'missions'

25

▶ **Reading:** Acts 12 v 24 – 13 v 3

Monday 25 January

'But the word of God continued to increase and spread.' (verse 24)

Here's the third summary statement from Luke. These both divide up his book and remind us of the central theme—it's all about the good news of Jesus spreading. In this section we see a new movement in that spread—the start of missions!

The mission director: the Holy Spirit!

▶ **Read v 1-3**

There are lots of unanswered questions here, such as exactly how the Spirit made Barnabas and Saul's new role known. But what is plain is that He has a job for them to do and the role is clear enough.

time out

- ❓ *So far, how has the gospel spread in the book of Acts?*
- ❓ *What needs to happen for Jesus' game plan of chapter 1 v 8 to be fulfilled?*

So far, people have simply spoken about Jesus wherever they have gone. But at first they stayed in Jerusalem. Many spread out because of the persecution and so told others—that was how the church at Antioch started (11 v 19-21).

But if the whole world is to hear of Jesus, people must deliberately go to places where He is not known. That is why I've called this the start of 'missions'—the deliberate movement to new ground to tell people the gospel.

- ❓ *What should we learn from the fact that the Holy Spirit kicks off this mission trip?*

God wanted people to know about Jesus! And He still does. The work of mission is ongoing.

pray thru'

Consider the words of the hymn used by mission agency OMF. Use them to pray:

*Facing a task unfinished
That drives us to our knees
A need that, undiminished
Rebukes our slothful ease
We, who rejoice to know You
Renew before Your throne
The solemn pledge we owe You
To go and make You known.*

*Where other lords beside You
Hold their unhindered sway
Where forces that defied You
Defy You still today
With none to heed their crying
For life, and love, and light
Unnumbered souls are dying
And pass into the night.*

*We bear the torch that flaming
Fell from the hands of those
Who gave their lives proclaiming
That Jesus died and rose
Ours is the same commission
The same glad message ours
Fired by the same ambition
To You we yield our powers.*

*O Father who sustained them
O Spirit who inspired
Saviour, whose love constrained them
To toil with zeal untired
From cowardice defend us
From lethargy awake!
Forth on Your mission send us
To labour for Your sake.*

Frank Houghton (1894-1792)
© OMF International

What's in a name?

26

▶ **Reading:** Acts 13 v 4-12

Tuesday 26 January

Barnabas and Saul are off and running on their first mission trip. They preach the gospel in Jewish synagogues (v 5). But Luke is most interested in their first encounter with a Gentile.

Whose son are you?

▶ **Read v 4-8**

- ❓ *What are the different reactions to their message?*
- ❓ *What strikes you about the sorcerer? (Look at how he's described and his names.)*

The proconsul wants to hear about Jesus but his attendant tries to stop him and turn him from believing the gospel.

What's ironic is that this attendant is called 'Bar-Jesus', which means son of Jesus. But he has nothing in common with Jesus; rather, he is a false prophet and sorcerer, hence his other name, 'Elymas' (and in v 10 he is called 'a child of the devil'). This introduces a theme that will continue over the next chapters—the Gentiles wanting to hear the gospel but opposition coming from Jews.

Which nationality are you?

▶ **Read v 9-12**

Paul receives his name change in v 9. Up to this point in Acts he is called Saul—and from this point on he is called 'Paul'.

- ❓ *Why do you think Paul's name change is given at this point?*

- ❓ *What is significant about what Paul says to Elymas?*

Paul's name change is related to his role. He is to be the apostle to the Gentiles (like this proconsul), but he will be opposed by Jews (like Bar-Jesus), and so he now changes from a Jewish to a Gentile name.

Paul calls Elymas a son of the devil, who is an enemy of what is right and is perverting the right ways of the Lord. Those are fearful words! And hence his punishment is to be blind, just as Paul himself was blinded by Jesus when he was opposing the gospel.

time out

- ❓ *How do people today oppose the spread of the message about Jesus?*
- ❓ *How might those who are seemingly part of the church be an 'enemy of everything that is right' and pervert 'the right ways of the Lord'?*
- ❓ *How should we respond to people doing these things?*

All fulfilled in Christ

27

▶ **Reading:** Acts 13 v 13-37

Wednesday 27 January

As Paul and Barnabas travel around, they regularly speak in synagogues. In this section they visit Pisidian Antioch (v 13-14), and are invited to give a sermon (v 15), and so we get to hear what they are saying.

Bible history

▶ Read v 16-22

Paul begins by telling them the story of Israel. He's going to tell them later that Jesus fulfils all that God was doing in the Old Testament.

- ❓ *What are the key points of Israel's history that Paul points out?*
- ❓ *Why does he stop with David?*

Recent history

▶ Read v 23-31

Paul moves on to John the Baptist and Jesus.

- ❓ *What are the key points he picks up about Jesus' life?*
- ❓ *What does he say was happening when Jesus was rejected?*

Fulfilment of history

▶ Read v 32-37

Paul now draws some conclusions from his history lesson so far.

- ❓ *How does he say Jesus fits with all that came before Him?*

- ❓ *Why does he quote these passages from the Old Testament?*

Paul sees Jesus fulfilling all of God's promises, especially those made to David. David was promised that a ruler from his line would always be on the throne (**2 Samuel 7**); he'd even been promised a ruler who would never see decay (**Psalms 16**).

In raising Jesus from the dead, God has exalted Him as His King who will rule the world; He is the one who inherits the promises made to David; He is the Holy One, who will never see decay.

All roads lead to Jesus

Paul sees all of the Old Testament history and promises as leading and pointing to Jesus. (This is, of course, what we've seen already in the speeches of Peter and Stephen in chapters 2 and 7.)

pray thru

Praise God:

- for His sovereign control over history.
- for His promises made and kept.
- for His King, Jesus, who will rule forever.

True forgiveness and freedom

28

▶ **Reading:** Acts 13 v 38-39

Thursday 28 January

Paul's speech reaches its climax in these two verses so we're going to slow down to ponder them and let them warm our hearts.

▶ **Read v 38-39**

❓ *What are the two things that Paul says we can now have through Jesus?*

True forgiveness

The first is 'forgiveness of sins'.

time out

Spend some time considering the sins you know about in your life – make a mental or actual list. Remember sins of attitude and action. Remember sins against God and against people. Remember sins of omission as well as commission.

Now dwell on the fact that they are all forgiven through Jesus. Completely forgiven.

True freedom

The second thing is freedom—being set free from sin, which Paul also calls justification. Justification can refer to God's declaration of being righteous before Him; but it can also refer to being released from the power and control of sin. That is the sense here.

time out

Consider how unable we are to obey God on our own; think about our continual return to sin; remember the way our hearts produce evil. The law could not release us from this power as all it could do is tell us what we ought to do.

Now dwell on the fact that through Jesus we are freed from sin. We will continue to fight against it, but its controlling power has gone.

The double cure

We have what the hymn writer Augustus Toplady called the 'double cure'—that is escape from the penalty and freedom from the power of sin. Here's his hymn:

*Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
hide me now, my refuge be;
let the water and the blood,
from your wounded side which flowed,
be of sin the double cure;
save from wrath and make me pure.*

We have forgiveness (saved from wrath) and freedom (being made pure). These wonderful blessings are both 'through Jesus' and they are given to whoever believes (v 39).

pray thru'

Spend some time thanking God for His wonderful grace.

A light for the Gentiles

29

▶ **Reading:** Acts 13 v 40-52

Friday 29 January

We've seen Paul's speech and the wonderful conclusion he came to. Today we finish with his warning and see the mixed reaction to his message.

A warning

▶ Read v 40-41

- ❓ *Paul has told them that forgiveness and freedom can be theirs in Jesus if they believe. What does he now warn them about? Why?*

Pauls' concern is that they will think this is too good to be true—and so won't believe it!

Ongoing conversations

▶ Read v 42-43

Paul has started a huge discussion with his speech. He and Barnabas are immediately booked for the following week and many people want to talk further. Notice that this is a mixture of Jews and converts to Judaism—that is Gentiles.

Opposition starts

▶ Read v 44-48

- ❓ *What different reaction is there the following week?*
- ❓ *How do Paul and Barnabas respond?*

This continues the theme we saw earlier in chapter 13 with the Jews contradicting Paul to stop people believing in Jesus. Although they are the natural inheritors

of the gospel promises, they are the ones who oppose it most.

This rejection means Paul and Barnabas feel free to turn to the Gentiles—who are glad and honour the word of the Lord!

Opposition gets worse

▶ Read v 49-52

- ❓ *How is the pattern we've seen repeated?*

The word spreads but some of the Jewish leaders have had enough—and so stir up enough opposition to force Paul and Barnabas out of town. They warn them as they leave by shaking the dust off their feet—a symbolic gesture showing that they cannot regard them as part of God's people.

time out

- ❓ *What attitudes do you see to the message of the gospel around you?*
- ❓ *Are you ever tempted to think it is too good to be true—and so in danger of rejecting it yourself?*
- ❓ *Do you ever see people jealous or angry because of others following Jesus?*

The gospel that divides

30

▶ **Reading:** Acts 14 v 1-7

Saturday 30 January

The preaching tour continues. Having been kicked out of Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas head 80 miles down the (Roman) road to Iconium.

The effect of the gospel

▶ Read v 1-4

- ? What is repeated that we have seen recently in Acts?
- ? What is repeated that we saw earlier in Acts with Peter and the other apostles?
- ? How would you describe the effect of the gospel on this city?

Paul and Barnabas speak as usual in the synagogue and many come to faith in Jesus. But once again there is a group of Jews who oppose them—notice how they are described: ‘those who refused to believe’ (v 2).

- ? Why do you think Luke uses that description?

Paul and Barnabas stay around speaking boldly for God, and God gives them the ability to perform signs and wonders to confirm the message, just as He did with Peter and the other apostles.

The result? A divided city.

time out

- ? In what ways do you see the gospel bringing division between different groups of people or individuals?
- ? Would there be more division if we spoke more boldly about Jesus?

The effect of opposition

▶ Read v 5-7

- ? How does the opposition mentioned so far intensify?
- ? How do Paul and Barnabas respond?

Notice that it is Jews and Gentiles involved in the opposition this time—they plot to stone Paul and Barnabas, that is, to kill them. But in God’s goodness, Paul and Barnabas find out about it (we’re not told how); and they leave town (again). Notice that there’s nothing necessarily wrong with avoiding persecution if you know it’s coming.

time out

- ? When should Christians stay to endure persecution and when should they flee?
- ? What is the effect of this persecution that we have seen already in Acts?

pray thru'

The gospel brings division and persecution. Pray for any you know (perhaps yourself?) who are struggling in the face of opposition. Pray for strength to speak boldly about Jesus, and grace to respond in a way that honours Him.

How long, O Lord?

31

▶ **Reading:** Psalm 79

Sunday 31 January

God's people are in a mess, and the nations are laughing at them.

▶ **Read Psalm 79**

A cry among the ruins

Foreign invaders desecrate holy places; bodies lie unburied amidst the rubble. We've seen pictures like this on the news. But as the psalmist looks at Jerusalem, he recognises God's hand in these proceedings.

❓ *What reason for God's anger is given in v 8?*

Sometimes, God brings us to difficult situations to discipline us. Perhaps because we are proud or disobedient. Perhaps because of our ingratitude or grumbling. We may not think we need it, but He knows we do.

Pray thru'

- ❓ *Can you think of times you have needed such discipline?*
- ❓ *Can you see what God taught you at such times?*
- ❓ *Are there particular sins you need to confess before God now?*
- ❗ *Thank God that He loves us enough to discipline us.*

The reason for discipline

The surrounding nations mistake discipline for desertion (v 10). Instead of recognising that God is disciplining His people because He loves them, they assume God has deserted them because He despairs of them. But they will see things differently when God delivers His people: then it won't be 'Where is their God?', but 'There is their God!'.

❓ *How is God's glory displayed when He delivers His people (v 9)?*

And, of course, God will inevitably restore His people.

❓ *What will happen when He does (v 13)?*

time out

Read Proverbs 3 v 11-12

- ❓ *Why should we not despise the Lord's discipline?*
- ❓ *What does discipline say about our relationship with the Lord?*

❓ *How would you now answer the haunting questions of v 5?*

Same story, different reaction

32

▶ **Reading:** Acts 14 v 8-20

Monday 1 February

Paul and Barnabas are being pushed around what is now modern Turkey. They now arrive in Lystra where they experience a very different reaction from the what they were used to!

Repeat performance

▶ Read v 8-10

? *What does this incident remind you of from earlier in Acts? (See 3 v 1-7.)*

Paul repeats a miracle that Peter performed in healing a man who was lame from birth. This is part of the way Luke shows us parallels between Paul and Peter and so confirms that Paul is a genuine apostle.

Unexpected response

▶ Read v 11-13

? *How would you describe the crowd's reaction?*

? *Why do you think they respond this way?*

This is not a predominantly Jewish city and so the conclusion drawn about the healing is very different. They believe that such powers can only be because the gods have come down and those gods deserve sacrifices.

Pointing to the true God

▶ Read v 14-18

Barnabas and Paul are horrified to be thought of in such a way—shown by tearing their clothes. They try to explain the truth of the matter.

? *What are the main points they make?*

? *How does this differ from what you would have said?*

Notice:

- their humility in saying they are no different to their listeners
- their bluntness in calling idols 'worthless'
- their pointing people to turn to the one true, creator God
- their saying that rain and food is evidence of God's kindness.

Same old story

▶ Read v 19-20

The Jews from the last two cities, Antioch and Iconium, want another chance at Paul. So they come looking for him and persuade the crowd to stone him (rather different from sacrificing to him). They think it's all over, but Paul isn't dead and once again he and Barnabas head out of town the next day.

pray thru'

Pray for those you know who live following idols, that they would turn to the one true God.

Pray for your own boldness in speaking the gospel.

Homeward journey

33

▶ **Reading:** Acts 14 v 21-28

Tuesday 2 February

The first missionary journey is drawing to a close. Here's Luke's summary of their trip home.

Preparing churches

▶ Read v 21-23

Having preached the gospel in Derbe, Paul and Barnabas go home through the three cities we've been reading about—each of which they were opposed in!

? *Why do you think they go back to these cities?*

? *In what ways do they prepare the Christians there for life ahead?*

This shows us the need for 'follow up' of new Christians! Paul and Barnabas choose to head back into dangerous territory so they can encourage and strengthen the disciples there. Presumably they did that by various kinds of teaching, but a key part of the message is teaching about the suffering Christians will go through.

time out

The suffering they mention isn't part of the qualification of entering the kingdom. Rather, in a rebellious world it is the path we must walk if we are faithful to Jesus.

They also appoint elders in each church—those who will have oversight and teaching responsibility for the church. The church needs leaders and, although all these Christians would be young, they choose those they think are best suited.

(To reflect more on choosing leaders, see **1 Timothy 3 v 1-7**.)

They leave by committing these young churches to God—trusting His care and protection for them.

apply

- ? *Are there any young Christians or church situations you know of who you could encourage and pray for?*
- ? *How can you let them know you are praying for them?*

Arrival home

▶ Read v 24-28

This is the simple description of travelling home to Antioch and reporting what has happened but consider the particular phrases Luke uses:

- *'where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed'* (v 26)
- *'they reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith'* (v 27)
- ? *What do these phrases tell us about how they viewed what they had done?*

pray thru'

Pray for a similar view of Christian ministry for yourself, your church and any you know of in mission situations.

