

How to use Explore

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 each day.

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.

1
Find a time you can read the Bible each day

2
Find a place where you can be quiet and think

3
Ask God to help you understand

4
Carefully read through the Bible passage for today

5
Study the verses with Explore, taking time to think

6
Pray about what you have read

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Opening up the Bible

Welcome

Tim Thornborough,
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Good Book Company,
is passionate about
helping people to open
up the Bible



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

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.

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 a mid-morning break may suit you. 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, anywhere 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.

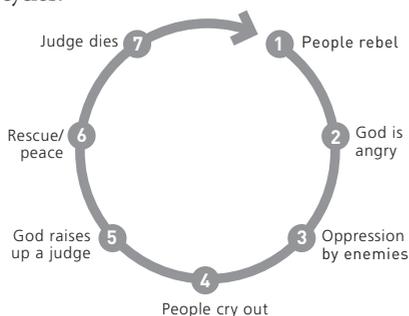
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim'.



JUDGES: Really sorry?

Happy New Year from The Good Book Company. We are returning to the book of Judges, a challenging yet exciting book about flawed people and a flawless God.

In Judges, Israel's history goes in repeated cycles:



Read Judges 10 v 6-10

- ❓ How do we see the first four stages of the Judges cycle here?
- ❓ What would we expect to happen next?

The twist

Read Judges 10 v 11-16

- ❓ How does God answer (v 11-14)? What point is he making?

The Israelites understand the point. Their request in verse 15 is different from the one of verse 10. They say: Do with us as you wish, though we still beg for mercy. In verses 9-10, they simply wanted their distress removed. Now, they want relationship with God, whether or not their suffering ends. They want him, not just what he gives.

- ❓ How does verse 16a show that Israel really has changed?

Apply

Repentance gets beneath the surface. The two signs of real repentance are:

- sorrow for sin, not just for its consequences
- sorrow over idolatrous motives, not just behavioural change

- ❓ Reflect on some ways you have sinned over the last week. What idol were you worshipping at that point?
- ❓ Have you actually repented of it?
- ❓ Which aspects of God's perfection will you meditate on so that you love him more than you love what he gives?

The gang leader

Read Judges 10 v 17 – 11 v 11

- ❓ In what ways is Jephthah an unlikely saviour (11 v 1-3)?

Notice the people treat Jephthah just as they treated God. They rejected him (v 2), yet presume he will help them (v 5-6). They want him to rescue them, but not rule them as their head (v 6). Just as God did, Jephthah makes them ask more humbly, accepting that with rescue comes rule.

The judges all point to Jesus. So someone who rejects Jesus is rejecting God, however much they claim to know or respect him. And anyone who has been rescued by Jesus will have him as their ruler.

Pen before sword

Israel has turned back to God, and he has given them a judge, Jephthah. But Jephthah does not go to war with Israel's enemies immediately.

Read Judges 11 v 12-29

Jephthah is seeking a peaceful resolution—so he asks the king of Ammon: “What do you have against me that you have attacked my country?” (v 12). The king’s answer, in verse 13, is that some of the land Israel now lives in formerly belonged to the Ammonites; and so Israel should “give it back peaceably”.

Three arguments

Verses 15-22 is an **historical** argument.

- ❓ *From whom, and how, did Israel gain the land now in dispute (v 19-22)?*

The Ammonites (similarly named to, but completely different from, the Amorites!) had never lived in this land!

Next, Jephthah uses a **theological** argument (v 23-24).

- ❓ *What point is he making in v 23?*
- ❓ *What should the Ammonites do (v 24)?*

There are two ways of reading this. One is that Jephthah is *accommodating* himself to the Ammonites’ pagan worldview—ie: each nation’s “god” gives that nation a portion of land—even though he knows this is wrong, because the LORD rules everything. The other is that Jephthah has adopted this view—that he knows so little of the LORD that he views him as one god among many.

Third, Jephthah deploys a **legal** argument (v 25-27). At the time Israel took this land in battle, no one challenged their right to it.

The response

All three arguments prove that it is the Ammonites, not Israel, who are in the wrong.

