



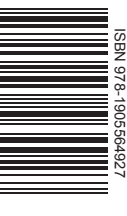
explore

Bible notes for adults

You may never have discovered how a regular 'quiet time' can help you grow and mature as a Christian. This short guide will help you get started.

With daily readings, prompts and advice, it will encourage you get established in a routine of engaging with God, and to discover the joy and liberty that comes from knowing Him.

Join with the thousands of Christians around the globe who use *Explore* to help them read the Bible and pray every day.



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explore
28 daily
Bible readings

Time with God

Your introduction to a regular time with God

In this issue: • How to spend Time with God •
• The Sermon on the Mount • Jonah • Bible survey •

explore

Time with God



In this issue

This introductory issue of *Explore* is designed to help you understand and apply the Bible as you read it daily. Sections in this sample include readings on the nature of the Bible, part of the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's Gospel, an overview of the whole of the Bible and readings from the book of Jonah.

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.

Contributors to this issue

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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



Spending time with God

How to have a regular 'Quiet Time'

W*elcome to this introductory issue of Explore—a resource to help you dig into, understand and apply the timeless truths of God's word to your everyday life.*

Many people have found that setting aside a regular time each day to read and think about God's word, and to spend time in prayer, has been the power-house of their spiritual life and growth. Explore is designed to encourage, help and support you in this daily joy and discipline, sometimes referred to as a 'Quiet Time'.

It is often a struggle to be consistent in finding 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 to it hungry to learn from the Lord, and to feed on the truth, it will be a place of nurture and

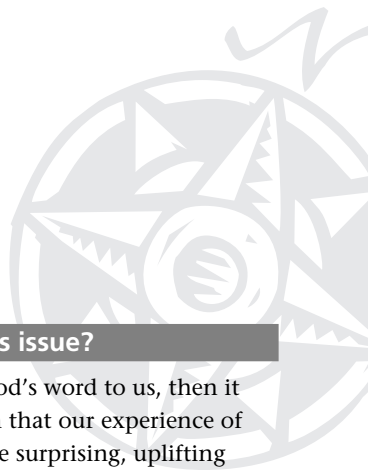
growth, and a source of direction and strength for your daily life.

► **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.

As C.S. Lewis said: *'The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job of each morning consists in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice... letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.'*

But you may not be a 'morning person' so last thing at night, or, if you're free, a mid-morning break. Whatever suits 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, which makes your bedroom the top choice for many. Some people who commute plan to get to work a few minutes earlier and get their Bible out in an office, or some other quiet corner. Some like to sit in a favourite armchair with a cup of tea at hand. Others find sitting at a table or desk more productive. The rule is that there's no rule—whatever works for you!



🕒 **PRAYER:** Although *Explore* helps with specific prayer ideas from the passage, you should try to develop your own lists to pray through. Perhaps you could pray each day for one family member, one friend, and a fellow believer? And how about keeping a prayer diary where you record your prayer requests, and also how God has answered them. 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 what is truly important, and it will shape the nature of our prayers for ourselves, the world and others.

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

What’s in this issue?

If the Bible is God’s word to us, then it stands to reason that our experience of reading it will be surprising, uplifting and, at times, deeply disturbing to us. So the 28 days of daily readings in this introduction start by looking carefully at the claims the Bible makes about itself.

After the first few days, where we think about the nature of the Bible from a range of passages, we’ll look over a section of Jesus’ teaching from Matthew.

Then, on day 15, we begin a short overview of all the different types of writing to be found in the Bible, and finish by working our way through the OT book of Jonah.

We hope that this month of readings will give you a taste for reading the Bible regularly with *Explore*, and that, as a result, you will grow in the knowledge and love of God. You’ll find details of how you can order a subscription to *Explore* inside the back cover.

Remember!

- **It’s quality, not quantity, that counts.** Better a few minutes thinking about a few verses, 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 fall into the trap of thinking 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 more wholeheartedly.

THE BIBLE: Look who's talking!

▶ Reading: 2 Peter 1 v 16-21

Stand by for the ride of your life!
Because, if the Bible really is God's Word, then it's not just a book about God, but a book **by** God. In other words, as you open the pages of your Bible and read today's passage, you will actually be listening to God speaking to you!

God spoke through men

▶ Read 2 Peter 1 v 20-21

You often hear it said that the Bible was written by men whose understanding was limited by their own times and circumstances—and so it doesn't really apply to how we live and think today.

❓ *What do these verses say about that?*

It's a great word picture in v 21. The idea is of a sailing ship being blown along by the wind. Scripture isn't simply man's ideas, or man's 'spin' on God's ideas. It is God (the Holy Spirit) *breathing out* His own words through man. Until God 'blew', the men who wrote down the Bible had nothing to say; they were like sailing yachts without wind.

Some people say we hear God as we pray, or are silent. But really it is when we open the Bible that we listen to God, for it is here that God speaks definitively.

• *'But doesn't God speak in lots of ways?'*

Yes, He speaks through creation, through our conscience, through experiences we have, even through dreams sometimes—but these are more like the teacher clap-

ping to get the children's attention. The Bible contains the clear, undisputed words that God is speaking to us today. So we must come, bowing in our hearts as we read, to receive everything God says.