Opposition from within

34

▶ **Reading:** Acts 15 v 1-4

Wednesday 3 February

The first missionary journey saw the gospel spreading further afield and raised more opposition from outside the church. Today we start a section looking at opposition that arises from within the church.

The accusation made

▶ Read v 1

- ❓ *What is the argument of these new teachers from Judea? Look on to v 5 to see more about who they are and what they are saying.*
- ❓ *Why do you think they would be saying this?*
- ❓ *What effect do you think this would have on the church in Antioch?*

These new teachers are teaching that Christians should be circumcised in order to be saved. This is part of their view that Christians should still follow the law of Moses (verse 5). These teachers are Christians but used to be Pharisees—who were very concerned about obedience to the law.

The debate begins

▶ Read v 2

- ❓ *How do Paul and Barnabas respond to this teaching?*

There must have been a pretty impressive argument over this! And rightly so because they are discussing how you can be saved. This question of the ongoing role of the law, and whether Gentiles needed to follow it, was a huge issue at this time.

The debate results in Paul and Barnabas being sent to Jerusalem to discuss this issue with the apostles and elders of the church there. (It is sometimes said this was a council of churches—it's actually two delegates from one church visiting the 'home base' of Christianity.)

The mood set

▶ Read v 3-4

- ❓ *What happens on the way to Jerusalem and when they arrive?*
- ❓ *Why do you think Luke tells us this?*

Paul and Barnabas report all God has been doing—that is, in bringing the Gentiles to faith. God has already been showing His acceptance of them. The debate is yet to happen but Luke is showing us the way it's going to go.

time out

What might we impose as necessary for salvation on people other than faith in Jesus? If we wouldn't impose anything explicitly, what might we communicate implicitly?

The evidence decides it

▶ **Reading:** Acts 15 v 5-21

Thursday 4 February

Paul and Barnabas have arrived in Jerusalem to discuss whether Gentile believers need to obey the Old Testament law. **Read verse 5** to see the accusation.

Evidence from Peter

▶ Read v 6-11

- ❓ What evidence does Peter bring?
- ❓ What does he say will be happening if they impose the law on people?
- ❓ What conclusion does he draw about salvation?

Evidence from Barnabas and Paul

▶ Read v 12

- ❓ What evidence do Barnabas and Paul bring?
- ❓ What's the implication of what they've said?

Evidence from the Bible

▶ Read v 13-18

- ❓ What evidence does James bring?
- ❓ How does he see the prophecy in Amos contributing?

God has made Himself clear—He miraculously led Peter to preach the gospel to Cornelius and his household, and then gave them the Holy Spirit, showing that they were full members of His new community. He worked miraculously through Paul and Barnabas among the Gentiles—just as He had among Jews in Jerusalem. And God had promised a day when peo-

ple from outside Israel would seek Him and be part of His people.

The conclusion drawn

▶ Read v 19-21

- ❓ What conclusion does James draw?
- ❓ What reason does he give for the recommendations he suggests?

The overall conclusion is that the law is not part of how we are saved. As Peter said: 'It is though the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved' (verse 11).

However, the Jewish law is well known and followed and so Gentile believers are encouraged to abide by parts of it that would allow getting together with Jewish believers—such as in what they eat.

Notice that circumcision—the big demand at the start of the chapter—doesn't feature at all!

pray thru'

Pick one of the following and reflect and pray:

- ❓ What encourages you most from the evidence given about Gentiles being saved?
- ❓ What is communicated about the importance of Christian unity in this section?
- ❓ Where does the truth of salvation by Christ's grace alone need defending most today?

Letter writing

▶ **Reading:** Acts 15 v 22-35

Friday 5 February

The decision about obeying the law is decided. All that remains is to communicate that decision to the various churches who've been bothered by this new teaching.

The letter written

▶ Read v 22-29

- ❓ *Why do you think they decided to send two of the leaders of the Jerusalem church?*
- ❓ *What details are there in the letter about people and decisions?*
- ❓ *How would you describe the tone and feel of the letter?*

A visit from people, rather than just a letter, is so much more personal! And means that any outstanding questions can be answered. It was more costly to send people but worth it for the benefits to their relationship and the health of the church in Antioch.

time out Churches can easily slide towards doing what is only actually necessary rather than what is most loving and relational. Are there any areas where you or your church have done this and should change?

Notice in the letter:

- the distancing from the false teachers
- the recognition of how disturbing their teaching was
- the affirmation of Paul and Barnabas

- the confirming in person of what is written
- the details of their decision

The result is a wonderfully reassuring and pastoral letter!

time out Think about the thoughtfulness behind this letter and these actions. Do we and our churches have this attitude?

The letter delivered

▶ Read v 30-35

- ❓ *What is the response to the letter?*
- ❓ *What else is significant about the visit?*
- ❓ *How would you now describe the relationship between the churches?*

The church is glad for the encouragement of the letter and is strengthened by the ministry of Judas and Silas. They are eventually sent back to Jerusalem with a lovely 'blessing of peace'. The danger of false teaching has been avoided: not only in preserving the truth of the gospel but also in preserving the unity of the church.

apply Sometimes we defend the truth of the gospel but in an unloving way, or we are loving but downgrade truth. What can we learn from this whole episode about these tendencies?

Unfortunate division

37

▶ **Reading:** Acts 15 v 36-41

Saturday 6 February

The story now returns to Paul and Barnabas back in the church at Antioch—but another problem is looming.

The trip proposed

▶ Read v 36

Paul suggests a return trip to the churches that were planted on their first missionary journey, to see how the believers are doing. The letter that was delivered to the church in Antioch is also for these other churches (see 15 v 23) and reporting that decision is part of this proposed trip (see 16 v 4).

The disagreement raised

▶ Read v 37-39a

- ❓ *What is the source of the disagreement? (Look back to **Acts 13 v 13**)*
- ❓ *How do you think we should feel about this disagreement?*
- ❓ *Do you think this could have been resolved?*

We don't know why John (also called Mark) left on the first trip but clearly Paul doesn't think it reflected well on his suitability for a second trip. Luke says he didn't continue with them in the work; so Paul obviously thought he should have done so.

It is difficult to know what should have happened—one of them could have changed their minds and accepted the other's view. However, this was a differ-

ence over what was wise or best, not what was right or wrong. We have to accept that such disagreements will happen—which is not to say that this justifies them without trying to work things through.

The parting of ways

▶ Read v 39b-41

Barnabas does take Mark with him and Paul chooses Silas (who he knows from his recent visit to Antioch to deliver the letter). They head off in different directions, which does of course mean there is now the advantage of two mission teams rather than one. Luke's focus now continues on Paul, and Barnabas drops out of view.

(We do later hear of Paul's commendation of Mark in **2 Timothy 4 v 11**.)

time out

- ❓ *What attitudes are needed in your church to avoid these sorts of disagreements and separation? If you want to see some suggestions look at: **Ephesians 4 v 2-3; Philippians 2 v 1-5; Colossians 3 v 12-15**.*

Spend some time praying for these.

Cutting issues

▶ **Reading:** Acts 16 v 1-5

Sunday 7 February

Paul and Barnabas have gone their separate ways and we follow Paul in his return trip round the churches they previously planted.

The apparent oddity resolved

▶ Read v 1-3

The previous chapter spent time stressing that people didn't have to be circumcised to be Christians—but here we read about Timothy, who Paul circumcised.

- ❓ *Can you think what is culturally strange about Timothy, given who his parents are?*
- ❓ *What particular reason is given for circumcising Timothy?*

You are a Jew if your mum is a Jew—and so, despite Timothy's mixed race parents, he would still have been considered Jewish. It was therefore odd that he hadn't been circumcised already.

Paul specifically wants to take Timothy along with him—and so circumcises him. He seems to think it would both regularise Timothy to the Jewish people they met, and also allow entry into synagogues. This fits with the principles Paul lays out in **1 Corinthians 9 v 19-23**. Here are some key verses:

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews ... I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. (TNIV)

So this is not because Timothy needed to be circumcised for his salvation—but for his evangelistic usefulness.

apply What are we prepared to do or not do in order to lower barriers with people we're trying to reach with the gospel? Pray for your own flexibility and willingness to be 'all things to all people' and that of your church.

The churches growing

▶ Read v 4-5

- ❓ *What are Paul and the others doing as they travel?*
- ❓ *What is the overall result?*

Verse 5 is another of Luke's summary statements, which he uses to divide up his book. In this last section, we've seen the start of deliberate missions into new areas. That raised opposition from outside, and then theological disagreement inside the church. Now the word keeps going on.

time out ❓ *What have you been struck by through this last section of Acts (12 v 25 – 16 v 5)?*

GENESIS: The beginning

39

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 1 v 1-2

Monday 8 February

Why start here?

▶ Read Genesis 1 v 1

'Let's start at the very beginning,' sang Maria (in *The Sound of Music*). But why should the Bible begin here?

❓ *What does this starting point show about who the Bible is written for? And about the significance of its message?*

By beginning at the very beginning, it's clear that ultimately the Bible is the story of everything and for everyone. It's not just the story of Israel—it doesn't begin with Abraham. Nor just the story of the Jewish religion—it doesn't start with Moses receiving God's law. Those things are important elements in the story, but they are not the final goal of the story.

Separate

❓ *What does verse 1 tell us about the nature of God?*

▶ Read Genesis 1 v 2...

❓ *...and answer the same question.*

'Heavens' here doesn't mean 'the spiritual realm' but 'everything from the ground upwards'. Similarly, 'earth' means 'everything under our feet'. So 'the heavens and the earth' = 'the whole physical universe'. Theologians describe God's action as creation out of nothing. Before God acted, there was no space and no time—an unimaginable situation. From this we learn that God is transcendent—separate

from the world which He has created.

Involved

But God didn't create our world instantaneously. At first, 'the earth was formless and empty'. We'll find out shortly how God first formed, then filled the world. At the very beginning, however, there was only shapelessness, emptiness, darkness and bottomless wateriness—'the deep'. This is not a friendly place for human life! And yet it is pregnant with possibilities for the Spirit of God was nevertheless 'hovering' (like a parent bird, **Deuteronomy 32 v 11**) over this whole scene. So God is also *immanent*—actively present in our world from the very beginning.

time out
Before God created the world there was not nothing! That's because Father, Son and Holy Spirit shared an eternal relationship of love and glory (**John 17 v 5; 1 Corinthians 2 v 11**)—a relationship that is now open to us in Christ Jesus. **Read John 14 v 20.**

pray thru'
Spend time praising God for His work of creation and what it reveals about Him.

From chaos to form

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 1 v 3-13

Tuesday 9 February

Forming

▶ Read Genesis 1 v 3-13

Now we begin to see how God gave the chaotic and empty world form and shape.

- ❓ *What three separations did God make as He formed the world?*
- ❓ *What phrase introduces each creative act?*
- ❓ *What verdict is given each time?*

Who?

Repeatedly we're told: 'And God said'. We have seen the Spirit of God hovering over His world (v 2). Now we see the word of God expressing His will and putting it into effect. As the story of the Bible progresses, we shall see God emerge as three distinct persons—Father, Spirit, and Son or 'Word' (**see John 1 v 1-18**).

How?

God's act of forming involves separating—light from darkness (v 4), the sky above from the world below (v 6), and the sea from the land (v 9). And each outcome is described as 'good' (v 4, 10 and 12).

time out

Religious types often seem suspicious of enjoying the good things in life. What does it mean for us that God declared His creation good?

Read 1 Timothy 4 v 3-5. What attitudes might you need to change?

The separations that formed our world took place in separate stages, marked by the words 'And there was evening, and there was morning—the nth day'. Could these be periods of twenty-four hours? Of course, but it is a strange 'evening and morning' without a sun and moon to separate night from day (see v 14-19). The picture this passage paints is certainly not straightforward!

Genesis teaches fundamental truths about the physical world but clearly not in the same terms as our modern physical sciences. Yet the world of Genesis 1 is recognisably *our* world, not the world of mythology. And Genesis tells us that the world had a specific beginning, developing in stages and becoming increasingly complex until it reached its present state—certainly not an 'anti-scientific' view. However, the pattern of six days indicates that this development is heading somewhere. Shortly we shall see exactly where.

time out

❓ *How can Christians today be scientists with integrity?*

Pray for those who work in the physical sciences to seek truth above reputation.

From form to filling

41

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 1 v 14-25

Wednesday 10 February

We've seen how God formed our world: today we see how He filled it. **Read the verses.**

❓ *What are the parallels between these verses and yesterday's Bible passage?*

Praising stars

▶ **Read Genesis 1 v 14-19**

❓ *What light do these verses shed on practices like astrology?*

The sun, moon and stars have no special powers—they merely mark time and give light. They are not, of course, simply for human convenience—they proclaim the glory of God (**Psalm 19 v 1**). But they have no other spiritual significance, even though people will later worship them in ignorance (**Deuteronomy 4 v 19**).

time out

Many people read their horoscope each day. Have you ever tried to turn a conversation about 'the stars' into a gospel opportunity?

❓ *How might you do that?*

Multiplying creatures

▶ **Read Genesis 1 v 20-23**

❓ *What new thing does God do on day five?*

The seas and the skies were made to be filled, but before the fifth day they are not yet filled. Once again, we see that creation takes place in stages, rather than happening all at once. On day five God

speaks a word not only of creation, but of blessing (v 22)—He tells the creatures He has made to be fruitful, to multiply and to fill their God-given realm.

Land animals

▶ **Read Genesis 1 v 24-25**

❓ *Why is no blessing mentioned here?*

Not because God has nothing to say but because His word of blessing to the land animals is being saved for the pinnacle of His creation (see v 28). The stage is now set for the appearance of the human race.

The Bible's creation account comes to a climax with man. That's a great offence to many people who see humans as nothing more than animals—indeed, worse than animals, since only we trash creation. But it's precisely because we are much more than animals that we can, sadly, trample the rest of creation under our feet.

pray thru'

You've seen the diversity and wonder of God's creation, from travelling or on TV. Spend time praising Him for the richness (and humour!) of what He has made.

God's image

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 1 v 26

Thursday 11 February

We've arrived at one of the most extraordinary verses in the whole Bible.

Who is doing the making?

▶ Read Genesis 1 v 26

❓ *Look carefully at this verse. What is strange about the way God speaks here?*

It's the last stage of creation, and God says: 'Let us make man in our image'. But who is God talking to? Not the angels—no mention of them here and no suggestion anywhere that we're made in their image. And nothing else in creation can create alongside God.

God, it seems, is consulting Himself—but Himself in the plural (not 'I will make' but 'Let us make'). The word for God used here ('*Elohim*') is itself plural, so is this just correct grammar? Well, the Bible insists that the plural '*Elohim*' refers to one God. In **Genesis 6 v 13**, for example, God ('*Elohim*') says to Noah, 'I am going to destroy the earth' (not 'we are'). So 'us' in Genesis 1 v 26 appears to be not a matter of grammar but theology...

This verse shows that God's oneness involves diversity. It reinforces what we've already discovered—that the Creator God, though separate from His creation, is at the same time present in creation through His Spirit, and active in creation through His Word (**see 1 v 2-3**).

What is being made?

❓ *What does God say about mankind's identity? And mankind's responsibility?*

What God says about mankind is just as remarkable—we are to be the 'image' and 'likeness' of God Himself. And we are to do it by acting for God, ruling over the living things that God has made.

Pray thru'

Martin Luther wrote that because of our sins, 'we are all beggars'. Confess how you have marred God's image through sin.