- ❓ *How does the king of Ammon respond (v 28)?*
- ❓ *How does God respond to the king of Ammon (v 29)?*

Diplomacy is exhausted, so war is now inevitable. But Jephthah’s use of the pen before the sword is important. Truth must be told, and peace sought, even though it does not always win the day. In this, Jephthah is pointing us to a greater leader...

Read 1 Peter 2 v 21-25

We follow a Saviour whose truth was mocked, whose righteousness was ignored, yet who compromised on neither. Jephthah partially, and Christ supremely, give us an example of how to face unfair accusations.

Apply

- ❓ *The last time you dealt with an unfair accusation or criticism, how were you (or weren't you) like the Lord Jesus?*
- ❓ *How will Jephthah's and Jesus' examples shape your response next time?*



Vow, death, war

God's Spirit has come upon Jephthah (v 29)—so the outcome of the coming battle is certain. But Jephthah doesn't understand this, with tragic consequences...

A terrible vow

Read Judges 11 v 29-33

- ❓ *What promise does Jephthah make (v 30-31)?*
- ❓ *Why is it an unnecessary "deal" to offer?*

The LORD gives total victory (v 32-33). Now, peace should follow. But...

A terrible death

Read Judges 11 v 34-40

This is a terrible story. Many have thought Jephthah had promised God an animal sacrifice. But the noun is not in the form appropriate for talking about animals. And if he had promised God the first animal out of his house, he would never have considered himself bound to sacrifice his daughter. Jephthah promised human sacrifice.

So why did Jephthah make, and keep, such a vow? God hates human sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12 v 31). But it seems Jephthah had been deeply de-sensitised to violence by the cruelty of the world around him. The world had squeezed him into its mould. Second, human sacrifice was how you could "buy off" a pagan god—Jephthah seems to have thought the LORD needed to be impressed and bought with a lavish "gift". The tragedy is that God had already been moved to save his sinful people (10 v 16), and empowered Jephthah to bring this salvation (11 v 29).

▼ Apply

Jephthah had listened to his culture far more, and his Scriptures far less, than he realised. And so he knew God far less well than he needed to. It is easy for us to see that in him; far harder for us to see it in ourselves. We need to ask ourselves two questions:

- ❓ *Am I regularly and humbly reading the Bible, asking God to show me my blindspots?*
- ❓ *In what ways would I live more radically or restfully if I really believed God was completely committed to me, to love and bless me?*

A terrible war

Read Judges 12 v 1-8

Jephthah was diplomatic with those outside Israel (11 v 14-28); but here, he does not hesitate to strike out at those among God's people who oppose him. He treats God's people far worse than he treats the world.

▼ Apply

- ❓ *How might you be too quick to judge fellow Christians?*
- ❓ *Is there anyone in your church who you are refusing to forgive, because deep down you like being able to look down on them or shun them?*
- ❓ *How, and why, does this picture of real faith challenge you?*

Samson's birth

Samson, the last of the judges in this book, is famous for his long hair and his strength. But his story is much deeper and more intriguing than that.

Read Judges 13 v 1-7

What sin is

- ❓ *What does Israel do once more (v 1)?*

This phrase is repeated throughout Judges (eg: 2 v 11; 10 v 6). It shows us that many of the things the Israelites did were not evil in their eyes—yet in God's, they were.

- ❓ *What does this teach us about what makes sin sin?*
- ❓ *What does it teach us about the danger of sin?*

At the heart of sin is idolatry—and idols are deceitful. They tell us, and they cause our society to tell us, that to worship them is sensible, careful and wise, when in fact we are doing evil in the only eyes in the universe that really matter.

Apply

- ❓ *Why is it liberating to know that God's eyes are the only ones which truly count?*
- ❓ *How will your life today reflect the truth that God's eyes matter more than yours, and more than others'?*

How God works

- ❓ *What does the angel promise (v 3)?*
- ❓ *Why is this impossible, humanly speaking (v 2)?*

- ❓ *What does the angel tell her about how this child will live, and what he will do (v 4-5)?*

The purpose of the Nazirite vow, laid out in Numbers 6 v 1-21, was to ask for God's special help during a crucial time; it was a sign that you were looking to God with great intensity and focus. Usually, the vow was made voluntarily and for a definite period of time.