Men spoke from God

▶ Read 2 Peter 1 v 16-19

Yes, God is speaking, but not in a vacuum! A real man, an apostle called Peter, has real concern and is writing a real letter to real Christians. To hear God's words to us now, we need to understand what God was saying through Peter to the people then.

❓ *What is it that Peter wants his readers to be sure about (v 16)?*

And what is the reliable truth that Peter is telling us about Jesus? That, far from there being uncertainty about who He was, they should see He was the very person all the Old Testament was pointing to (v 19). Jesus is God's final revelation, His last word to mankind. If they believed the Old Testament scriptures, how much more should they now receive the truth about Jesus.

❗ *That's Peter's word as a faithful witness—and it's also God's word.*

pray thru'

- Thank God that He has not left us groping around in the dark on the important issues in life.
- Praise God for the Bible, and ask Him to help you come to it humbly, ready to hear, and glad to obey.

Sure thing

2

► **Reading:** 1 Peter 1 v 22 – 2 v 3

A salesman calls at the door offering to replace all your windows for free. The doctor looks seriously into your eyes as he tells you the results of your test. Whose word do you trust?

I wonder how many years it will be before people look back to the 'old days' at the beginning of the 21st century and laugh at the way we believed the kind of world view the media churned out. And yet now people look at you as if you are mad if you dare to suggest God's words in the Bible are a safer guide...

New is true?

► **Read 1 Peter 1 v 24**

Peter isn't ashamed to quote words that were already 700 years old when he wrote. Now you can add on another 2,000. But they're as fresh as today's bread from the baker's. Every day humans fade and die, and their ideas get buried with them. And every day is a new testimony to the unchanging truth of God's words. Everything God has said has proved true; everything God has said is still proving true.

time out

❓ *What are we doing to God's unchanging truth if we tweak it to 'bring it up to date'?*

❓ *In practice, what can we do to help ourselves rely on God's truth when all the pressure is to go with what everyone else is saying?*

Old is dead?

► **Read v 22, 23**

❓ *What is Peter's argument in these verses?*

You see just how new God's ancient word is? Peter is saying that God's word is the key to living a life of genuine love towards others. It's not that it simply *contains* truth which will help us love one another—it's actually alive in us if we've been born anew through it! God's living word is giving us life and love as we trust and obey what He says.

So of course we will be hungry for what gives us life...

The Bible—boring?

► **Read 2 v 1-3**

At last we find words that we can rely on, answers that satisfy, truth that never shifts ground, promises that will certainly be kept. And a sign that God is at work in us is that we are hungry for it. Like wailing newborn babies crying out in distress until we are happily and contentedly feeding on God's life-sustaining truth.

❓ *Is that you? Or do you still have a 'take it or leave it' attitude to reading the Bible. If so, it might say more about you than the book in your hands...*

Spiritual minds

▶ **Reading:** 1 Corinthians 2

3

Here's a great prayer many use as they come to read the Bible: 'Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law' (Psalm 119 v 18).

But why do we need to ask for that? Is it that the Bible is a particularly difficult book needing extra brain-power to work out? No—the reason is that it is God speaking, and we therefore need God to open our ears and eyes to receive it. As the Holy Spirit of God breathed out the words originally, we need the Holy Spirit of God to breathe those words into our lives. So go on, ask now!

God speaks nonsense!

▶ Read 1 Corinthians 2

The heading is tongue in cheek of course, but it helps make Paul's point. God's words are 'foolishness' unless we have God's Spirit. Now don't think the Bible is some kind of mumbo jumbo needing 'spiritual' gymnastics to interpret—that's not Paul's point at all. God's words actually make perfect, glorious sense—but our human minds and desires are so screwed up that we won't take it in. So at one level we understand what the Bible is saying—because God's message to humankind is simple enough for children to grasp. But at another level it leaves us confused because it goes right against the flow.

❓ *What is at the heart of God's message of wisdom—which to human thinking is nonsense? See v 2, 7.*

❓ *Why did the Jews have Jesus crucified? See v 8, 9.*

❓ *So how can we understand or receive God's message? See v 10-14.*

time out

Reading the Bible should be a very humbling experience. It means asking God to overturn our wrong thinking and replace it with His wisdom, which our world thinks is nonsense. *Until we do that, the Bible will remain a closed book to us...*

Spiritual minds

God's Spirit opens our eyes as we think. Unlike some kinds of meditation, we don't *empty* our heads when we come to the Bible: we *fill* our minds with God's truth. Never imagine that thinking is unspiritual! It is only *wrong thinking*, merely human reasoning, which is unspiritual. So as we approach the Bible it is with prayer for God to enlighten us and with minds set on understanding God's words.

apply

We are to use our minds like the Jews of Berea, who, when they heard the good news about Jesus, '*received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*' (Acts 17 v 11)

- *Why not help yourself to think by making simple notes every day.*

Health food

4

► **Reading:** Matthew 4 v 1-4

Do you enjoy a healthy diet? Or maybe you don't get enough... of God's nourishing, life-giving word? Matthew 4 v 4 provides a helpful health chart to shape our priorities.