Yet God's remarkable declaration will one day have an even more remarkable outcome, for a man will be born who will truly be 'the image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1 v 15), because He is God Himself with us (Matthew 1 v 23).

❓ *In view of this, how can you be a good 'image' of God today?*

Humankind?

43

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 1 v 27

Friday 12 February

▶ Read Genesis 1 v 26-27

- ❓ *What key truth does verse 27 repeat?*
- ❓ *How many times is this said (see also v 26)?*
- ❓ *How does the way it is said change?*

The truth that humans are made in God's image is so important that, in two verses, the Bible states it three times.

time out

A painting, even a damaged one, is worth millions if created by a great artist.

- ❓ *What does the truth of v 26-27 say about each human life?*
- ❓ *In what ways is this under attack as our society turns away from Christian teaching?*

Unity

Verse 27 first mentions 'man' in the singular: 'In the image of God he created him'. This is because the first man represented all of us. We see it when sin entered the world 'through one man' (**Romans 5 v 12**)—all of us are implicated in that sin, because we all belong to that one man. So **1 Corinthians 15 v 22** says, 'in Adam all die'. Many today are uncomfortable with this, but actually we still think this way in certain situations. When swimmer Rebecca Adlington won a gold medal in the 2008 Olympics, few Brits had a problem with saying: 'We won!'

Wonderfully, the sin which came through one man's disobedience is overcome by salvation through one man's faithfulness (**Romans 5 v 19**). We face judgment for sin because of our unity with Adam, but we can be saved by our unity with Christ (**Romans 6 v 5**)—that's because the human race is a single 'mankind'.

Diversity

However, as the end of verse 27 adds, humanity is also male and female, not only to fulfil verse 28 ('Be fruitful and increase'), but also together to image what God—in His unity/diversity—is like. And also, later in the Bible, to demonstrate the relationship between God and His people, pictured in the coming of Christ as a marriage of husband and wife (**see Revelation 21 v 2; Ephesians 5 v 22-27**).

time out

Both our gender and our relationships with the opposite sex are significant because they're part of imaging God.

- ❓ *How will this affect your thinking in this area, and your prayers?*

Rule

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 1 v 28-31

Saturday 13 February

Everyone knows the difference between a good ruler and a bad one.

Experience should also teach us that 'no ruler' is not a good thing. (Think of William Golding's book Lord of the Flies, what happened in Iraq after Saddam Hussein's overthrow, or the carnage that ensues when the teacher leaves the classroom!)

▶ **Read Genesis 1 v 28-31**

God tells mankind, like the animals, to be fruitful, increase and fill the earth, However, there is an important addition, for mankind is also to rule over the animal kingdom.

❓ *What do you think God envisaged when He gave this command? What makes a good ruler?*

Once again, this truth grates on modern sensibilities. Verse 28 has been held responsible by some sceptics for every environmental catastrophe, on the basis that it has given western man the excuse to plunder the planet.

Perhaps abusers of God's creation have sometimes misused Scripture to justify their ravages. But a proper reading of Scripture shows that such an interpretation is ridiculous. Because mankind is to be the image of God, the rule that we have been given is to reflect the way God rules. And He is, above all, the one who cares for His creation (**see Job 38 – 39**).

Of course people have abused the envi-

ronment. But that has nothing to do with fulfilling Genesis 1 v 28. Rather, it reflects the way in which we have become corrupt rulers (Genesis 3 onwards). It is because we are uniquely superior to the rest of the created order that we are so able to wreck it!

At this stage in the story, however, everything is as it should be. Thus verse 31 gives the verdict that it is 'very good'.

time out

We stand not under God's world, as inferior to it, nor over God's world as indifferent to it, but in God's world as representatives of Him.

❓ *As our society turns away from Christian teaching, how do we show indifference to God's world?*

❓ *Or how do we abdicate our rulership?*

Think of some ways in which you can exercise your rule over God's world as a servant king, not a tyrannical despot.

The meaning of rest

45

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 2 v 1-3

Sunday 14 February

▶ Read Genesis 2 v 1-3.

❓ *How is the seventh day unlike the other six days?*

❓ *What's the significance of that?*

God's creative work is finished (2 v 1)—but there is still a seventh day, yet without the phrase: 'And there was evening and there was morning, a seventh day'. In other words, a day without end!

Neverending rest

'Rested' (v 2, NIV) means 'to cease from action', from which the Hebrew word 'Sabbath' derives. The distinction between ceasing and resting is important. We think a 'day of rest' is for getting over one week of work and preparing for another. But God rested, not to recover, but to enjoy the results of creation. So the seventh day is the goal of creation—that's why it is blessed and made holy (v 3). And that's why the Hebrew Sabbath was not a special 'worship' day—which was for every day—but rather, a day when every person and animal tasted God's original purpose for creation.

time out

❓ *What does 'rest' mean in **Psalm 95 v 11**?*

❓ *And in **Hebrews 4 v 8-11**?*

vation—for Israel, entry into the promised land, and for Christians, entering the kingdom of heaven through the gospel.

❓ *Compare **Exodus 20 v 8-11** and **Deuteronomy 5 v 12-15**. What's the difference between these two versions of the fourth commandment?*

In Exodus, the Sabbath is for sharing God's rest, but in Deuteronomy, it commemorates God's deliverance. That's because, while rest is the goal of deliverance, deliverance is how we enter rest. So Christians keep 'Sabbath' by faith in Christ, rather than by observing a special day (see **Colossians 2 v 16-17**).

But God made us for 'rest', so let's make sure we do!

apply

There's no 'Monday morning feeling' in Genesis. God is not resting to go back to work, and godly rest is much more than recuperation.

❗ **Take a break!** Remember, it's a foretaste of what we were created for—to be with and rejoice in our God and Saviour.

After the Fall (see **Genesis 3**), 'rest' becomes an expression of the hope of sal-

A closer look

46

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 2 v 4-7

Monday 15 February

▶ Read Genesis 2 v 4-7

❓ *We've already read about the creation of humanity in 1 v 26-28. Why is this second account here? What are the differences? Can you explain them?*

Some people believe the account which begins in Genesis 2 v 4 is different from, contradictory with and even inferior to the account in 1 v 1 – 2 v 3. We can't agree if we respect Scripture as the word of God. Nevertheless, there are differences from chapter 1.

Genesis 1 could be described as an overture, while Genesis 2 is like individual musical 'movements'. Genesis 1 gives us the big picture—all the themes are there, caught up in one grand and flowing account. But a massive amount is left unsaid, so Genesis 2 begins to give us a closer look.

Waiting for Adam

- ❓ *What is said here about the plants?*
- ❓ *What is said about the water?*
- ❓ *How might you describe the earth before man's creation?*

Genesis 2 focuses on man's world (not the whole world, but that for which man would be responsible) and his relationships with and within it. Creation is waiting for mankind to come along and the earth is unfruitful because there is 'no man to work (literally 'to serve') the ground'. As every gardener knows, you

don't want rain when there is no one to mow the lawn! So there is water in this primitive earth (v 6), but it is not yet harnessed beneficially.

This is the situation in and for which Man is created. He is to serve the earth. Significantly, therefore, he is formed 'from the dust of the ground' ('Ground' = 'adamah' in Hebrew, from which comes 'Adam' ie: 'man'). Although man has humble origins, his life comes directly from God, who breathes 'living breath' into him.

time out

- ❓ *Compare **John 20 v 22**. What is the significance of Jesus' action here?*
- ❓ *How would you answer someone who believes that we are 'nothing but' chemicals and instincts?*

pray thru'

'Dust to dust, ashes to ashes...'
Remember who you are—fearfully and wonderfully made—and praise your Creator.

▶ Read the passage

- ❓ *What do you think was the difference between the world in general at this point and the garden of Eden?*
- ❓ *What do we learn about God's provision for mankind?*
- ❓ *And God's purpose for mankind?*

Eden

The world was waiting to be filled and subdued. Note that at the beginning the world was not perfect (ie: not complete). But a garden is (at least in intention) an ordered and cultivated place. So it was here that God caused attractive plants and fruitful trees to grow. These trees were not just 'good for food' but 'pleasing to the eye'. God provides beauty as well as nourishment. The garden of Eden was designed to show what the world was intended to become under mankind's care.

pray thru'

God is the first 'artist' as well as being an architect and builder. He has created beauty as well as practicality. Think of a time and place when you have been stunned by the beauty He has made. Give praise to our awesome God.

The two trees

- ❓ *Look at verse 9. What was unique about Eden?*
- ❓ *Look ahead at v 15-17. For what other purpose was Eden created?*

Uniquely, two special trees grew at the centre of this garden—'the tree of life' and 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. Eden was more than a pleasant location or a model of what man would achieve—it was a testing ground, where man's obedience to God would be tested and where issues of eternity would be decided.

time out

- ❓ *Can you spot the parallel between the gardens of Eden and Gethsemane?*

Gethsemane was also a testing ground—where one man's obedience to God was tested to the farthest limits, and again, where issues of eternal life were decided.

Beyond Eden

Verses 10-14 give us an idea of the landscape and features of God's world beyond Eden. The picture of abundant water and the details about mineral resources conjure up an image of a land ripe for exploration and enjoyment. At this stage, the future seems bright! God's good world awaits its human rulers.

Good and evil

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 2 v 15-17

Wednesday 17 February

Most people today would say that personal fulfilment is impossible without complete autonomy ie: freedom from being ruled by someone else...

▶ Read the passage

❓ Look back at 1 v 26-28. What are the limits of our 'rule' and our 'likeness' to God?

Provision

Man was put not only in a place prepared by God (Eden), but also in a relationship with God—under His rule. But a rule, wonderfully, like no other. Notice God's two commands: 'Eat anything you like... but not that'. Adam had abundant blessing from God but not moral autonomy. In Eden, Adam found God's blessing under God's rule. Eden is actually a picture of the kingdom of God—blessing under God's rule is the present privilege and future destiny of Christians today.

Purpose

God's blessing included purpose and meaning. Adam was to 'work' or 'keep' the garden (like a park-keeper in charge of a park). Our purpose is found in showing God's likeness by ruling the creation under us.

Prohibition

❓ What do you think is meant by 'the knowledge of good and evil' (v 17)?

This term appears in **Deuteronomy 1 v 39** (little children 'do not yet know

good from bad') and in **1 Kings 3 v 9** (kings need to 'distinguish between right and wrong').

But Adam wasn't a child—he surely knew there is 'good and evil'. He had a capacity and (like kings) a responsibility to make right judgments, otherwise God could not have tested him. So here 'the knowledge of good and evil' must mean something else. God's prohibition was intended to show that Adam must not presume to decide between right and wrong independently of God. To do so would mean death (v 17), for it would be to separate from God, and actually oppose Him.

time out

People say: 'You can't tell me what to do'.

❓ Why are they passionate about this?

apply

Although outside Eden, like Adam, we too must not presume to tell God what is right or wrong.

Read Romans 12 v 2

❗ Pray for obedience to what God's word says is right and wrong.

▶ Read the verses

- ❓ *What suddenly surprising statement appears in these verses? Compare 1 v 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.*
- ❓ *Who makes this statement?*

Seven times in Genesis 1 we read that God's creation is good. Now, for the first time, something is 'not good'—specifically, it is 'not good for the man to be alone'. Adam isn't complaining of loneliness. It is God, not Adam, who announces what is 'not good'. There is a lack of completeness—something more is needed before mankind is finished and God can declare everything 'very good' (1 v 31).

The 'missing link'!

- ❓ *What is needed?*
- ❓ *What for, do you think?*

God also defines what is missing—Adam needs 'a helper'. Which, elsewhere in Scripture, refers to the help God provides in a crisis (see **Psalm 121 v 2**). Or help given by an ally in war (**2 Kings 14 v 26**). What Adam needs is not help with the washing up but strengthening! And from someone 'suitable for him'.

time out

Are you something of a loner? Do you considered that as a strength, or a potential weakness? Remember, God designed us for 'togetherness'.

The X Factor

A sort of talent parade follows (v 19).

- ❓ *What does Adam do here?*
- ❓ *How is he achieving the purpose for which he's been made (see yesterday's notes)?*
- ❓ *How does this demonstrate that there is 'no suitable helper' (compare 1 v 28)?*

Animals have 'strengths' that humans lack. Think of what elephants, horses or dogs can do that we can't. Yet none of these is the 'suitable helper'—they can't supply the strengthening that Adam specifically needs.

Notice that God waits to see how Adam will name each creature. He gives Adam autonomy here because, by naming the animals, Adam is ruling them, as he was designed to. But the helper is to be 'with' Adam in this (1 v 28—God spoke to 'them').

pray thru'

Thank God that He has not made us to be alone. Pray for those who strengthen you, and for people you know who are lonely.

Woman

50

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 2 v 21-25

Friday 19 February

Adam needs strengthening in order to be complete, but with what kind of strength? It's not physical strengthening, as we learned from the outcome of the animal parade in 2 v 19. And it's not just company—it can't come from another man.

▶ Read the passage

- ❓ *Why do you think some modern minds find verse 22 offensive?*
- ❓ *What do the woman's origins tell us about her identity (v 23)?*

Just a spare rib?

Is woman simply man's 'spare rib'? That's how many today view 'the message' of verse 22. But look at the welcome the man gives to the woman in verse 23. She is one with him, even though she is separate from him. She is of his very essence—bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh—and yet she is not 'man'.

- ❓ *What outcome did God intend from His creation of the woman (v 24)?*

Verse 24 tells us that 'for this reason' (the 'same difference' of the woman) people separate from their parents and unite in marriage. And in the rest of the Bible, sexual union is seen as recreating the 'one flesh' ideal of Adam and Eve, even when that union is itself far from ideal (eg: **1 Corinthians 6 v 16**).

time out

Sex is good: God made it! Resolve to regard sex and sexuality as a wonderful and beautiful thing.

United with Christ

But marriage is not the ultimate goal for humanity. In the New Testament the 'one flesh' union of marriage is a picture of the greater 'one spirit' union of each believer with Christ (**1 Corinthians 6 v 17**). The creation of Eve points us to our ultimate dignity and destination—union with Christ.

At this stage, nakedness and sexuality bring 'no shame' (v 25). Far from it! They are the very creation of God Himself—the one who makes all things 'good'.

pray thru'

Many see human marriage as the solution to our 'aloneness', but the true solution is divine marriage (**Revelation 19 v 9**).

Pray for those (perhaps yourself) who feel loneliness and long for marriage—to be strengthened by God Himself.

The serpent

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 3 v 1-5

Saturday 20 February

▶ Read the passage

- ❓ What does **Revelation 12 v 9** confirm (something most of us assume but not actually mentioned here)?

Crafty questions

- ❓ How does the serpent's question exaggerate God's prohibition? (Compare 3 v 1 with 2 v 16-17.)
- ❓ What idea about God would this begin to create in Eve's mind?
- ❓ How does the woman's answer (3 v 2) exaggerate God's prohibition?

'You must not touch it' (3 v 3) is an addition to God's words in 2 v 17. Had God said more to Adam than we read in chapter 2? Had Adam tried to put his own 'fence' around God's law in what he said to Eve? Or did Eve make this up herself? Whatever the answer, Eve has been drawn into a damaging dialogue with the enemy about God's will and His truth. Every time he speaks, the devil sows doubts and denials of God's character and truth into Eve's mind.

time out

'Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion' (1 Peter 5 v 8). Dialogue is not always the best approach to resolving moral issues—sometimes it is better just to run for your life!

Deadly denials

- ❓ What is the devil trying to suggest about God in 3 v 4-5?