- ❓ *How was this Nazirite vow different?*

This is a special birth, because it is an impossible birth. So it points us to the most special of all births, over a millennium later. But Jesus' conception is not the only one that Samson's is similar to. God brought into the world through barren women Isaac, Samuel and John the Baptist (Genesis 11 v 30; 21 v 1-3; 1 Samuel 1 v 5-7, 19-20; Luke 1 v 7, 11-17). God has often worked through a child whose existence, humanly speaking, is impossible. In doing so, he shows that the outworking of his salvation is something that no human can manage; that he alone is the one who "gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were" (Romans 4 v 17).

Apply

- ❓ *How does this reminder of who God is and how he works encourage and/or comfort you today?*

Reasons to be prayerful

How do you think you should approach God in prayer? What attitude do you think you should have before you put your hands together and close your eyes?

Reasoned prayer

Read Psalm 86 v 1-7

David doesn't come, as we might, filled with a sense of hesitancy, humility and his own sinfulness. He seems very confident in a way we might find "unspiritual".

❓ *What reasons does he give God as to why his prayers should be answered? List them below—I can count seven!*

❓ *What do we need to know more clearly in order to pray like this (v 5, 7)?*

▼ Apply

❓ *If you don't pray like this—why not? Is there some kind of misplaced humility going on?*

⬆️ Pray

Follow David's pattern. Think of something very specific to pray for, and then ask the Lord for it—giving him these reasons why he should answer you.

Transforming prayer

Read Psalm 86 v 8-13

❓ *What is amazing about v 8-9? Why?*

- ❓ *What truths about God does David remind himself of?*
- ❓ *How does he apply them to himself (v 11)? What do those phrases actually mean in practice?*
- ❓ *What is an undivided heart (v 11), do you think?*
- ❓ *How can we stop our hearts being divided, robbing us of joy (v 4, 11, 12)?*

TIME OUT

- ❓ *How does a divided heart prevent us from "fearing God"?*

Focused prayer

Read Psalm 86 v 14-17

- ❓ *David has a scary problem (v 14), but what does he focus on instead (v 15)?*
- ❓ *What does he ask for (v 16-17)?*

In v 15, David quotes Exodus 34 v 6 and uses God's own words as part of his requests. The use of God's covenant name, "the LORD", is also part of the way David makes his confident request to God. He is saying: "You saved me, so please show everyone that you are a God of your word".

⬆️ Pray

Choose a promise of God, think about how it applies in your life, and then use that promise to pray to God.

Better than a rulebook

How do you raise a baby who has been conceived through divine intervention, and who is destined to be God's means of rescuing his people?

Give us rules

Read Judges 13 v 6-8

- ❓ *Why does Manoah want the angel to return (v 8)?*

Some consider this to be a lack of faith—but notice that Manoah believes the promise will come true. His request is not for proof that the boy will be born, but for help with how to raise him.

Read Judges 13 v 9-18

When the angel returns, Manoah asks him for “the rule” for his son’s life (v 12).

- ❓ *What extra information does he get (v 14)?!*

In that culture, to eat with someone, or to know someone’s name, was to establish relationship, with duties on both sides. It seems Manoah is still trying to get the angel to tell him more detailed rules about how to bring this boy up.

- ❓ *How does the angel respond to these attempts (v 16, 18)?*

Whatever Manoah tries, the angel will not give him the rules he wants.

Better than rules

Read Judges 13 v 19-25

Why would the angel have returned if he had nothing to say to Manoah? Manoah

prayed for help, and the help was apparently refused. But in fact, Manoah did get the help he needed, but not in the form he was asking for. He wanted a “rule” (v 12)—he wanted regulations. He didn’t get them...

- ❓ *What did the angel do instead (v 19-20)?*

It’s likely the angel of the LORD is actually the Son of God (see previous issue, study 11). So God is giving Manoah an unforgettable experience of his greatness and wonder. And, since they don’t die in his presence (v 22-23), God is giving them an assurance of his goodness, too.

Manoah will not be given rules, because he is being given God. This is a message for all of us. We think we need rules, but we need to know God. God does not, and will not, give us a guidebook for every twist and turn, every doubt and decision. We don’t get lots of prescriptions, and (unlike Manoah) we don’t get an appearance from the angel of the LORD. We do, through the Holy Spirit, get God.