Essential

► **Read Matthew 4 v 1-4**

I don't know about you, but if I'd been without food for forty days I'd think a good dinner would be my first priority. I'm not sure that I could think sensibly about anything else!

Jesus shows us a different perspective. Doing what God said was far more important than feeding His hungry stomach. So He quotes this fundamental lesson God taught Israel through their forty years wandering in the desert. Natural provision is only one side of the story. Spiritual food is essential. Without God's words we are not truly alive.

time out

Jesus clearly had a mind full of Bible—the quote came readily to His tongue.

❓ *What implications are there for the time we will need to spend with God's word?*

❓ *If God's words are essential to live by, don't miss a meal! Plan for regular times to read the Scriptures. Make it a priority—which will mean other things have to go lower down...*

time out

It's great (and important) to read the Scriptures and to know them—but what did Jesus do with what He had read? A big intake of food without processing it can give you bad indigestion...

Nourishing

Do you remember reading 1 Peter 2 v 2? It says: *'Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation'*. Many new believers stay babies for years. They are not clear what God says about all kinds of things; they continue doing many things that grieve their Lord, and fail to do other things that please Him. They are immature in their relationships with other Christians and do not live close to God. The reason is obvious, surely...

pray thru'

* Pray that God will give you friends to encourage you to be hungry for God's word, and a church family that will both teach the Bible clearly and live it honestly.

Enjoy

▶ **Reading:** Psalm 19

So far there's been a certain amount of logic. Because the Bible is God's words, it is utterly reliable, needs to be read with spiritual minds, and is essential food. The logic continues. If these are God's words and God is good, then it follows that His words won't just bring weighty truth—but also deliver deep, satisfying joy.

Which is why my uncle's face lights up when he talks about the Bible. He doesn't like reading, hardly ever reads a book—and yet every day, without fail, he will devour great chunks of the Bible. He loves his Bible because he loves his God.

What's good about the Bible?

▶ **Read Psalm 19**

The first 6 verses aren't about the Bible at all—they are about a silent sermon God preaches every day to everyone. There are a few things you can understand about God without words:

❓ *What are they, according to verse 1?*

But in v 7-11 we come to God's *perfect* revelation. And it's here the psalmist really warms to his theme. He's not just stating truths about God's word—catch his enthusiasm as you reread the verses!

❓ *How would you describe to someone what David thinks of God's word?*

❓ *What use is the Bible, according to this psalm? Make a list from v 7, 8, 11.*

Do you see why the Bible fills those who receive it with joy? The psalmist isn't just

being enthusiastic, as you might get excited about the latest book you've read, or film you've seen. It's not just a fascinating story to thoroughly enjoy. It has 'soul substance.' It satisfies deep down.

It satisfies

time out

- ❓ *Where have you tried to find satisfaction?
How would you describe the results?*
- ❓ *Why do you think God's words can bring a quality of satisfaction that cannot be found in the activities, things or relationships we pursue in this world?*

Do you now begin to see that v 8, 10 is no exaggeration? It's not that every time we open the Bible we get an amazing experience—but the truth in the Bible has the power to set us free, and gives us a joy that no one can rob us of.

pray thru'

- ❗ *Praise God for the privilege and joy of being given His life-giving word to renew, refresh and guide you. Finish by praying verse 14.*

No messing...

▶ **Reading:** Hebrews 4 v 12, 13

6

God's word surely gives joy to those who receive it, but there's another important attitude to consider as we open the Bible...

'This is the one I esteem' says the Lord, 'he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.' **Isaiah 66 v 2**

Razor-edged probe

▶ **Read Hebrews 4 v 12, 13**

I sometimes give advice. But I can never insist people do what I suggest—how can I? It's up to them—my thoughts and words don't have authority over someone else's life. But we don't come to the Bible merely for advice. God's words are final. He has total authority over us. We reject them at our peril.

▶ **Skim through Hebrews 3 v 7 – 4 v 11** in order to get a sense of the context of verses 12 and 13.

The readers are being warned in no uncertain terms not to 'do an Israel' with God's words. An entire generation disobeyed God and, as a result, failed to enter God's land—they died in the wilderness. It's that serious, these Christians are being told: *'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts'* (4 v 7).

❓ *What are we told in v 12, 13 about what the Bible is like?*

❓ *What are we told about what the Bible does?*

No messing

You get the point. If you come to me for advice, it's up to you how much you let on about your situation. You can play games with me if you wish and get the answer you want. But we're truly foolish if we think we can try that with God. His word lays us bare. God's word gets to the stark truth about us. It uncovers all our layers of pretence and sees exactly what we are thinking.

time out

Can you see now why an attitude of humble trembling before God's word is vital? Are you ready to hand in your (rather feeble) defensive weapons and take whatever God says?