The serpent moves on to outright denial: 'you will not surely die' (3 v 4)—implying that God has lied. And from there it is only a small step to trashing God's motives: 'God knows ... you will be like God' (3 v 5)—suggesting God wants to keep the best for Himself, so He's not generous at all but selfish.

So far, humans have accepted God's limit on their moral autonomy—they know of good and evil, but have not 'taken the fruit'. They have accepted that God defines what is good and evil, and have trusted what He has communicated through His word. But now they are offered the opportunity, no longer to trust but to see for themselves (3 v 5).

pray thru

How's your trust in God's character and word? Pray for God's help in resisting the devil's crafty tactics.

Restore us, O God

▶ **Reading:** Psalm 80

Sunday 21 February

This psalm, like the one before it, sees the people of Israel in distress. They need someone to come and save them from their current predicament.

▶ **Read Psalm 80**

The broken vine

▶ **Read v 1-16**

❓ *From v 1-2, why is the Lord able to save His people?*

Three times the people cry out 'Restore us, O God'. The problem is... it is God's anger that has brought them this distress.

❓ *Why is God angry (v 4)—does the psalm give any indication?*

❓ *What are the results of His anger (v 5-6)?*

time out

Sometimes the reasons for these difficult times are not clear to us, even though the results are. Our response must be trust.
See Job 13 v 15.

The psalmist compares the people of Israel to a vine.

❓ *Find 4 things from v 8-11 that God has done for Israel?*

❓ *What is Israel's situation now, according to v 12-16?*

It all looks pretty desperate. The vine has been pillaged by passers-by and plundered by pigs; now it is cut down and burnt. Pretty final, wouldn't you say?

❓ *But what hope is held out in v 17?*

The true vine

▶ **Read v 17-19**

The only hope for the people seems to be with a man. A man who is at the right hand of God. A son of man who is raised up by God. The New Testament calls Him Jesus.

time out

Jesus referred to Himself as the true vine, and the people as the branches. **Read John 15 v 1-8.**

❓ *Why does God prune fruitful branches?*

❓ *How are Christians to be fruitful?*

❓ *From v 8, why is this to God's glory?*

pray thru'

Are you going through tough times at the moment? Talk with God about these now, and ask Him what He is trying to teach you through them. Perhaps you could join in with the chorus of Psalm 80: 'Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved'.

❓ *And will you respond according to v 18?*

The Fall

53

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 3 v 6-7

Monday 22 February

▶ Read v 6-7

A delicious prospect

- ❓ *Find three reasons why eating the forbidden fruit must have seemed like a good idea.*
- ❓ *See **Romans 1 v 18**. What truth must Eve have suppressed to take this step?*

Eve fell into sin for a series of compelling reasons—the fruit of the tree appeared nourishing, attractive and could make you brainy (3 v 6)! But her overwhelming desire for these things led her to ‘forget’ that God had forbidden it, and accept the enemy’s slander of her Creator, who had shown her nothing other than lavish generosity and total love.

- ❓ *See **1 Peter 4 v 3-4**. What common characteristic of sin did Eve show?*

Not surprisingly, Eve gave some to her husband. She wanted him to have what she had got, and he was willing to take it, in spite of knowing what God had said.

A devastating outcome

- ❓ *Look at what happened immediately after they ate the fruit. How did this both deliver and depart from what had been promised (v 5)?*

They were promised that the fruit would help them see clearly (v 5). And it did, but what they saw first were themselves in a new and unpleasant light. Whereas before their nakedness left them

‘unashamed’ (2 v 25), now they felt shame and tried to cover up.

Shame is a complex emotion. In some societies it drives people to suicide. Recollections of shame last far longer than other memories, even though it is often caused by small things. We feel shame intensely because it connects with the depths of our being. Shame is also about the views of others—we are ashamed before them. Adam and Eve hid, not from God initially, but simply from view. Their attempts to cover themselves with leaves, however, were as pathetic as they are understandable.

pray thru'

Are there things that you feel ashamed of? Christ bore our shame as well as our sin on the cross (see **Hebrews 12 v 2**). There is no need to hide away from Him. Show Him your gratitude, right now...

The blame

54

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 3 v 8-13

Tuesday 23 February

▶ Read verses 8-13

God could be heard going about the garden (v 8). Could this be God's Son before His incarnation? It's not entirely clear—the Hebrew could mean God's voice, and does not require that He was walking on foot. Yet clearly, this familiar sound meant Adam and Eve knew it was time to hide!

Respect

❓ *Why do you think God asked: 'Where are you?' (v 9)?*

❓ *Adam's answer (v 10) isn't the whole truth. What's the real reason for his fear?*

God isn't ignorant of Adam's whereabouts! Rather, He shows Adam respect by calling the man to come to Him willingly. But the intimate relationship between them has been broken. Where there was once openness, there is now fear. Adam and Eve haven't only tried to cover themselves from view—they have tried to hide themselves from God. What's more, the cover-up is more than physical. Adam doesn't say: 'I was afraid because I had disobeyed' but 'because I was naked'.

❓ *Why do you think God asked: 'Who told you?' (v 11)?*

God already knows mankind has disobeyed Him—that's why they now see themselves shamefully and fear Him. Their nakedness was not a problem under

God's rule until an outsider changed that perspective. God's question invites them to confess and repent.

Blame

What comes instead is blame. Adam manages to blame simultaneously his wife and God—'the woman you put here with me' (v 12). Eve is slightly more honest: 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate' (v 13).

❓ *How has God's order and purpose for man, woman and animals been overturned?*

- Man was made to rule the animals, yet he has listened to them.
- Eve was made to strengthen Adam, yet she has weakened him.
- Adam was told to obey God, yet he has followed his wife into sin.

time out

Don't blame others for your own disobedience to God. When you are tempted, God also provides a way out (**1 Corinthians 10 v 13**).

Confess any disobedience to God and ask for the strength and courage to obey Him in the future.

The curse

SS

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 3 v 14-15

Wednesday 24 February

God blessed His creation three times (see Genesis 1 v 22, 28; 2 v 3). Now we read of the opposite as God curses His creation, beginning with the serpent.

▶ **Read Genesis 3 v 14**

The serpent

❓ *Compare verse 1. How is the serpent's position in the animal kingdom affected by God's curse?*

Whereas the serpent was once renowned for his superiority above the other animals (3 v 1), now he will be cursed 'above' them, which means being reduced 'below' them—crawling on his belly, where he will 'eat dirt'. People often want to know if snakes originally had legs! Biologists believe they did but Genesis draws a veil over this.

▶ **Read verse 15**

The promise

❓ *The serpent successfully deceived Eve, but in what way is this a hollow success?*

Astonishingly, we move from curse to promise! It's true that the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning (see **2 Corinthians 11 v 3**). But he didn't win possession of Eve. Instead, there is to be warfare between him and the woman, and in future generations. The mention of 'offspring' does not mean Satan 'gives birth' to future demons, but that the con-

flict is to be ongoing—not confined to Eden.

The outcome of the conflict will be the destruction of the serpent—though at substantial cost to his destroyer. The Hebrew for the level of damage is the same for both, but the object of the damage is significantly different: 'He will 'crush/strike' your head; you will 'strike/crush' his heel'.

Verse 15 is known as the 'first gospel' because it would, of course, be fulfilled by Jesus. And through Him, His disciples share that same victory...

1 Thess

'They overcame [the Serpent] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death' (Revelation 12 v 11).

Satan is a defeated enemy, but not yet a dead enemy. Therefore we must be 'self-controlled and alert' (**1 Peter 5 v 8**).

❗ Pray for faithfulness and effectiveness in the conflict with Satan and sin.

The pain

56

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 3 v 16

Thursday 25 February

Just as there was a 'chain of blame' moving down from the man, via the woman, to the serpent, so now there is a chain of curse moving in the other direction. And now it's the woman's turn...

▶ Read Genesis 3 v 16

❓ *What two areas of a woman's life are affected by God's curse?*

Motherhood miseries

The serpent has been told that Eve's offspring would eventually defeat him. Now, however, Eve hears that producing offspring will be no easy matter. It will be characterised by 'great travails'—the word translated 'pain' (NIV) can mean struggle or sorrow. So the miseries that were to accompany motherhood were not only physical ones (see **Luke 2 v 35**).

time out

Pray for pregnant women who you know, that God might keep them safe. And for mothers who are in sorrow over difficult or wayward children. How could you help them?

Husband hassles

❓ *What do you think 'your desire will be for your husband' means? Compare Genesis 4 v 7.*

Eve is told that her 'desire' will be for her husband. The wording of 3 v 16b, however, exactly parallels the warning about sin given to Cain in Genesis 4 v 7, where God warns Cain that sin will control him

if he doesn't struggle against it. If the example of sin and Cain is anything to go by, Eve's desire for her husband would not be sexual but a struggle for control. This certainly makes sense in the context—Eve had earlier sought to do what was 'best' in her eyes for Adam, even though she should have known it was wrong. Perhaps this temptation to 'improve' her man would be built into their relationship as a permanent reminder of what went wrong.

pray thru'

Pray for understanding in your relationships with members of the opposite sex. And pray for the redeemed marriages within your congregation, that they would resist the pull of these temptations and show the beautiful (and evangelistic!) qualities of marriage as it was meant to be...

The dust

57

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 3 v 17-19

Friday 26 February

Finally, God turns to Adam and pinpoints his sin...

▶ Read the passage

❓ *What specifically was Adam's sin?*

The NIV says: 'because you listened to your wife'. Elsewhere, however, the full phrase 'listened to the voice of' means 'obeyed' (see, for example, **Genesis 22 v 18; 27 v 13**). It's not that a man should never listen to a woman, but that Adam should not have done what Eve said when it went against what God had said.

The cursed ground

❓ *Why did God curse the ground? (Compare 2 v 15.)*

Eve was cursed in her specialist 'realm' of childbearing, and Adam in his specialist 'realm' of 'ground keeping'. Throughout the Old Testament, this idea of the cursed ground or land recurs (see **Deuteronomy 24 v 4b; 29 v 27; Jeremiah 44 v 22**).

Mankind depends on the land as well as ruling it, and the specific result of this curse is that food production now becomes a problem. The word for 'painful toil' is the same as that used for 'painful childbirth' in verse 16. Instead of freely available fruit to eat (2 v 16), the ground now produces 'thorns and thistles', and

only after sweaty toil will there be any edible produce (v 18).

time out

Don't overvalue work. By its very nature it is 'sweaty toil' that leads to frustration, as well as meaningful activity.

Cursed into the ground

❓ *Why did God curse Adam to return to the ground? (Compare 2 v 17.)*

❓ *Why was this appropriate? (Compare 2 v 7.)*

God warned Adam that disobeying His command would bring death (2 v 17)—it wouldn't be instantaneous but it would be absolutely certain. Adam was formed from the ground—his very name means 'earth'. Taken from humble beginnings, he now faces a humiliating end. The words 'dust to dust, ashes to ashes' may sound dignified at a funeral service, but they really express a shocking disgrace. Made to image God, we become nothing but floor sweepings.

pray thru'

Read 1 Corinthians 15 v 47 and 49.

❗ Praise God for His great salvation, which raises us from the dust.

Life

▶ **Reading:** Genesis 3 v 20-24

Saturday 27 February

In the midst of life we are in death'—but it's also true that, under God, in the midst of death we can be in life.

▶ **Read the passage**

Continuation

- ❓ *What sign of hope can be found in Adam's choice of name for his wife?*
- ❓ *And what greater hope will this lead to? (See 3 v 15 and Galatians 4 v 4.)*

Eve is to be 'the mother of all the living' (3 v 20). Life will go on—a remarkable affirmation of hope amid the curses and tears of Genesis 3. What's more, the one who will bring eternal life has already been promised—and will be 'born of a woman' (**Galatians 4 v 4**).

Covering

- ❓ *How does God's covering for Adam and Eve compare with theirs (3 v 7)?*
- ❓ *What does God's covering cost?*

God Himself now shows the way ahead by providing animal skins for the man and the woman. Clearly, their own coverings were a pathetic failure. Now they have an effective covering—but at a cost, for these garments are the skins of dead animals (v 21)! Atonement—a word whose root itself means 'covering'—will only ever come with the taking of life.

Cut off

- ❓ *What's the purpose of the cherubim and flaming sword (v 24)?*

By eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve have become 'like God'—they have decided what's good and evil—challenging God's right to decide and separating themselves from Him. They mustn't become immortal like God as well. This means separation from the source of life in the garden.

The cherubim and the flaming sword make it clear that there's no way back. In the future, the tree of life will be found somewhere else entirely—in Christ, who 'himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness' (**1 Peter 2 v 24**).

pray thru'

Fallen nature constantly reminds us that life depends on the death of others.

Read Hebrews 9 v 22.

Thank God that the outcome of Genesis 1-3 is not death and dust but the cross and glory.

Independence party

59

▶ **Reading:** Psalm 81

Sunday 28 February

Americans celebrate Independence Day on 4th July. Four countries celebrate their Independence Day on 1st January (Cameroon, Haiti, Sudan and Western Samoa). Romanians celebrate their Liberation Day on my mum's birthday. These are all opportunities for a party, for rejoicing and remembering.

For the Israelites, remembering their independence and liberation was all about remembering the exodus. This psalm begins with an invitation to remember and rejoice—probably on the Feast of Tabernacles.

▶ Read Psalm 81

Free indeed!

- ❓ *What had God done for the Israelites?*
- ❓ *From v 8-10, how were the people to respond to what God had done?*

As Christians, we celebrate our independence by remembering the cross. Jesus died that we might be freed from sin, and so be free indeed.

apply

The psalmist gets very specific about the things the Israelites were rescued from. Think back to specific things you were enslaved to and have been delivered from by Christ, and the burdens you bore, but which Jesus has borne for you on calvary.

- ❓ *How will you rejoice in this today? Will other people notice your joy?*

Free to serve

- ❓ *What was God's complaint in v 11?*
- ❓ *What did He do about it (v 12)?*
- ❓ *What is the offer held out in v 13-16?*

Looking back at the exodus was a time not only for rejoicing and remembering, but also for repenting. Despite all of God's goodness to them, the Israelites would often not listen and would often not submit. Perhaps you can empathise with their failings!

- ❓ *Do you need to repent of not listening and/or not submitting? Seek God's help to listen and follow.*

pray thru

We see God's promise of blessing in v 10 and v 13-16. Turn to **1 Peter 1 v 3-5** and spend time reflecting on all that God has already given the Christian.

- ❗ **Thank God for our freedom in Christ. Spend time praising God, whose service is perfect freedom.**

MARK: King of glory

▶ **Reading:** Mark 9 v 1-13

Monday 1 March

We pick up Mark's Gospel as Peter has just realised that Jesus is the Christ—the promised

Messiah King of Israel. He and the other disciples have yet to understand that the path that Jesus takes to the throne leads through suffering to a cross and a grave.

The King of Glory?

▶ **Read Mark 9 v 1**

❓ *What do you think Jesus is referring to in v 1?*

Although Peter knows who Jesus is, the reality of their daily life must have looked rather different. Moving from place to place; hounded by a fickle crowd; and aggressively opposed by the Jewish rulers. Jesus' strange band of disciples hardly looked like the kind of group that could change the world.

So far, they had seen flashes of Jesus' power in His teaching, healing and miracles. But day by day they walked and ate and talked with what appeared to be just an ordinary man. The King was with them, but His power and glory was largely hidden from sight. After telling His disciples that following Him means death (8 v 35), perhaps the Lord wants to encourage them with a taste of the glory beyond...