Apply

- ❓ *Are there ways in which you are not enjoying your relationship with the living God, because:*
 - *you are grudgingly obeying his “rules”?*
 - *you are wishing he would give you some rules?*

Thank God now that you know *him*.



Wife and strife

The story of Samson is a potent mix of sex, violence, death and power—exactly the stuff of a summer action film!

Finding a wife

Read Judges 14 v 1-4

- ❓ *How is the woman Samson wants to marry described (v 1-2)?*
- ❓ *Why don't his parents want him to marry her (v 3)?*

Their issue is not with inter-racial marriage, but with inter-faith marriage. God had told his people that Israel were neither to ally with nor marry into peoples who did not know God (Exodus 34 v 15-16), because he knew that then his people would “prostitute themselves to their gods”.

Yet here, the man who is supposed to be fighting the Philistines (13 v 5) is marrying into them. Samson is a leader who reflects Israel's real spiritual state. He is impulsive and unteachable, and has adopted the values and views of the Philistines.

- ❓ *Can you think of ways in the past that you, or your church, have taken on the surrounding culture's views about what is important in life?*
- ❓ *Why is becoming like the culture so attractive for churches and believers?*

Samson insists that “she's the right one for me” (literally, “she is right in my eyes”, v 3b).

- ❓ *What do his parents, and Samson himself, not know (v 4)?*

This verse is the key to understanding the whole story. God will use the weaknesses

of Samson to bring about confrontation between the two nations. As the story goes on, we'll see everyone acting out of their own ungodly character—and God using it all to ensure that the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines begins.

Pray

- ❓ *Can you think of times when God has used your flaws to bring about good? Thank him for this grace.*

Ask God to use you for his good purposes today, despite and even in your weaknesses.

Starting a fight

Read Judges 14 v 5-20

As a Nazirite, Samson must not touch dead things, or drink alcohol. If he does, he must go straight to the tabernacle for cleansing.

- ❓ *How does he disdain his vow?*
 - v 5-9
 - v 10 (“feast” is literally “drinking party”)
- ❓ *How does Samson use his God-given gift of strength in verse 19?*

Israel's judge fights not to deliver the people, but to settle his own debts.

Apply

- ❓ *What gifts have you been given by God? How could you use them today?*

Violence and treachery

We know enough about Samson by now to know that he is unlikely to respond peaceably to his fiancée marrying another man...

Vicious cycle

Read Judges 15 v 1-8

- ❓ How does the level of violence increase through these verses?
- ❓ What picture do we get of:
 - the Philistines?
 - Israel's judge?

Again we see that Samson is just like God's enemies! His reactions and "solutions" are just the same as theirs.

Whose side?

Read Judges 15 v 9-13

- ❓ What is the Philistines' aim (v 10)?
- ❓ Whose side does the tribe of Judah prove to be on? Why (v 11)?

They may bear the name of God's people, but Judah would rather live at peace with the world and worship their idols than be freed to worship God—and they would rather cut down their own rescuer than risk confrontation with the Philistines.

Apply

As God's people today, it is always easier to live like the world than to live under Jesus' rule. It is always more comfortable to ask Jesus to stop making demands on us than to accept the risk and cost of living for him.

- ❓ Where are you under pressure to take the easier route in your life at the moment?

Whose victory?

Read Judges 15 v 14-20

- ❓ Why is Samson able to escape (v 14-15)?
- ❓ Who does Samson give credit to for his victory (v 16)?

In v 18, Samson (for the first time) speaks to the God who has chosen him, and empowered him. But his prayer is neither humble nor faithful; he basically demands that God helps him, and complains that God isn't doing so—which is remarkably clueless, given that God's Spirit has already rescued him from a lion, a lost bet, and a thousand Philistines. Samson uses God's strength, but he doesn't depend on God except in extreme situations. He is a deeply flawed leader of a deeply flawed people... and yet, amazingly, God is working all the time to "begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines" (13 v 5).

Pray

Thank God for working for his people even when his people are working against him.

Pray that you would have eyes to see, and a heart to praise God, when he helps you. Ask him to help you prayerfully to depend on him today, whether it goes well or badly.