❓ *If not, what will you say to Him when you have to give an account of yourself (see v 13)?*

When we come to the Bible, we can't come picking and choosing the bits we like or agree with. We come to change our thinking and living, to bring it in line with what God says. You might like to read the awesome warning Jesus gives right at the end of the Bible to those who cut and paste the Bible to suit themselves:

▶ **Read Revelation 22 v 18, 19**

❗ *Is there something that you need to come clean about with the Lord right now? He's waiting to hear from the 'real you'. And more than ready to forgive you and pour out His blessing into your life...*

Over to you

▶ **Reading:** Mark 4 v 1-20

It's a funny thing. Jesus stood up in a boat and told the raging waves to be calm and they instantly obeyed. No question, no hesitation—just total obedience. Jesus' words have that kind of power. And yet, when it comes to human beings, there's a much wider variety of responses. Jesus' words have just as much authority over us, just as much power—but God has given us the responsibility for what we do with His words.

Parable of the sower

▶ **Read Mark 4 v 1-20**

Jesus' first concern is for the sowers, His disciples. They need to understand that even though they have the most brilliant truth to share, not everyone will take it. There's absolutely nothing wrong with the seed—it's the word of God; the problem lies in the soils, the human hearts and lives into which God's word falls. Even with the promising responses of this story, in the end only one soil yields any fruit.

- **The hard path, v 15.** The seed lies on top. The word is heard but doesn't penetrate. But why is there no response?
- **The rocky soil, v 16, 17.** Enthusiastic response—the person believes in Jesus and wants to follow Him. The problem is the cost...
- **The thorny soil, v 18, 19.** This time the response is more thoughtful. God's word has time to take root. But in the end the competition wins the battle for space...

- **The good soil, v 20.** You can only define soil as 'good' when the seed actually produces fruit. Our lives start to be 'fruitful' for God—we become more like Jesus.

It's a challenging parable, because it explodes the idea that simply being receptive to God's words will do—that it doesn't need to actually take over our lives...

- ❓ *Which soil best fits the way you have been responding as you have read or heard God's words in the last few days?*

pray thru'

Do you want to be good soil?

- ❓ *What fears and worries surface in your mind as you think about bringing yourself into complete obedience to Jesus words?*
- ❓ *Talk to Him about these things, and ask Him to change your sluggish heart, protect you from 'the competition' and help you to be a receptive, responsive servant.*
- ❓ *And pray for fruit! In your life and in the lives of others. The fruit of a godly life that pleases the Lord and draws others to Him as well...*

Tomorrow we'll start a short series looking at Jesus' teaching in The Sermon on the Mount.

THE KING'S SERMON

8

▶ **Reading:** Matthew 5 v 1-5

Would you climb a mountain to hear Jesus preach? I'm sure you'd have thought it well worth the effort... so let's pay as much attention to the same sermon written down.

▶ **Read Matthew 5 v 1-5**

time out

Jesus is painting a word-portrait of the kind of people we should aspire to be. Before we go on, take a moment to think what kind of people you respect and admire. What characteristics do you value and want to have for yourself?

❗ *If you could be like that, then surely you would be truly happy...?*

Blessed...

Blessed means 'approved by God, privileged, truly happy'.

❓ *Do you long for Jesus to be able to describe you like that?*

❓ *So what are the top-of-the-list characteristics for 'blessed' people?*

Poor... mourners... meek

Jesus doesn't mean that these people are weak, characterless, miserable and cowardly! 'Blessed' people are the very opposite of that in practice. Jesus *does* mean that they don't have a high opinion of themselves—because they have seen their spiritual poverty before God. They mourn over their appalling sinfulness. So much so that they can even take other

people's criticisms meekly.

▶ **Read Isaiah 57 v 14, 15**

Immediately, we can see who the people are that fit this description. It is believers; those whose hearts God has changed, whom Jesus has saved and begun to make like Him. Miserable? No, more happy than can be described, because they enjoy the presence of the living God Himself.

More privileges

Look again at what Jesus has promised those blessed people:

▶ **Re-read verses 3-5**

Notice the wonderful contrasts in each of the verses. What they think of themselves is just so different from what God thinks of them, and what He has in store for them.

Jesus had come to bring in the kingdom Isaiah had predicted:

▶ **Read Isaiah 61 v 1-3**

pray thru'

❗ *Praise God if He has made us at all like this! But has He? Are these characteristics really seen in your life?*

❗ *If they are, then one thing is sure—we'll want to become more and more like this, more and more like the King Himself.*

'Blessed people'

▶ Reading: Matthew 5 v 6-9

Four more descriptions of 'blessed' people today; read them slowly and carefully, thinking about each word...

Hungry for righteousness

▶ Read v 6

What do most people 'hunger and thirst' for? What do they crave more than anything else? Money... possessions... security... happiness... love?

time out

What about us? If we're honest, many of these things are highly attractive—and maybe even dominate our thoughts.

But if we crave these things (even happiness!), we will never be lastingly 'filled'. Verse 6 tells us who is promised their heart's desire—those who long to be righteous and to live holy lives.

❓ *Is that what you really want most of all?*

The merciful

▶ Read v 7

'They've never helped me out, so I don't see why I should do anything for them.' 'They've had it coming to them for a long time.'