The promise of v 1 may refer to Jesus' death and resurrection, or pentecost. But its reality is seen six days later as the inner circle of disciples are privileged to witness the extraordinary events of the transfiguration on the mountain top.

The King revealed

▶ **Read Mark 9 v 2-13**

pray thru'

The curtain is lifted for a few short moments, and they glimpse Jesus as He really is—in all His power and glory—and they are terrified!

❗ Is this the Jesus you serve? Someone who we cannot even look at, because of His blinding purity and glory? Or is your 'Jesus' a pale reflection of this awesome reality?

❓ *What is the significance of the people who appear with Jesus at this 'transfiguration'?*

❓ *What command does God give to the disciples—and to us?*

Moses and Elijah 'sum up' the Old Testament. The implication is clear. Jesus is not doing a 'new thing'. He is the fulfilment of all that Jewish religion and history were pointing to. God the Father proclaims His love and approval of all that Jesus has done and is, and charges the disciples to 'Listen to Him'.

apply

Is that it!? Just listen to Him? The simplicity of the command seems odd—surely they would be told to worship Him, serve Him, give their lives to Him? But no—all these things must follow from the most important thing: **to listen carefully** to precisely what Jesus has to say about Himself, the way He would rescue the world, and precisely *how* they should serve Him properly in the future.

Faith and power

61

▶ **Reading:** Mark 9 v 14-29

Tuesday 2 March

Jesus comes down the mountain to a bewildering scene. The disciples arguing with the Jewish leaders...

Power struggle

▶ **Read Mark 9 v 14-19**

time out

❓ *What do you think of demon possession?*

The Evil One still goes for this head on approach to spiritual warfare in some places, but in large parts of the world today his strategy is to quietly influence. The strategy may be different, but his intentions remain the same: to control and kill (v 22). And his chief weapon is still the plausible, attractive lie...

❓ *How does the crowd react to Jesus' arrival?*

Without Jesus, all the disciples experience is failure and futile arguing. As interested as the crowd may have been in this spectacle, Jesus' arrival is far more wonderful.

❓ *Why couldn't they cast out the demon (v 19)?*

It's clear that the issue here is faith. Perhaps the disciples were feeling so capable after their recent 'successes' that they had forgotten where the power came from to defeat the devil. Perhaps they started thinking that it was something they had the ability to do themselves. They were sadly mistaken, and no doubt humbled as their attempted exorcism turned into a squabbling match with the religious leaders.

pray thru'

The devil wants control of your life too. He may not be able to take away your salvation, but the love of money, pride in ourselves, bitterness and divisiveness are all ways he can turn us from being effective disciples to wasting our lives in worthless arguments. Don't try to fight these things in your own strength. Only Jesus' power can prevail.

Faith that heals

▶ **Read Mark 9 v 20-29**

❓ *How much faith does the man need?*

It's a simple lesson, but one I suspect we need to re-learn again and again. We do not need big faith. We need only a little faith, but it needs to be in the right thing. Even a little faith in the Lord Jesus will work the miracle of freeing us and others from spiritual bondage and oppression.

pray thru'

Do you feel that your faith is weak? Don't be afraid. But make sure your weak faith is in the right place—the strong Son of God. Don't think about how weak you are. Think about how strong Christ is. Trust His great love and power, and ask Him to make your faith stronger. He *will* hear you and work in your life.

Little big King

▶ **Reading:** Mark 9 v 30-41

Wednesday 3 March

In a world where kings lived in distant splendour and ruled with a fist of iron, it is no wonder that the disciples found Jesus' idea of royalty confusing...

Jesus: big or little?

▶ Read v 30-32

- ❓ *What new piece of information does Jesus give the disciples (compare 8 v 31)?*
- ❓ *Given what has just happened in chapter 9, why are the disciples so confused?*

Some of them had just glimpsed the beautiful, terrifying glory of Jesus. They knew He was the greatest person ever. Yet He talks about betrayal and death at human hands. How can this be?

apply

We are often perplexed about things that don't seem right in the Bible, our lives, or in church life. Here's an example *not* to follow. Don't bottle these questions up, but talk openly and honestly about them. God is truth. There is nothing to fear in the truth—however difficult it may be.

You: big or little?

▶ Read v 33-37

- ❓ *What is the point of Jesus' illustration with the child?*

Jesus is amazingly patient with His followers! He pours His heart out to them to show how He must be humbled and suffer, and they are arguing about who is the best!

Jesus says that welcoming someone as insignificant as a child in His name welcomes both Jesus and His Father—God. No one is so little that they are insignificant in God's kingdom. Like Jesus, the way to be the best is to be humble and to serve others.

pray thru'

Power, status, pecking order, class. These things can easily dominate our thinking, our church life and our attitudes if we let them.

- ❗ **Pray that both you and your leaders at church would share Jesus' view of leadership. Pray that **Philippians 2 v 3-4** would be true for you.**

Your church: big or little?

▶ Read v 38-41

- ❓ *What is John's argument in v 38? Would you have done the same?*

We have a tendency to be arrogant about the groups we belong to. We are suspicious of other churches who do things differently, and often rather prone to unhealthy competition. There is always room for healthy, open debate, but we need to be as open handed and gracious as our Lord. If He has welcomed someone—who are we to reject them?

pray thru'

Give thanks for what the Lord has done in and through Christians who are 'different' from you. Pray that they will grow in their love for the Lord Jesus.

The darkest danger

63

▶ **Reading:** Mark 9 v 42-50

Thursday 4 March

The disciples want to be 'big'. Jesus wants them to be 'little'. But their jockeying for position has some far more dangerous implications that they need to be aware of...

Don't hurt the little ones!

▶ Read v 42

Animals (and parents!) get angry and dangerous when their children are attacked. Jesus feels exactly the same way about His precious children. Anyone or anything that threatens them can expect a hostile response. The strength of the response shows the strength of the love He feels towards them.

❓ *So how much does Jesus care for His little ones?*

Alpha We can do many things to harm other believers: careless teaching, slack behaviour like unkindness, gossip and idleness, or lack of the loving care we owe to each other. Understand how important Jesus thinks these things are.
❗ *Is there a warning here for you?*

Don't go to hell!

▶ Read v 43-48

Jesus is realistic and compassionate in the way He talks about the reality of judgment. He uses powerful images to convey its extreme seriousness. Hell is a fire that never stops burning. Hell is pain that

never stops hurting. Hell is like a worm that never stops eating you.

But notice who is being warned here and why! It is the disciples who are in danger because of their desire for greatness. Jesus is saying: 'If you want to be important, then you will never receive forgiveness, and you must pay for your own sins.'

This is so important that everything else we fear is nothing beside it. Being maimed, and yet finding life, is preferable to being thrown onto the fiery rubbish dump of eternity.

Don't be a hypocrite!

▶ Read v 49-50

❓ *What is the point of the Jesus' 'salt' illustration (see **Leviticus 2 v 13**)?*

Salt must be added to a sacrifice for it to be acceptable to God (**see also Exodus 30 v 35; Ezekiel 43 v 24**). Jesus knows that any act of service can be done out of impure motives—out of a desire to earn God's favour, rather than a desire to please our Father. So salt becomes a picture of purity and integrity. The greatest danger we face is hypocrisy, and we must be careful to guard against it.

pray thru' Pray now that you would take Jesus' warnings seriously, and be careful to guard your ways and your heart as you seek to serve Him humbly.

No divorce!

▶ **Reading:** Mark 10 v 1-12

Friday 5 March

The pain of broken relationships is the thing that strikes deepest into people's hearts and lives. So the question of divorce is always going to be controversial...

Hard hearts

▶ **Read v 1-12**

- ❓ *Why do the Pharisees ask the question?*
- ❓ *How does Jesus approach their question?*
- ❓ *What does Jesus say is wrong with the Jews?*

By getting Jesus to make a pronouncement on a contentious question, the Pharisees were no doubt hoping to split the enthusiastic crowd. If He was permissive, as some Rabbis were, the hard-liners would hate Him. If He was tough, then He would alienate those who struggled in their relationships. In His masterful way, Jesus gets to the heart of the question by showing how the Pharisees had misunderstood the meaning of the text they quoted from **Deuteronomy 24**. What Moses had allowed as a compassionate exception, they were treating as a rule for everyone.

Basic principles

▶ **Read v 6-12**

- ❓ *What is the basic principle for marriage?*
- ❓ *What happens when it is broken?*

One partner for life, joined inseparably into one flesh, has always been God's

plan from the very beginning. So while separation can happen, and, rarely, be advisable, breaking the marriage bond by marrying another is always an act of adultery. By starting with the exception, the Pharisees twisted God's word to serve their hardness of heart. By starting with a clear understanding of the nature of marriage as a spiritual bond, the exception is seen for what it is—an allowance to prevent further damage and pain in the sinful realities of our fallen world.

time out

God is compassionate towards anyone in a loveless, difficult or abusive marriage. His law allowed for this reality (see **Matthew 19 v 9**). Given Jesus' emphasis here:

- ❓ *How would you advise someone who said to you that they were bored with their spouse?*
- ❓ *How would you advise someone who said to you that their partner was having an affair?*

pray thru'

Jesus' words are not hard to understand, but do you find them hard to accept? The disciples clearly found it hard, because they ask Jesus to explain it again! Pray that you would honour and respect the sacredness of marriage in a world that devalues it.

- ❗ **And pray for marriages and couples know to you personally. Ask God to strengthen and support them.**

Childlike acceptance

65

▶ **Reading:** Mark 10 v 13-16

Saturday 6 March

What kind of person enters God's kingdom? What kind of person follows Jesus? So far, the disciples have not understood...

time out

- ❓ Think of someone you know who is important. How do you think about them? How do you treat them?
- ❓ Now think of someone you know who is not important. Do you think about them differently? Do you treat them differently?

Keep away!

▶ Read v 13-16

- ❓ Why were the disciples acting like this after Jesus' stinging rebuke to them in 9 v 37?
- ❓ So what is wrong with the disciples' thinking, even after they had heard Jesus say 9 v 34?

The disciples thought they were the 'ministers of state' in the kingdom of God. In a way, they were right about their status. But they were so, so wrong about what their job entailed, and indeed, about the kind of kingdom that Jesus rules over.

They thought that King Jesus should only deal with important adults and weighty matters of state—not the irrelevance of sentimental parents wanting a blessing for their bundles of joy.

Although their motives may have had some sense—after all Jesus spent a lot of time swamped with people—the Lord sees a bigger problem that needs correction.

Come close!

▶ Read v 14 again

- ❓ Who does Jesus think is important?

Even the most irrelevant of people is important in the kingdom of God. Yes, children, but also the poor, the sick, the old, the disabled. And criminals and drug addicts and traitors and prostitutes and foreigners. In Jesus' dealings with people, He has been consistent in this: He welcomes everyone, irrespective of who they are and what they have done or become. This is why the disciples' dismissal of the young is so offensive to Him.

pray thru'

Praise God that, even though we might rule people out, He never does. King Jesus welcomes *everyone* to His feast of forgiveness and friendship. Yes, even you!

Receive it as children

▶ Read v 15-16 again

- ❓ How must we be like children?

The children were clearly very young (Jesus took them in His arms), so perhaps the best answer to this question is to say that we must utterly trust Jesus, and see ourselves as helpless recipients of His blessing. A profound challenge to the self-importance of the disciples. Indeed, a disturbing challenge for anyone who thinks that their wealth, qualifications or accomplishments can buy them favour with God.

Defender of the weak

▶ **Reading:** Psalm 82

Sunday 7 March

God sits at the head of the table as chairman of the board, and He is clearly not happy.

▶ Read Psalm 82

Our understanding of this psalm depends on who we think God is talking to. Are the 'gods' of v 1 the so-called gods of the other nations? Or perhaps other spiritual powers? The most likely answer is that God is talking to human leaders—but more of that later...

- ❓ *Why is God so angry (v 2)?*
- ❓ *What should be happening (v 3-4)?*
- ❓ *Why has it gone so wrong (v 5)?*

In **John 10**, Jesus quotes from this psalm. In **v 34-36**, he refers to the psalm in a way that suggests the 'gods' were human. Probably, therefore, we should understand this psalm to be concerned with human beings—who have a wonderful dignity and an enormous responsibility in God's world.

time out

Read Exodus 22 v 22-24.

- ❓ *How would you describe the Israelites' responsibility?*

Now read James 1 v 27.

- ❓ *How would you describe the Christian's responsibility?*

apply

Think through the people you know—at home or at work, in church or more generally in society.

- ❓ *Who are the weak who need defending? Who are the needy who need rescuing?*

Make a list. What part can you play? List five ways in which you could defend the cause of the weak this week.

- ❗ **Before moving on, commit these ideas to the Lord in prayer.**

The final three verses of the psalm show God's ultimate sovereignty and authority. What hope does this give us when we find ourselves 'defenceless' against human power?

pray thru'

We are weak and will ultimately fail (v 7). We need therefore to trust in God's ultimate action in judging the world—He will make all things right.

Turn v 8 into a prayer—ask for God's authority to be seen and acknowledged in all the earth.

And by contrast...

67

▶ **Reading:** Mark 10 v 17-22

Monday 8 March

Jesus has just told us how to enter the kingdom of God. Like a child. The lesson is completed by the arrival of a man who shows us the other side of the coin...

The problem

▶ Read v 17-20

- ? *The man's question is a gift for an evangelist. Why does Jesus' reply seem so aggressive?*
- ? *What does the man's answer reveal about what he is really thinking?*

'Why do you call me good?' The Lord is not saying He is not good, or that He is not God. He is trying to get at the heart of what it really means to be good. The man thinks he is *almost* good enough, but has a lurking doubt. Perhaps he has missed something. His fundamental mistake is found in his original question: 'What must I do...'

pray thru'

Even when we've understood that Jesus has **done** everything for us, we still default to a **do** religion. We want to rely on our own achievements, which will never be good enough. Meditate on **Isaiah 64 v 6**, then thank God that Jesus' righteousness is His gift to you.

Jesus' answer

▶ Read v 21-22

- ? *It seems like Jesus is giving the man one last 'work' to do to make him 'good'. Is he?*

Not at all. Jesus' question is designed to show the man how proud he is. He thinks he is almost at the top of the ladder, and just has one step to take to get him to God. No doubt he saw his wealth as a sign that God was richly blessing him. But Jesus' challenge revealed two things:

- The man loved his wealth more than he desired God
- The only way to God is not by climbing a ladder of good works, but coming down to the bottom and realising it leads nowhere.

The man thought he was the first, but Jesus appeals to him to realise he is the last, so that he can truly inherit eternal life.

1/4/20

This remains the biggest misunderstanding that people have about the gospel of Christ. They are sometimes confused because Christians have cleaned up their lives (a little), so they assume it is about being good.

- ? *How can you help people understand this important truth?*

Verse 22 is one of the saddest verses in the Bible. Many went away from Jesus healed, renewed and rejoicing. But this man went away sad. Even though he wanted eternal life, he could not find it in himself to let go of his wealth so that he could grasp hold of eternity.

Prepared to be last

▶ **Reading:** Mark 10 v 23-31

Tuesday 9 March

If you are reading *Explore*, it probably means you are rich. OK, you probably struggle with the bills like most people, but on a world scale, you are well fed and prosperous. So take what Jesus says here to heart. It's for you...

Your money or your (eternal) life!

▶ Read v 23-26

- ❓ Why are the disciples astonished at Jesus' pronouncements in v 23 and 25?
- ❓ Do you agree with v 25? Really?