Defeated by “I”

“Samson led Israel for twenty years” (15 v 20). But it was not much of a rule, because—unlike the previous judges—he hadn’t rescued Israel from its enemies.

Typical

Read Judges 15 v 20 – 16 v 3

This section sums Samson up. Because of his weakness for women (v 1), he’s enticed into an extremely dangerous situation (v 2), and uses his God-given strength to escape (v 3). The more God blessed Samson with strength to fight his foes, the more Samson grew confident in his own invulnerability, and the more he lived as he saw fit. Samson’s heart used God’s blessings as a reason to forget God, not to obey him.

▼ Apply

Success is spiritually dangerous!

- ❓ *How might this be a danger for you?*
- ❓ *When do you most need to think: “This success in my life has come because of God’s kindness to me, not because I am self-sufficient”?*

Downfall

Read Judges 16 v 4-21

- ❓ *What causes Samson’s downfall?*
- ❓ *Why does Delilah betray him (v 5)?*

Why did Samson stay with Delilah after verses 8-9?! Perhaps it gave him a high to be in danger; but more likely, he felt he so needed what Delilah gave him that he was in denial about her motives. This couple are an extreme case of using one another rather

than serving one another. They say to each other: “I am with you because I love you”, but they mean: “I am with you because you are so useful to me”. Doubtless there was a lot of passion; but it was all done out of a motive of self-enhancement, not self-giving. Samson was using Delilah to get sexual love and (probably) the thrill of danger; she was using him to get fortune and fame.

▼ Apply

C.S. Lewis distinguished between two types of “love”: *“Need-love cries from our poverty; Gift-love longs to serve ... Need-love says of a woman [or man] ‘I cannot live without her’; Gift-love longs to give her happiness.”*

Unless you have an experience of God’s love that fulfils your deepest needs, you will tend to use other people to bolster or prove yourself.

- ❓ *How does this truth, seen so destructively in Samson and Delilah, challenge you in your relationships? How does it encourage you as a Christian?*
- ❓ *How does Samson end up (v 21)?*
- ❓ *Why (v 20)?*

It was never about the hair. It was about God and his generosity—which has now been withdrawn. Without God, Samson is nothing.



Death and victory

The man who had burned the Philistines' grain (15 v 4-5) is now reduced to grinding it (16 v 21). For the first time in Judges, God's chosen judge has been defeated.



Not about the hair

Read Judges 16 v 22

Why did the Philistines let Samson's hair grow back? It must have been because they thought that God would never bless Samson again, given his broken vow. But God is not bound or limited by his people's obedience—he is faithful to his promises even when his people are unfaithful.

A faithful prayer

Read Judges 16 v 23-31

The true contest is Yahweh ("the LORD") versus Dagon, the god of the Philistines. Who is stronger? Who should Israel serve?

- ❓ *What appears to be the answer to those questions in verses 23-25?*
- ❓ *How does v 26-30 give the true answer?*

At last, in verse 28, Samson shows true faith in God. There is a new-found humility. He recognises Yahweh is sovereign. He acknowledges he depends on God for his strength. And he is prepared to die (v 30) to perform his God-given role, rather than use his God-given strength to save himself.

▼ Apply

We do what we do only because of God's grace, and that grace is given so that we might do what is pleasing to him.

- ❓ *When, and why, do you find it easiest to forget this?*
- ❓ *How will you make sure you remember?!*

A shadow of Jesus

The death of God's judge, to deliver his people, points us to the death of God's Son.

Both Samson and Jesus:

- were betrayed by someone close to them
- were handed over to Gentile oppressors
- were tortured and chained
- were asked to perform
- died with arms outstretched
- appeared completely struck down by their enemies (Dagon, and Satan), yet in their death crushed their enemy, breaking their power over God's people.

There are, though, two crucial differences:

- Samson was in Dagon's temple as a result of his own repeated disobedience. Jesus was on the cross as a result of his perfect obedience and our repeated disobedience.
- Samson's death began deliverance (13 v 5); Jesus' death achieved deliverance "once for all", a final rescue (see 1 Peter 3 v 18; Hebrews 10 v 10).

▲ Pray

Spend time thinking about Jesus' death, in its similarities and differences to Samson's, and praise God for this greatest rescue.