Yes, we will think like that... unless we've known God's mercy to us. After all, what did we deserve from God? It's impossible to know God's mercy and never show mercy to others! There's a direct link between these things for those who are truly 'blessed' people:

KNOW GOD'S MERCY

BECOME MERCIFUL

**OBTAIN GOD'S MERCY AT THE
END OF YOUR LIFE**

The pure in heart

▶ Read v 8

Jesus is our best example. Think of the total purity of His heart, His thoughts, His motives, His whole life. And He sees God perfectly.

▶ Now read Hebrews 7 v 26

The more we are pure like Jesus, the more closely we will see and know God.

The peacemakers

▶ Read v 9

Again think about the Lord Jesus, God's holy Child, and how He came to make peace with God for His enemies.

▶ Read Colossians 1 v 20, 21

pray thru

*We cannot **make** peace in the way Jesus did—but we can be like Him.*

Pray about situations where there is discord—in your family, in church, at work. Pray that you would be merciful, pure in heart, and self-sacrificial, to be a peacemaker in these areas.

For my sake...

10

▶ **Reading:** Matthew 5 v 10-12

Take another look through Jesus' word-portrait of a 'blessed' person (v 3-10), and you'll see that these are just the characteristics most people despise. Either because they see them as worthless and unattractive—or because they show just how self-centred and materialistic we really are. Not surprisingly 'blessed' people suffer for it!

▶ **But read v 10-12!**

The persecuted are 'blessed'

Happy, privileged, honoured people! Think of that when life as a Christian is becoming distinctly uncomfortable because of the way you are being treated. Others may despise you, but Jesus calls you blessed. In fact, He even tells you to rejoice about it (v 12)!

❓ *Why? (v 12: find two reasons)*

And add another—it's a privilege to share in Jesus' sufferings.

▶ **Read Acts 5 v 40, 41**

What kind of people?

Not...

- anyone who is persecuted, or...
- Christians who are a pain in the neck!

But...

- **People who are persecuted because they're following Jesus.** (Notice the key phrase; 'because of righteousness'.)

Jesus Christ suffered more through persecution than anyone else ever will. The more we are like Him, the more likely it is

we will suffer for His sake.

▶ **John 15 v 18-21 puts it straight**

pray thru'

Do you suffer for Jesus?

If so...

- remember the reward...
- remember the privilege...
- remember the Master.

If not...

- is that because we are not very like our Lord and Master, not much like the 'blessed' people He describes?

❗ *Pray for courage to follow Jesus more closely, to face suffering like Him.*

❗ *And pray for your many, many Christian brothers and sisters throughout the world who will, today, endure ridicule, beatings, injustice and threats. Ask that they would know the reassurance and joy of Jesus' blessing today.*

Salty and bright

▶ **Reading:** Matthew 5 v 13-16

Think of a pile of road salt that's been left out on the side of the street for a few months. Totally useless! All the salt has been washed out leaving just a pile of off-white rubble. No good for the road, no good even to chuck on your garden—just a nuisance.

▶ **Read v 13**

A 'Christian' who isn't Christ-like is just like that! Do we call ourselves Christians? If we are, it's impossible to be totally un-Christ-like.

True christians are salty

They have a good effect on unbelieving people...

Christians PRESERVE.

- Christians stop the rot of the impurity and corruptness around them. Historically you can see that; whenever there has been revival of true faith in Christ, the whole of society has been cleaned up. And a single Christian can change the mood of an office by refusing to pass on gossip, or by standing up for honesty, for example.

❓ *In what ways do you have that kind of influence?*

Christians ARE SAVOURY!

- Like salt they add flavour. There's something insipid about the empty, pointless life of unbelievers. But Christians show that life is worth living; it has purpose and meaning.

❓ *Is that the kind of message your life conveys?*

True christians are lights

▶ **Read v 14-16**

Sin is like darkness. Think how dark it is all around. Think of the evil everywhere you look. And think how dark many people are inside.

Light is what is needed! We long for Jesus, THE LIGHT, to shine powerfully into the darkness.

❓ *Yes, but what do these verses say? Who are the shining lights..?*

time out

If the light has shone into your heart, then you have become a light.

▶ **Read Ephesians 5 v 8-13**

Christians have for too long been blaming the meat (of society) for going rotten, when the preserving salt has been taken out of it. Or blaming the house for getting dark when the light has been removed.

It's time for us to recognise our responsibility to be salt and light in society.

❓ *Do you show up in the dark?
Or are you hiding away?
(See Matthew 5 v 15)*

▶ **Read v 16 again**

❓ *Why is it so important for Christians to be bright and salt-like?*

Holy inside

12

► **Reading:** Matthew 5 v 17-20

So far as the common people were concerned, the scribes and Pharisees were the authorities on God's law. So who was this new teacher, Jesus?

They would have been puzzled at the completely different emphasis in Jesus' teaching—very different from that of the scribes and Pharisees.

❓ *So was Jesus actually attacking God's holy laws...?*

A far higher standard...

► **Read Matthew 5 v 17-20**

Jesus wanted to make it quite clear to the people that He was far more concerned about God's law than the scribes and Pharisees were. The people thought the scribes and Pharisees were so holy—no one could ever reach their standard. There would have been a gasp when Jesus said the words of verse 20.