Of course Jesus is right. His wonderful, ridiculous picture of a camel and a needle is meant to make us laugh.

But *why* is it impossible for a rich man to be saved? It is because of the power of money to control us. The rich man in the last story loved his money more than God. The events at the end of chapter 9 show that the disciples felt rich in status, and were in danger of loving that more than God.

apply How are you 'rich'? It may be in your abilities, your personality, your family. But anything that makes us feel 'OK' is a threat to our salvation. Because it will try to displace God in your heart. And don't discount money. You may think you have it sorted out, but our love for and reliance on money has a nasty way of creeping back and gripping our souls.

Last and first

▶ Read v 26-31

- ❓ What is Jesus' answer to the question in v 26?
- ❓ So must Christians give up their wealth?

We are meant to be shocked by these statements. **It is impossible to be saved.** And only when we understand *that*, can God do in us what we cannot do ourselves. Only when we know we are the last, can God raise us up to be first.

It is still not clear whether the disciples really understand this. Jesus' reply to Peter's outburst in v 28 shows that, although Peter has not *earned* a place in heaven because they followed, nonetheless they have done a good thing that will be rewarded. Jesus looks after everyone who follows Him. Being a Christian may be hard on our pockets and our families, but we will gain a hundredfold in the world to come.

Pray thru' It's dangerous to say it, because we need to take Jesus' warnings about wealth very seriously. But the 'many' of v 31 indicates that there will be at least *some* who are wealthy who will receive eternal life.

- ❗ Talk to the Lord about how rich you are. Ask for His help to let these things not rule your heart, where only Jesus can be King.

Why Jesus came...

69

▶ **Reading:** Mark 10 v 32-45

Wednesday 10 March

An extraordinary scene unfolds. Jesus striding along the road to Jerusalem with purpose and resolution. The disciples following behind, some amazed, more of them terrified about what is about to happen. Then He turns to explain to them what is going on...

He came to die!

▶ Read v 32-34

- ❓ *What new information does Jesus give to the disciples (see 8 v 31; 9 v 30-32)?*
- ❓ *Why is it so amazing that Jesus tells them this at this particular moment?*

time out

Jesus knows that people will spit on Him, laugh at Him, flog Him and kill Him. He knows all this, and yet He walks purposefully towards Jerusalem. He says 'yes' to the cross, because it is the only way to bring forgiveness to the world. He says 'yes' to suffering and pain, for the glory that lies beyond. Those who follow Him must be prepared to experience the same thing. **Read 1 Peter 2 v 21-24.**

He came to serve!

▶ Read v 35-45

- ❓ *What did James and John ask Jesus for?*
- ❓ *What was the reaction of the others to this?*

Kings don't serve, do they? Kings sit on towering thrones and have hordes of flunkies to serve them. James and John wanted to sit next to Jesus and rule over

others too. They clearly had not got the point of all that Jesus has been saying in the last two chapters! The fury of the other disciples, when they learn about this 'power play', clearly shows that they had not understood either.

So Jesus has to explain to them again that He is different. King Jesus came to serve others, not Himself. King Jesus came to give His life for others. The King is going to His capital to receive pain, not honour.

apply

Jesus does not want us to be self-important. He wants us to serve other people. He doesn't want us to be above others. He wants us to be below them. Do you love Jesus because He served you? So will you be a servant too?

- ❓ *Think of one practical thing you can do to serve someone else today.*

He came to give!

▶ Read v 45 again

Jesus came to give His life for people like us. He paid the price to set His people free. He died so that we could live. He gives and gives at His own cost.

pray thru'

- ❓ *So have you received His love, His forgiveness, His life?*

If you have, thank and praise Him for this now. If you're not sure, ask God to open your heart to Him—and plan to talk with a mature Christian about this in the next few days

Opened eyes

70

▶ **Reading:** Mark 10 v 46-52

Thursday 11 March

Beggars would have been a common sight along the roads in Jesus' time. Unable to work, all they could do was sit and ask for pity from passers by.

Asking

▶ Read v 46-48

- ❓ What is the significance of what Bartimaeus calls Jesus?
- ❓ How does the crowd's reaction show that they have still not understood Jesus' teaching?

Bartimaeus calls Him 'Son of David'—a title that shows that the man believes that Jesus is the promised King from David's family line (see **2 Samuel 7 v 11-16**). Unlike 8 v 30, Jesus is happy for people to say openly who He is. The *shushing* by the crowd shows that, yet again, they have failed to understand that Jesus' mercy is even for the lowest beggar on the street.

And here's the thing. Bartimaeus simply asks, and will not be put off by those who tell Him that Christ is not interested in him. We sometimes convince ourselves that God will not hear our cries. We are not worthy. We feel weak and pathetic. For sure we are all those things, but we are also loved, and the Lord is filled with mercy towards even the most wretched of us. *'You are coming to a King. Large petitions with you bring.'* (John Newton)
Read James 4 v 2.

- ❓ Is this true of you?

Receiving

▶ Read v 49-52

- ❓ Why does Jesus ask such an obvious question?

Our prayers may sometimes be without words (see **Romans 8 v 26**). But God wants us to actually *say* what we want. It is often as we articulate our thoughts to God, that we challenge ourselves to genuine faith—trusting in God's goodness to give us what we need.

Of course He does not always give us what we ask for. He did not grant the request of James and John in v 37! But true prayer involves throwing ourselves on the mercy of our wise and powerful King. It involves us being prepared to receive what He wants to give us—what He knows is best for us.

pray thru'

No word, no touch, just instant vision, and an immediate desire to follow Jesus on the way (v 52).

Is your relationship with Christ like this? Or are you demanding in your prayers; peevish when it doesn't go your own way; and reluctant to follow Him?

Think again about the determination, the love and the mercy of Jesus towards you, and talk to God honestly about your thoughts.

'We must lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us.' (C.S. Lewis)

A royal parade

▶ **Reading:** Mark 11 v 1-11

Friday 12 March

The second half of Mark's Gospel is about why Jesus came. He has talked a lot to the disciples, and predicted His death three times, with increasing amounts of detail. Now now the talking is over. It's time for action.

A king on a donkey

▶ **Read v 1-11**

❓ *What is Jesus showing by riding a donkey?*
See Zechariah 9 v 9 and 14 v 4.

Whether Jesus has arranged for the donkey to be ready, or it is a miraculous provision, is unclear. But what is certain is that, by His arrival via the Mount of Olives, and by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus is making a clear statement about who He is: the King come to save His people.

time out

But what kind of King? Read some longer sections from Zechariah's prophesy to see what this King would come to do:

- **Zechariah 9 v 16-17**
- **Zechariah 10 v 3-4**
- **Zechariah 12 v 10 – 13 v 1**

The ancient world mocked the early Christians because they thought their talk of God dying in weakness and shame was ridiculous or offensive. Believers, however, delight in the truth that we have a humble King. Because we know that our lives, our forgiveness, our eternity depends on the fact that Jesus humbled Himself, even to death on a cross.

Hollow praise?

▶ **Read v 7-11 again**

They are shouting 'Praise God!' and cheering openly now. But soon they will be shouting 'Crucify Him!' or hiding in fear for their lives.

pray thru'

It's good to sing songs about Jesus; to praise Him and say that He is King. But will we welcome *this* Jesus as King over our lives? Will we follow the King who rides a donkey and goes to a cross to die? Will we follow a King who calls us to give our lives as He gave us His?

- 1 Give God your praise, but also talk to Him about your fears about what it will mean to truly follow in the way of His Son.

The King in His temple

72

▶ **Reading:** Mark 11 v 12-19

Saturday 13 March

Mark loves to split up stories in order to give us a hint about their meaning.

A tree with no fruit

▶ Read v 12-14

We saw from Zechariah yesterday that the King comes not only to save His people, but to judge His enemies. And the enemies are not only those who oppress God's people from outside. The Messiah would also condemn the 'false shepherds'—those who had set themselves up as leaders of Israel but had led them away from God (eg: **Zechariah 11 v 17**).

King Jesus walks towards His temple in Jerusalem. Will He find that God's people love and worship God there? Will He find the fruit of righteousness and true faith?

On His way Jesus looks to the fig tree for fruit but finds none. It is full of leaves and greenery but is barren. It looks good but it is useless to God. And worse than that. It is offensive to Him. He curses it.

Alpha Empty religion is offensive to God. He is present with you as you are reading this now. He comes to your church whenever it meets. What does He find? Is it just form and fine words? Is it just routine and habit? Is it fine-looking greenery without the fruit He is looking for? Is the Lord pleased with you because He sees genuine love in your heart, and in your gatherings. Or is He angry that you are all show and no substance?

A temple with no worship

▶ Read v 15-19

- ❓ What does Jesus want to find when He comes to His temple?
- ❓ What does He find instead?
- ❓ What is the response of the leaders?

It should be a place of prayer that showed the glory of God to the world. But it has become a religious shopping mall and a convenient short-cut across the city.

The Jewish leaders show that they are false shepherds because they do not repent. They should have seen the truth in His words and welcomed their King and Saviour, but instead they plot to kill Him.

pray thru' Empty religion is never far from us. We so easily fall in love with 'our way of doing things'. Jesus says in **Mark 7 v 8, 9 and 13** that human religious traditions, sometimes even ones that seem to be based on the Bible, have a way of becoming the enemies of the word of God. Pray for yourself, your church, and especially your leaders, that you would always judge your traditions by God's word, not *vice versa*.

Dealing with the enemy

73

▶ **Reading:** Psalm 83

Sunday 14 March

How do you feel about the enemies of God? Embarrassed? Annoyed? Scared? Israel was surrounded by enemies. **Read Psalm 83** and see their reaction ...

Feared

▶ Read v 1-8

- ❓ *Why are God's enemies conspiring against God's people (v 4)?*
- ❓ *List some of the reasons why this enemy seemed so fearsome.*

They shout, they threaten, they make intricate plans, and most disturbingly, they unite against little Israel. Strange how even the fiercest enemies will unite to harass Christians. Perhaps they have more in common than they think—hatred of the one true God and His King.

Destroyed

▶ Read v 9-12

Not a psalm for the politically-correct brigade—there's no hint of consensus politics here! The details in v 9-12 refer to God's destruction of His enemies. **Read Judges 4-8** for the full story. Pick out all the things that the psalmist asks God to do His enemies (I think there are at least five!):

The psalmist asks God to...

1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

- ❓ *Compare v 4 with v 18. How will God's actions show that He alone is the Most High?*

What they object to most, it seems, is the claim that 'God *alone* is the Most High over all the earth' (v 18). And God humbles them, so that they will know this for certain. Things do not change. Help out in the local community, and people think well of you. Care for the elderly, or run a group for young mums, and people will praise you. But dare to claim that Jesus Christ is the *only* way to God, and the same people will tut and dismiss you.

time out

- ❓ *How does the cross fulfil Psalm 83 v 17?*
- ❓ *How does the cross fulfil Psalm 83 v 18?*

Read Philipians 2 v 9-11

pray thru'

Give thanks for the confidence we can have in Jesus' victory. If it is relevant for you at this time, pray for those who persecute you.

God's new temple

▶ **Reading:** Mark 11 v 20-25

Monday 15 March

The next morning they find the fig tree dried up, shrivelled and dead. Jesus has judged the fruitless tree in the same way that Israel's prayerless, commercialised temple would be judged.

▶ **Read v 20-25**

A new temple: v 22

❓ *Why do you think Jesus says this in reply to Peter's statement about the fig tree?*

A major theme running through these stories is about the temple. The King comes to His temple, but finds that it has ceased to be a place where God is honoured and worshipped. And so Israel's temple will be destroyed. But Jesus will raise up a new temple. First the temple of His own body (**see Mark 13 v 1-2; 14 v 58**); and then a new temple, not built out of stones but out of people!

Jesus' teaching here is to help the disciples see that the new living temple of Jesus' followers must be filled with faith, prayer and forgiveness, unlike the one that has now been cursed.

time out

Read 1 Cor 3 v 16-17; 2 Cor 6 v 16; Ephesians 2 v 21. This new temple is both individual and communal. The bodies of those who follow Christ are temples of the Holy Spirit, so we must honour God with our bodies, and not 'prostitute' them. But our fellowship as a whole must work together in praise of the God who has saved us.

Away with the old

▶ **Read v 23 again**

Understanding the context of this passage illuminates the curious image Jesus uses in v 23.

❓ *Can you see the deeper significance of what Jesus is saying here?*

Of course He is teaching us about the nature of prayer (more on this tomorrow), but 'this mountain' he is talking about is the mountain right in front of them: Mount Zion with the temple gleaming on top of it. The disciples will later talk about how solid and permanent the temple looks (13 v 1-2), but the Lord is concerned that they understand that it will be swept away by the power of God.

time out

Read Malachi 3 v 1-3.

Jesus' behaviour in the temple, and the way Mark tells this story, leave us in no doubt who Jesus is: the Lord come to His own temple.

❓ *How does the end of Malachi's prophesy relate to today's reading?*

apply

Is your spiritual life more like the old temple than the new? Prayerless, faithless, more interested in politics and systems than God?

Is your church more like the old temple than the new? Filled with greed, rather than filled with prayer and forgiveness?

Real Prayer

75

▶ **Reading:** Mark 11 v 20-25

Tuesday 16 March

The days are long gone when my children naively believed that their father could do anything. Time and experience has shown them how weak and vulnerable he is...

▶ **Read v 20-25**

Faith = prayer?

❓ *What is the connection between faith and prayer?*

At first glance the answer Jesus gives to Peter's exclamation about the fig tree seems odd. But He is concerned to explain to them where this power comes from. He is not just some arbitrary miracle worker. He does not curse the tree for the fun of it. This is a lesson they desperately need to learn, because soon He will be taken away from them, and they will need to depend on God's power in the same way. By faith.

Jesus has made the connection between faith and prayer before—**see 9 v 23, 29**. We no longer believe our earthly fathers can do everything. But we *do* believe that our Heavenly Father can do anything and everything. Practical trust in the omnipotence of God will always express itself as prayer. If we truly believe God can do the impossible, and know that He wants the best for those who are His children by faith, we will express that faith by asking our Father to act.

apply

Many things feel too hard for us. We encounter a big problem; a setback at work; we lose our job; we fail an exam; we become ill and don't recover. We reach the end of our resources to deal with it so we give up. But God is able! He is powerful to deal with your mountainous problem. Will you talk to Him about it now, trusting that He hears?

Encourage yourself by reading Matthew 7 v 7-11.

Ask and receive: v 24-25

❓ *What do you think Jesus means in v 24?*

❓ *What is the condition in v 25?*

It is a mistake to read v 24 as a kind of mind game. 'If I think positively about this, then it will happen.' Prayer is not a technique: *if I do it the right way, it will work*. It is a relationship: *if I trust God in the right way, HE will work!*

Praying with faith is about humbling ourselves beneath God's mighty hand. It is about knowing what He wants and praying confidently in His will. And it is about daring to ask boldly for things that we think will further His work of salvation in the world. Verse 25 makes it clear that only those who have understood the grace of God properly will be heard by Him.

❗ **Will you pray like that now?**

A revealing question

76

▶ **Reading:** Mark 11 v 27-33

Wednesday 17 March

Jesus has swept into the temple like He owns the place, pronounced judgment on its leaders and practices, and now starts a daily routine of teaching people in the temple courts. Not surprising then that the leaders challenge His right to do this...

▶ **Read v 27-33**

Who's in charge?