That must have seemed the end of all hope for them—no way could they better the efforts of the scribes and Pharisees. But they had completely misunderstood what being holy means. They all thought that true holiness consists of not actually committing sins such as murder, adultery or swearing. It meant sticking rigidly to a set of do's and don't's ... being very thorough with religious duties such as prayer, fasting, Bible-reading... Surely these were the things that please God?

Jesus' answer is an emphatic and shock-

ing **No!** If this was the standard, then the scribes and Pharisees were faultless... But Jesus went on to show that it's what we are like inside that truly counts.

time out

The temptation to believe that looking good to others is what counts will never leave us. But we must never be satisfied with living a morally upright, do-good-to-others, church-going life. We must be holy inside.

► **Read verse 20 again**

The way to be holy

It was as impossible for the scribes and Pharisees as anyone else to achieve holiness inside. But Jesus had come to bring hope for all of us—to show how we can become acceptable to God. Through Jesus Christ Himself. Because He was perfectly holy inside as well as out, God was perfectly satisfied with His life.

pray thru'

Talk with the Lord about your 'holiness'. Is it more of the outside sort, or are you working at being pure inside as well? It all starts with trusting in, relying on and receiving the holiness of Jesus Christ. And then allowing His Holy Spirit to do His work inside us.

❗ *Maybe you need to start by asking Him for a hunger to be holy?*

Killer?

▶ **Reading:** Matthew 5 v 21-26

So what exactly does Jesus mean when He says that we need a better ‘righteousness’ than that of the scribes and Pharisees (verse 20)?

As He is just about to show with a number of examples, it means that our attitudes as well as our actions need to be right. But that’s easier said than done... As Jesus uncovers what we are really like inside, we’ll soon see that our own ‘righteousness’ is hopeless—and that we need His righteousness to make us acceptable to God.

▶ **Read v 21, 22**

❓ *You’d be offended if I asked you whether you had ever committed murder. But think again—what is Jesus saying here?*

Murder

Murder is not just...

- **actually killing.** That’s what the people had been taught by the scribes and Pharisees (beginning of v 21).

Murder is also...

- **being angry** with someone for no good reason.
- **insulting someone** because you despise them (the two phrases have a similar meaning).

Jesus was not adding to God’s original command. He was just bringing out (‘filling full’) its full meaning (verse 22).

pray thru’

Can any of us plead ‘not guilty’? We need to confess our ugly sin and urgently seek forgiveness. Just as David did:

▶ **Read Psalm 51 v 1-12**

Can you pray those words as meaningfully as he did, and discover that there is forgiveness? Jesus died to save even murderers.

Confession—and...

▶ **Read v 23, 24**

Have you annoyed someone—or offended them, so that they are angry with you? They haven’t shown it perhaps, but you know they’re upset inside. Then go and say sorry. And not just before going to church, or the Lord’s Supper. Because now we worship God everywhere. So you really need to sort this out before you pray to Him (that’s what ‘bringing a gift to the altar’ really means for us today).

❗ *After all, what is the opposite of a murderer? See verse 9.*

time out

Jesus is not teaching that calling someone a fool deserves far greater punishment than hatred. The figure of speech implies that all three crimes are really the same at root and deserve the severest punishment.

▶ **Read James 3 v 9-18**

Wash me clean!

14

▶ Reading: Matthew 5 v 27-32

You shall not commit adultery! It's easy—and stupid—to imagine that we're too strong, or our relationships too stable, for us to fall for that one. How many people, even prominent Christians, do you know who have slipped into that sin?

It may have stopped short of actually living with another person's husband or wife, but that wrong, adulterous relationship was still there. Prayer, not complacency, is in order, when we're dealing with our volatile and unruly sexual instincts. But Jesus is teaching that adultery starts long before any wrong relationship has developed.

▶ Read v 27, 28

In the mind

No one else may know what has been going through our minds, but God does.

apply What about some things in newspapers, magazines etc. (and not just the pictures) ... novels... TV... internet... jokes... on the beach...?

❓ Have your thoughts always been pure?

❓ Have you pretended to be disgusted, but secretly been enjoying it?

So let's get practical

▶ Read Matthew 5 v 29, 30

That *does not mean* that we can make ourselves holy.

That *does mean* that we can take certain

practical steps to avoid falling. Of course, even if we cut off both hands and gouged out both eyes, we could still commit adultery inside—hacking our body about will do nothing to change our sinful hearts! Jesus is using these graphic images to tell us to go 'over the top' to get rid of sin.

Avoid sin at all costs

- That shop is a temptation ... **THEREFORE...** *I won't go near it.*
- That novel will have sex in it ... **THEREFORE...** *I'll put it down.*
- That programme pushes the barriers ... **THEREFORE...** *I will switch off.*

It's surprisingly easy to become careless about sin—particularly things which are thought nothing of in our time.

▶ Read v 31, 32

Divorce in those days, as today, was no problem to many.

❗ But what does Jesus say about it?

ideas ❓ How can we avoid having a weak view of sin?

❓ How can we avoid falling into sinful habits? 1 Peter 4 v 1-5 gives some ideas.

❓ How can we help each other in this area?

▶ Galatians 6 v 1-5 helps

Unlocking the puzzle

How does the Bible fit together?

Having looked at the nature and power of the Bible, and sampled some of Jesus’ life-changing teaching, we’re now going to step back for a while and get a feel for the different types of writing that we find in the Bible.

The struggles of suffering Job; the raw honesty and anguish of the Psalms; the love-lyrics of the Song of Solomon; the raging anger of the prophets; the profound depths of the Gospels; the complex arguments in the letters; the terrifying visions of Revelation. The Bible is a diverse and colourful library of books.

Its 66 puzzle-pieces all mixed up can be confusing—especially if you don’t have the picture on the box to look at. So, the notes for the next seven days are intended to help you begin to sort out the puzzle-pieces that make up the Bible, and to discover how each part needs to be read and understood if we are to make sense of it.

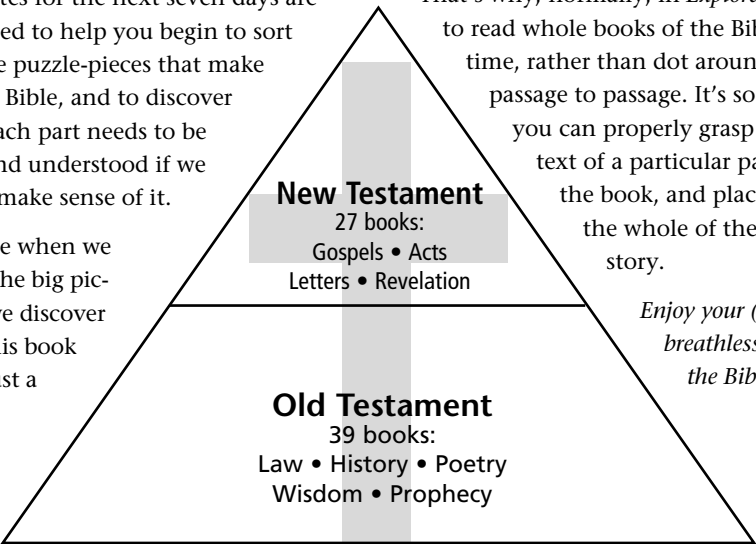
Because when we grasp the big picture, we discover that this book isn’t just a

random collection of odd writings. No. It is actually one big story that fits together from beginning to end. With one subject: Jesus Christ.

The temptation might be to skip the Old Testament (which looks forward to Jesus’ coming), and go straight to the New Testament. That’s OK to start with, but you can see from the diagram that you’ll miss out, because without the OT, we wouldn’t really have a proper understanding of sin and the character of God. So we would not properly understand why Jesus had to come, die on the cross, and rise again. It’s about knowing the big picture so we can understand where each small part fits in.

That’s why, normally, in *Explore*, we like to read whole books of the Bible at a time, rather than dot around from passage to passage. It’s so that you can properly grasp the context of a particular passage in the book, and place it in the whole of the Bible’s story.

Enjoy your (rather breathless) tour of the Bible!



Old Testament (OT)				New Testament (NT)		
Law	History	Poetry	Prophecy	Gospels	Letters	Revelation

THE LAW: It's God calling!

15

► **Reading:** Genesis 12 v 1-9

The Bible is about God—but it is also about people, because God is always about His business of calling people to belong to Him. So don't be put off by the different-ness of the culture that you're jumping into when you read the Old Testament (OT). Hang onto the truth that God always has been a people-Person. You get a great cameo of what God has in mind for people in the life of Abraham.

Get on your camel!

► **Read v 1-9**

The story so far: God made everything fantastically good. Adam chose to sin, in an act of rebellion against God's good rule. The whole creation was wrecked by this sin which infected all human beings. Even after God 'made a fresh start' by destroying all but Noah and his family, mankind still insisted on going the wrong way.

Enter Abram (later called Abraham). Or, rather, enter God into Abram's life. It could well be that's exactly what is happening to you. It wasn't so much that you were looking for God, as God calling you.

❓ *Abram, in a very literal way, had to move; see v 1. What land was he heading for (v 5)?*

The Bible, and especially these first five books, is about God moving people. Just

as He did with Abraham, God calls His people to leave the place where they worship false gods into the place where He rules.

time out

Is God calling you to move? Not literally, but out of a lifestyle of ignoring Him and doing your own thing, into His kingdom?

► **Read v 1 again, and then Colossians 1 v 13.**

To blessing!

► **Read v 2, 3 again**

You get the picture? We brought down God's curse on us by going against Him. But God plans blessing for a people He will call. Abraham... His nation Israel... all people who believe in Jesus! That's the grand plan in mind in these key OT verses. And these first five books of the Bible spell out just how God called Israel to enter into His land and into His favour.

What we read in the books of the law establishes the pattern we see in the rest of the Bible—how God deals with people. Always taking the initiative to save. Always providing a sacrifice for forgiveness. Always sending a leader to rescue them. Always demanding a response of faith and repentance. Never letting evil get its own way. It constantly points forward to what is to come in Christ.