- ❓ *What three groups of people attack Jesus?*
- ❓ *What two questions do they ask?*
- ❓ *What are the right answers?*

The elders were the lay aristocracy—members of powerful rich families. The chief priests were the heads of the temple and all Jewish religion. The teachers of the law were the academics—the Pharisaic scholars. Together they made up the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council. Jesus is challenging the power and authority of each group, by His teaching, His 'takeover' at the temple, and by His veiled claims to be the true King. In doing so, the prophesy of 8 v 31 is fulfilled.

1/10/18

Jesus speaks and acts with God's authority. It is God who has made Him King over them. But they do not want God's King. They want control over the people, the temple and themselves.

- ❓ *Who has the right to rule over your life? Who has the right to teach you how to live? Who rules over your church? You know the answer. But is it true in practice?*

Jesus is!

▶ **Read v 27-33 again**

Jesus will always answer an honest question. But these are not honest questions. So He asks a question back to show them what is really going on.

❓ *Why is Jesus' question such a good one?*

Everyone knew that John was a prophet from God. So they should believe what John said. And John told people that Jesus is the Christ. The link between the two is made stronger by Jesus' fulfilment of **Malachi 3 v 1-2**. If the false leaders give an honest answer, then they answer their own question! So instead they lie, and say they don't know.

pray thru'

Most people ask questions because they want to know the answers. But some can ask questions to avoid the main issue: the lordship of Jesus Christ over their lives.

- ❗ **!** Pray that people you know would ask questions and want to know the answer. Pray that you would answer them as you ought.

Read 1 Peter 3 v 15

The coming storm

Jesus knows that His challenge to their authority will lead to His death (**read 12 v 1-12**). But He doesn't flinch or change His plans. He steadfastly follows the path He know will end up at the cross, because He is the King who has come to serve and to redeem.

EZRA: Life with the pagans

77

▶ **Reading:** Ezra 1 v 1-2

Thursday 18 March

In 597 BC the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and carried off the leading Israelites into exile. In 587 BC Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel said that this was God's judgment against the unfaithfulness of His people.

▶ Read verses 1-2

Jeremiah had also promised that the exile would only last for seventy years. **See Jeremiah 29 v 10** (and **25 v 11**). And long before Jeremiah, Isaiah had named Cyrus as God's anointed liberator. Cyrus, a Persian king who did not acknowledge Israel's God, would be used by God to end the exile. **See Isaiah 45 v 1 and 13**. And so it was. Seventy years after the defeat of Jerusalem, the Babylonians fell to the Persians.

The book of Ezra describes what happens next. It starts in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia. Chapters 1-6 describe how a group of Jews, led by Zerubbabel the governor and Jeshua the priest, return and rebuild the temple. Chapters 7-10 describe how Ezra leads a group of Jews back around sixty years later (458 BC) and how Ezra re-establishes the law of God.

Living without a king

The book of Ezra shows:

- the re-establishment of *sacrifice* (chapters 1-6)
- the re-establishment of *God's word* (chapters 7-10)

God's people had to work out how to live as God's people without an Israelite king on the throne. The answer was a focus on *sacrifice* and *God's word*. The book of Ezra helps us see how the sacrifice of Jesus and the word of God can enable us to live as God's people in a secular society. There are no 'miracles' in the book of Ezra, but God is clearly in control. He protects and provides for His people.

Waiting for God's King

▶ Read 9 v 8-9

The events of Ezra (and Nehemiah) are only a partial return from exile. God has been good to His people. He has not deserted them. But they are still in bondage. They are still slaves. The book of Ezra leaves us wanting more—longing for the liberation that comes in Jesus Christ.

time out

Read Romans 8 v 1-2. One day Jesus will liberate us from all human oppression. But more than that, He liberates us from sin and death.

The God of heaven

78

▶ **Reading:** Ezra 1 v 1-11

Friday 19 March

The fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians was a cataclysmic event for the Israelites. Was God unable to save them or had He perhaps abandoned them forever? How could they go on being God's people without God's king on the throne? The book of Ezra provides some of the answers to these questions.

God on the throne

▶ Read v 1-4

Cyrus appears to be the highest authority in the known world. But he acknowledges a higher authority: 'the God of heaven'. Isaiah had said that God would raise up Cyrus to overthrow the Babylonians (Isaiah 45). Now Cyrus acknowledges that God has given him 'all the kingdoms of the earth'.

God's people could continue to be God's people because God continued to be God. And He continued to protect and provide for His people. Cyrus issues a decree allowing the Jews to return to their land—the land that God had promised to their forefathers.

▶ Read verses 5-6

These verses recall the exodus from Egypt when the Egyptians gave the Israelites gold and silver as they left (**see Exodus 12 v 35-36**). Isaiah had said the return from exile would be like a new exodus (**see, for example, Isaiah 11 v 11-16**). God is bringing His liberated people back to the promised land.

time out Who or what are the most powerful people and institutions of our day? What would most people say? The President of the United States? Multinational corporations? Media empires? Certainly not the church. Yet Ezra reminds us that all the powers of this world are under God's control. And however bad things look, we can be sure that God will protect and provide for His people.

Vessels of gold and silver

▶ Read v 7-11

Isaiah had also said that the people would leave carrying 'the vessels of the LORD' (**Isaiah 52 v 11**). At the high point of Israel's history, the nations had brought gold and silver to King Solomon (**1 Kings 10 v 23-25**). But at the low point of Israel's history, the Babylonians had carried away the gold and silver from the temple. Now those gold and silver vessels are returned. The book of Ezra counts them all back. Under God's sovereignty, Cyrus not only allows the Jews to return; he generously provides for them so they can restore the worship at the temple in Jerusalem.

Welcome home

79

▶ **Reading:** Ezra 2 v 1-70

Saturday 20 March

It must have felt like a new beginning as the exiles returned home through the desert. And indeed it was. But there was also continuity with the past. The people were not inventing something new. They were rediscovering God's promises of a people and a land.

Possession through promise

▶ **Read v 1-42**

The people are identified by their ancestry. This was their claim to an inheritance in Israel. They had a part in the land because of God's promise to their forefathers. Their entitlement rested on God's promise. The book of Joshua had described how the people of Israel took possession of the land. It emphasised how God gave them the land in fulfilment of His promises. **See Joshua 21 v 43-45.** Now their descendants re-stated their claim to God's promises.

Inclusion through faith

▶ **Read v 43-58**

Not everyone has Israelite ancestry. A number of the names in the list of temple servants are foreign (Rezin, Meunim, Nephussim, Sisera). Throughout Israel's history, non-Israelites had become part of God's people. Rahab and Ruth were two well-known examples. If people put their faith in God, they could share the promises of God (**Exodus 12 v 48**).

▶ **Read v 59-63**

Not everyone could prove his Israelite ancestry. It seems they were still welcome, but they could not serve as priests. (We do not know much about the Urim and Thummim except that they were used for decision-making. But it seems they were no longer in operation so they could not be used to confirm the priestly ancestry of Hobaiah and co.)

▶ **Read v 64-70**

The returned exiles gave gifts towards the rebuilding of the temple 'according to their ability' (**see 1 Corinthians 16 v 2**). And they settled in 'their own towns'. Most of the people had been born in exile, but these were 'their own towns' through God's promise.

Apply

The returning exiles walk a fine line: they have a real concern for purity in the community, and at the same time are welcoming to outsiders.

❓ *How can you ensure your church or household walks the same tightrope? Do you need to change anything to get it right?*

In our time of need

80

▶ **Reading:** Ezra 3 v 1-6

Sunday 21 March

The first thing Abraham did in the promised land was build an altar and offer sacrifices to God in response to God's promise of the land (**Genesis 12 v 6-7**).

▶ Read v 1-6

And the first thing those who returned from exile did, after they had unpacked their bags, was build an altar in Jerusalem. The foundation of the temple had not yet been laid, but in the rubble of fallen Jerusalem an altar was built and sacrifices were made. Soon the regular programme of sacrifices was underway.

Verse 3 tells us they did this 'because of their fear of the peoples around them' (not 'despite their fear' as the NIV says). They felt insecure. They knew they needed God's help. And so their first priority was to start offering sacrifices. It would be wrong to be cynical about this—to see it as a form of 'protection money' offered to God to buy His favour. Sacrifice was the means of atonement. Sin was dealt with through sacrifice and God was approached through sacrifice. It is the same for us ...

▶ Read Hebrews 10 v 11-18

The sacrifices of the Old Testament pointed to the coming of Jesus. He is our Great High Priest and He is the perfect sacrifice. He offered Himself once for all. We no longer offer animal sacrifices, not because sacrifice does not matter any more, but because Jesus is God's perfect, complete

and eternal sacrifice. Jesus is our mediator. His sacrifice in our place, removing our guilt and making us right with God, means we can turn to God for help...

▶ Read Hebrews 10 v 19-22

The result of Jesus' sacrifice is that we can draw near to God with confidence. God is on our side. 'Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence,' says the writer of Hebrews, 'so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.' (Hebrews 4 v 16)

Why was the book of Ezra written? Perhaps one reason was to inspire later generations to show the same attitude as these people newly returned from exile. The priority of the readers should be to turn to God when they are in need.

pray thru'

The people in Ezra's day were in a 'time of need'. And so their priority was to approach God for help through sacrifice. What are your needs? What are the needs of those you love?

❗ Turn to God now for help through the sacrifice of Jesus.

*'He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?' **Romans 8 v 32***

How lovely...

▶ **Reading:** Ezra 3 v 7-13

Monday 22 March

In 2 v 68 the newly arrived Jews gave a freewill offering for the rebuilding of the temple. **Read 3 v 7.** Now the money starts to be spent. The workmen are paid. The materials are ordered. **Read v 8-9.** And everyone joins in the rebuilding work—even the high priest Jeshua and his sons.

Joyful celebrations

▶ **Read v 10-11**

When the foundation is laid, a celebration is organised. And it is not just a formal affair. 'With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD,' we are told. They didn't just sing; they sang with heartfelt praise and thanksgiving.

Why? Because the temple represented God's presence with His people. **Read Psalm 84.** Notice the psalmist's delight in God's temple. But notice, too, how his delight in God's temple is really delight in God Himself.

Painful memories

▶ **Read v 12-13**

Seventy years had passed since the last temple had been destroyed. But the older people could remember it, and they wept as they saw the new one being built, because it wasn't going to be anything like as glorious as the one Solomon had built.

The prophet Haggai, who ministered during this time, (**see Ezra 5 v 1**) had a message for these people:

▶ **Read Haggai 2 v 1-9**

One day the glory of the temple would be greater than the glory of Solomon's temple. What could Haggai mean? Those in the know knew that this new temple was rubbish by comparison with Solomon's magnificent building.

▶ **Read John 2 v 19-22**

Haggai was pointing to Jesus—God's temple. He is God with us, God among us, God for us. In Him we see God's glory—'the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth' (**John 1 v 14**).

pray thru'

The song in verse 11 is a common refrain in the psalms (see, for example, **Psalms 106** and **136**). Use **Psalm 100** to express your praise to God that He sent His Son so that we can know His presence.

Opposition

▶ **Reading:** Ezra 4 v 1-24

Tuesday 23 March

82

The practice of conquering armies, when they exiled people, was to move new ethnic groups in to the vacant territory. So the people living in the land when the exiles arrived back were probably not Jews or at least were ethnically mixed.

You have no part with us

▶ Read v 1-3

At first sight, this offer of help sounds plausible and the rebuttal of the returned exiles seems rude. But verse 1 tells us these were enemies—and the rest of the chapter bears this out. **Read v 4-5.** They set about trying to discourage the people.

apply The people in the land claim to 'seek your God'. And today many people say that all the religions worship the same god. But Zerubbabel and Jeshua are clear that others gods are not the same as 'our God... the LORD, the God of Israel'. The true God has revealed Himself in the history of Israel, and in Jesus. He is known through Jesus—or not at all.
See John 14 v 6.

Planning permission withdrawn

▶ Read v 6-23

Verses 6-23 are a parenthesis, giving us a foretaste of the sort of opposition that is to come. The reigns of Xerxes and Artaxerxes were after those of Cyrus and Darius (v 5), and this opposition belongs

to a later time (Nehemiah's time). It is a sign of things to come. The writer probably puts it in here to demonstrate that the apparently kind offer of help in verse 2 is really an attempt to frustrate the rebuilders. This is the proof of the claim in verse 1 that these are the 'enemies of Judah'.

▶ Read v 24

This verse picks up from verses 4-5. The opposition is so intense during the reign of Darius that the rebuilding grinds to a halt.

apply **This is reality.** God's people doing God's work will face opposition. We will face opposition for being true to God's word and refusing to compromise. Increasingly we face opposition, as the returned exiles did, for maintaining the uniqueness of biblical faith. People will work to frustrate us and they will misrepresent us.

Read 1 Peter 4 v 1-5. When we refuse to join in the sinful ways of others, they will heap abuse on us.

❓ *How does Peter exhort Christians who face this kind of abuse?*

Prophetic encouragement

83

▶ **Reading:** Ezra 5 v 1-2

Wednesday 24 March

The work of rebuilding the temple has stalled because of opposition (4 v 24). **Read 5 v 1.** But now the prophets Haggai and Zechariah get to work.

A sharp rebuke

▶ Read Haggai 1 v 1-15

- ? What is God's message to the people?
- ? What is the response of the people?
- ? What is God's promise to the people?

Haggai administers what can only be described as a kick up the backside to the exiles. They have given up rebuilding the temple. Now they are more concerned with their fine, panelled houses. But things are not going well and the harvests are poor. 'Can't you see the connection?' the prophet asks. God is judging His people because they have not made His honour their priority (**Haggai 1 v 8**). When the people hear Haggai's word, they obey and the rebuilding work starts again.

A bigger vision

▶ Read Zechariah 2 v 1-13

Zechariah, too, speaks during the time of Zerubbabel and Jeshua/Joshua (**see Zechariah 3 v 1 and 4 v 6-9**). To the people, it feels like a day of small things (**Zechariah 4 v 10**). But Zechariah gives the people a bigger vision. Not only are they busy building, but God is busy building as well. He is going to build a new Jerusalem—a city without walls

because there will be so many people living in it (2 v 4) including people from all nations (2 v 11). And God Himself will be a wall of fire to protect it (2 v 5). It is a picture of how God deals with His people throughout all history. We, the church, are God's people drawn from all nations. Ultimately, it is fulfilled in God's coming kingdom. Heaven is described as a new Jerusalem (**see Revelation 21**). God's people will live with Him forever.

▶ Read Ezra 5 v 2

The effect of these visions is immediate. The work of rebuilding begins. ' "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD Almighty' to Zerubbabel (**Zechariah 4 v 6**).

time out

What do you think Haggai and Zechariah would say to us?

- ? What might Haggai give us a kick up the backside about?
- ? How would Zechariah want to extend our vision?

pray thru'

If you can remember them, or have a hymnbook handy, use the words of John Newton's great hymn 'Glorious things of thee are spoken' to express your praise to God.

Official scrutiny

84

▶ **Reading:** Ezra 5 v 3 – 6 v 12

Thursday 25 March

The building work is back on track, but now it comes under official scrutiny.

▶ **Read 5 v 3-5**

Tattenai is the local Persian governor. This is not actually opposition, because Tattenai allows them to carry on building while he checks them out (v 5). He just wants to make sure everything is legal. Still, he notes down the names of those involved so that punishment can be meted out if things are not in order (v 10). Intimidating stuff! It must have been a nervous time for the Jews in Jerusalem.

▶ **Read 5 v 6-17**

This is the letter Tattenai sends to King Darius. It contains the response of the Jews to his official questions (v 11-16). They remind the Persians of the official permission for the rebuilding of the temple that King Cyrus had given. And so, Tattenai ends by asking that this claim be checked against official records (v 17). Notice how the people describe God: He is 'the God of heaven and earth' (v 11-12). He was Lord of Babylon—the exile was the result of God's judgment, not Babylon's power (v 12). And He is Lord of Persian bureaucracy (v 5).

▶ **Read 6 v 1-12**

The checks are made and the decree of Cyrus is found (v 3-5)—not in Babylon as expected (5 v 17), but in Ecbatana (6 v 2).

And so Darius issues a second decree reaffirming official permission for the work (v 6-7). But he also authorises financial support for the work from local tax revenues (v 8-10). The Jews in Jerusalem must have been waiting nervously to see if permission would be granted to continue building. Imagine their delight when the news comes that the Persian state is not only allowing them to continue, but is also subsidising their work!

For hundreds of years the Israelites had been ruled by Israelite kings. In theory at least, these kings ruled according to God's law. But now all that had changed. Now the Jews were ruled by foreign powers.

And for hundreds of years the church in the West operated within 'Christendom'. Church and state were linked, and the state sought to reflect Christian values (in theory at least). But all that is changing. We are beginning to live in a truly secular context.

apply

The book of Ezra suggests that God's people can still live as God's people. They do not need to overthrow Persian rule—not least because their God is the God of heaven and earth and He controls earthly powers. **See 6 v 12** (and **5 v 5**).

❓ *What are the lessons for us in the secular states in which we live?*

Joy tinged with sorrow

▶ Read v 13-15

Finally the temple is finished. Notice the reasons given for its completion:

- the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah
- the command of the God of Israel
- the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes.

These reasons co-exist. The effect of preaching God's word and secular explanations go together. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility go together.

Read v 22. The temple was built because of state support, but the Jews recognised God's hand in this.

Apply

? *What role is there for exploring social factors in understanding what makes Christian work effective? What are the dangers?*

▶ Read v 16-18

The completion of the temple is celebrated with joy. It is a great achievement and it means that the Jews can once again worship God as He directed in the Book of Moses. But it is joy tinged with sadness:

- They sacrifice 100 bulls and 600 sheep (200 rams and 400 lambs). **Read 1 Kings 8 v 63.** *How many were sacrificed when Solomon dedicated the first temple?*

- They offer a sin offering. A lot has happened since Solomon built the temple and not much of it good. The history of the people since Solomon has been one of decline into sin, followed by judgment.
- They offer twelve sacrifices for the twelve tribes of Israel, but in fact only two tribes remain. Ten were lost from history in Assyrian exile.

Sorrow tinged with hope

▶ Read v 19-22

A few weeks later the people celebrate their first Passover in the new temple. The Passover commemorated the time when God liberated His people from Egypt and saved them from death through sacrifice. Perhaps God could do it again...

Haggai promised: 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house' (**Haggai 2 v 9**). Jesus is the new glorious temple—the 'place' where we can meet God. And through His one sufficient sacrifice, He deals with sin. And Jesus is what the Passover lamb pointed to: He liberates us from sin and saves us from death. The Passover in Ezra 6 also anticipates the scope of Christ's work for it includes Jews and Gentiles (v 21). People from all nations will find liberation in Jesus and reconciliation through His death.

Who's in charge?

86

▶ **Reading:** Ezra 7 v 1-28

Saturday 27 March

The phrase 'After these things' in verse 1 covers a period of at least sixty years. Chapter 7 introduces Ezra for the first time. Indeed in v 27 he starts telling the story.

A man who knew God's word

▶ Read v 1-10

These verses establish Ezra's credentials. His ancestry shows he is descended from Aaron, the first High Priest (v 1-5). One of the priest's roles was to teach the law, and Ezra has devoted himself to the study of the law (v 6, 10). Indeed Ezra is portrayed as a new Moses. In chapter 8 he leads a new exodus back to the promised land. And he (re-)introduces God's law to the people, as Moses had done. The law was going to be crucial in giving the people identity now that they had no king.

A man who knew God's blessing

▶ Read v 11-26

In v 6 we read that the king of Persia granted Ezra everything he asked. And God blesses Ezra's journey to Jerusalem (v 9). Now, in Artaxerxes' letter, we see further provisions:

- Ezra goes to Jerusalem with a royal mandate (v 13-14)
- Ezra is given gold and silver to buy animals for sacrifice (v 15-17)
- Ezra is given vessels for the temple (v 18-20)

- Ezra is given access to local tax revenues (v 21-23)
- Ezra is given a tax exemption for all the temple workers (v 24)
- Ezra is given authority to set up an administrative and legal system according to God's law (v 25-26).

▶ Read v 27-28

From Artaxerxes' perspective, it was a good idea to keep in the good books of all the gods of the nations he ruled over—v 23 (he offered similar provisions to other nations). From Ezra's perspective, this is God's blessing. God 'put it into the king's heart'. So, while Ezra asked the king for these benefits (v 6), he praises God for their provision.

time out God's sovereignty extends even over each and every human heart. All things are under His control. And He exercises that control for the sake of His people, and for His greater glory. **Ephesians 1 v 22-23.**

❓ *How should this amazing truth change how you live today?*

How can we Christians live in a world that ignores God? This chapter gives two answers: (1) by finding our identity in God's word (not in our position in society) and (2) by trusting in the God who is sovereign over secular authorities (not by trying to gain power).

The house of the Lord

87

▶ **Reading:** Psalm 84

Sunday 28 March

Where would you most like to be right now? A beach? A golf course? In bed? **Read Psalm 84, and think again!**

Home is where...?

We looked briefly at Psalm 84 on Monday (day 81). Now we'll think about it in more detail...

- ❓ *How does the psalmist feel about the house of the Lord (v 1-4)?*
- ❓ *What is life like on the way to the house (v 5-8)?*
- ❓ *What is life like in the house (v 9-12)?*

Praising God with His people is where those who truly belong to Him most feel at home. It's why Christians, despite our knack of falling out with each other, love to meet together: to sing, to pray, to hear God's word explained and applied. It's just a foretaste of the much bigger, better and unrestrained experience that the New Creation will be for us.

time out

But we no longer need a physical building to go to. Hebrews explains how we are able to come into God's presence. **Read Hebrews 12 v 22-24.**

- ❓ *How is the Christian's present experience described?*

Reflect for a moment on the truth of being in God's presence right now—by faith.

Getting there...

▶ Read v 5-7

Notice how the pilgrims are provided for on their journey to the house of the Lord. They seem to have an in-built compass which keeps them heading in the right direction (v 5, ESV). They don't lack for water and refreshment on their journey (v 6); in fact, the verse may be implying that they bring blessing and life wherever they go. Nor do they run out of energy to keep going (v 7). Because the Lord will let nothing stop them appearing before Him at last.

This is true for all those who follow Christ truly. God has made an appointment with you in heaven, and He will make sure that you do not lack the resources to get there.

pray thru'

For each of the following verses, think of something to confess, something in which to rejoice, and something for which to pray.

Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you (v 4).

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage (v 5).

O Lord Almighty, blessed is the man who trusts in you (v 12).

A new exodus



▶ **Reading:** Ezra 8 v 1-36

Monday 29 March

A new people

▶ Read v 1-20

Ezra gathers together a new group of Jews to return to the promised land (mostly from the same families from which people returned in chapter 2). There are no Levites among the group, so Ezra makes a special request for Levites to join them. Throughout it all he recognises that ‘the good hand of our God was on us’.

▶ Read v 21-23

Ezra has told the king that God looks after those who look to Him. So now he refuses to ask for royal protection on the 1,000 mile journey. He wants to demonstrate God’s faithfulness and power.

time out **Read Nehemiah 2 v 7-9.** When Nehemiah leads a group back to Jerusalem, he has no hesitation in asking the Persian king for help and accepting army officers for protection. Ezra refuses royal help. Nehemiah asks for it. Who was right? Or was there merit in both approaches?

A new exodus

▶ Read v 24-36

Isaiah had spoken of the return from exile as a new exodus. And there are lots of parallels. Ezra leads God’s people through dangerous territory with only God to protect them (v 31). He leads them back to the promised land. And

they go carrying the wealth of the nation from which they came (**see Exodus 12 v 35-36**). This is not the first such ‘new exodus’. We have already seen that the return described in chapter 1-2 was also a bit like a new exodus. But neither the first return nor Ezra’s return was on the same scale as the exodus from Egypt under Moses. And neither was on the scale of that promised by Isaiah (**see Isaiah 45**). The ultimate exodus, of course, is achieved by the Lord Jesus.

▶ Read Romans 8 v 14-17 & 32

How does Jesus fulfil the promise of a new exodus? Fill in your answers, then turn them into praise.

The exodus of Moses	The exodus of Jesus
Liberated from slavery in Egypt	
Led by pillars of cloud and fire	
Called ‘my son’ (Exodus 4 v 22-23)	
Through the death of the firstborn	
An inheritance: the land of Canaan	

Grace and disgrace

89

▶ **Reading:** Ezra 9 v 1-15

Tuesday 30 March

Less than five months after his arrival, Ezra's teaching of the law comes to a head when the issue of mixed marriages is brought to his attention.

Disgrace

▶ **Read v 1-7**

The list of nations in v 1 is not an up-to-date list. It recalls the original inhabitants of the land. Israel was given their land because of God's judgment against the sinful ways of those nations (see **Genesis 15 v 16-21** and **Exodus 23 v 23-24**).

But now the people of Israel are behaving in the same way (see also Ezra 9 v 11-12).

Ezra's response is personal abasement and corporate repentance. Those who share Ezra's commitment to God's word gather round him in stunned silence. Then Ezra confesses the shame and disgrace of God's people. When Nehemiah is faced with the same issue, he pulls out the hair of the offenders (**Nehemiah 13 v 25**), but Ezra pulls out his own hair (9 v 3).

pray thru'

Do you share Ezra's horror at sin and the disgrace it brings to God's people? Spend some time confessing your own sins, and the sins of your fellow believers. Say sorry to the Lord for the disgrace it brings upon Him and His honour.

Grace

▶ **Read v 8-15**

We will return to the issue of mixed marriages when we look at chapter 10. For now, notice how Ezra highlights God's grace towards His people. The exile is not truly over, for the people are still in captivity (v 7), bondage (v 8) and slavery (v 9). But God has given His people a remnant. Ezra repeats the idea four times (v 8, 13, 14, 15). While there is a remnant, there is hope.

The prophet Jeremiah had warned Israel that exile was coming. But he had also promised that a remnant would return.

Read Jeremiah 23 v 1-8. God Himself would gather His people and place a new king David over them. The first exodus from Egypt would be superseded by a new exodus from Babylon ('the land of the north'). Ezra evokes that promise as he prays. God is graciously fulfilling it. And Ezra calls on God to go on fulfilling His promise: to protect and honour His remnant people.

One day the faithful remnant of God's people would come down to one person: Jesus Christ. Then in Him a new people would be born. But what of our guilt?

Look again at Ezra 9 v 15. The only thing we can do with our guilt is confess it before God.

❓ *But who can stand in God's presence? See **Romans 5 v 1-2.***

God's people act

90

▶ **Reading:** Ezra 10 v 1-44

Wednesday 31 March

In chapter 9 the issue of mixed marriage was raised and led to communal sorrow and confession. Now they do something about it...

The community acts

▶ Read v 1-15

Notice Ezra's role. Ezra has taught God's word (7 v 10). And when a problem arose, Ezra prayed. People have gathered around Ezra and it is they who suggest a course of action. The whole chapter makes it clear that this is a *community* initiative. They make the initial suggestion (v 2-3), and they promise their backing to Ezra (v 4). The leaders make the arrangements, while Ezra withdraws (v 6-8). And when Ezra presents the issue, 'the whole assembly responded' (v 12). Ezra leads by teaching God's word and praying.

time out

See Acts 6 v 4. It is God who transforms His people through His word. The role of leaders is to teach that word and to pray.

Sent away

▶ Read v 16-44

A careful investigation is made. A list is drawn up. And the foreign wives and their children are sent away.

What are we to make of these chapters? They seem harsh and inhumane, particularly in an age sensitive to anything that

looks like 'ethnic cleansing'. But the issue here is not racial, but religious. We have already seen that those who celebrated Passover included Gentile converts (6 v 21). Mixed marriages *per se* were not forbidden in the law of Moses. The problem was mixed marriages in which one partner continued to worship foreign gods, leading God's people astray. That had led to the downfall of Solomon and many kings after him (**see 1 Kings 11 v 1-11**). Underlying the issue of mixed marriages presented in 9 v 2 is the issue of 9 v 1: 'The people of Israel ... have not kept themselves separate from the neighbouring peoples with their detestable practices.'

apply

Read 1 Corinthians 7 v 12-16.

Paul says Christians who find themselves married to unbelievers should not divorce them unless that is what the unbelieving partner wants.

Read 1 Corinthians 7 v 39.

Paul also warns Christians not to marry unbelievers.

But there is a wider issue here.

Read 1 John 2 v 15-17.

❓ *How does John apply the same principles to all of us?*

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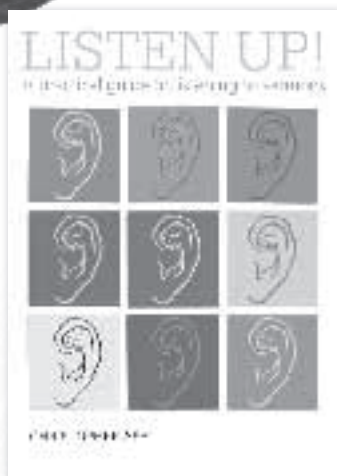
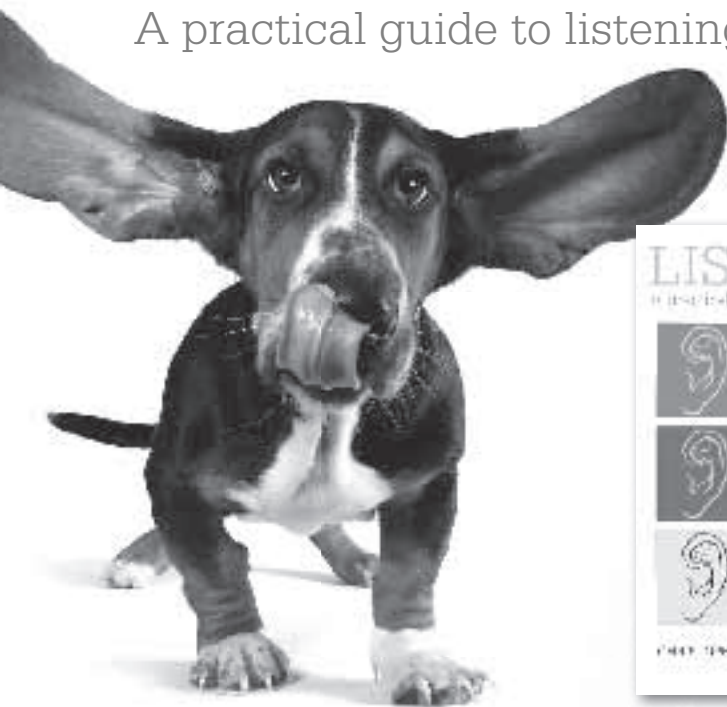
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