Old Testament				New Testament		
Law	History	Poetry	Prophecy	Gospels	Letters	Revelation

Law normally refers to the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, although in the Jewish Bible, they include Joshua and Judges in this category. Only some of these books are 'laws' as we might understand it. Most concern the history of Israel.

HISTORY: Trust in the Lord

▶ **Reading:** 1 Samuel 17

There's only one way to survive as a Christian: trust in God! And, surrounded as they were by aggressive and powerful nations, there was only one way for God's people, Israel, to survive in the promised land God had given them.

The history section of the OT is pretty much a dismal record of how God's people didn't trust their Lord. It covers 1,100 years up to 400 BC, including a period in which Israel were kicked out of the land for persistently refusing to go God's way.

But the flip side is that it is also an amazing record of God's patient plans with people who fail big time. And of God's amazing willingness to use weak people who do trust their God.

David the hero

▶ **Read 1 Samuel 17**
(or at least v 1-11 and 32-50)

So there is Israel, quaking in their boots because, as usual, they haven't been trusting God. All they can think about is big Philistines. When along comes the runt of a huge family, odd-job boy David, who knows nothing about war, and slays the giant with a single stone from a sling.

❓ *Why? Check it out in v 45-47.*

All David can think about is a big God. So God uses a nobody who trusts in Him,

and turns him into Israel's hero (see 18 v 7!). Eventually he becomes the greatest king of Israel.

time out

One of the big messages of the Old Testament's history books for us is this: **DON'T DO AN ISRAEL.** Don't try to survive using your own methods. Trust in God—and what He tells you—and discover just how big He is...

God the real hero

▶ **Read v 47**

David got the point even if everyone else missed it. The Lord is the real hero of the Bible. Yes, there are inspiring human heroes, like David—but they all fail when they forget to trust God. Actually, what God is teaching them and us through these stories is that we need a better 'hero' than David; a better king than the greatest king—someone who can rescue us not just from Goliath, but from the greater enemy of our perverse hearts. That's Jesus!

Where David fits in

Joshua records how Israel conquered the promised land. However, Israel soon forgot God and got into all sorts of trouble. Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles record how God gave Israel a monarchy. David led them in God's ways but it went downhill from there until eventually, God uses the Assyrians and Babylonians to take Israel into captivity. Ezra and Nehemiah tell how God brings them back—but even then things aren't a lot better. God's people need more than God's promised land—they needed God's promised Person...

Old Testament				New Testament		
Law	History	Poetry	Prophecy	Gospels	Letters	Revelation

Normally included under this heading are the Old Testament books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. In Hebrew thought, these books would be under the category of 'Prophets'.

POETRY: Knowing God

► **Reading:** Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd'—what an incredible claim to make! To have the God who created all things, who rules the universe, holding our hand and caring for our every need. But that's the reality for God's people—we can honestly say that **we know God!**

The poetry section really helps us in our intimate, personal knowledge of God. Although much of it was written by David and his son, Solomon, often the setting doesn't matter—it could be any believer, anywhere, anytime—a priceless goldmine to help us in day-to-day living. The Psalms especially are a great place to start dipping into. In Explore, we schedule a psalm or a section of Proverbs each week on Sunday to add variety.

My shepherd

► Read Psalm 23

As with all goldmines, you do need to dig to get the treasure! Reading the Bible is different from reading a novel or even some beautiful poetry. God speaks to us as we think about what is said in the Bible passage—because it is the truth of the words which counts, not their feel. A good way to read the Bible is to ask lots of questions about it. Try these on this psalm:

- ❓ *Why might David be 'in want' without the Lord?*
- ❓ *What are some of the things he would otherwise fear? (v 4, 5)*

- ❓ *In what ways does the Lord provide him such great comfort?*
- ❓ *Whatever his circumstances, what is his confidence as he faces the future?*
- ❓ *Now try it yourself—think of a question you can ask of verse 6...*

pray thru'

Hopefully the answers will have sparked off your own response. Challenge, comfort, longing, love. It's always important to 'pray in' the things you have learned from the Bible. Stop and do that now; use David's experience to help you know God better.

The lord jesus is...

Has this poem made you think about Jesus yet? Because the way the Lord Jesus becomes our shepherd is when He rescues us silly, lost sheep from going the wrong way. This psalm isn't to comfort just anyone who is finding life hard—God has no comfort for us outside His Son. The Lord Jesus is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want. As Jesus said:

'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me ... I lay down my life for the sheep.' **John 10 v 14, 15.**

Old Testament				New Testament		
Law	History	Poetry	Prophecy	Gospels	Letters	Revelation

Normally included under this heading are the Old Testament books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon.

PROPHETS: The Lord says...

▶ **Reading:** Isaiah 1

Old Testament prophets are a bit like policemen—you don't need them until someone starts breaking the law. Israel already had 'the law'—God had made it very plain how His rescued people should live. It was when they ignored the law and made up their own rules that God sent His 'policemen' to bring His people to book.

time out You could think of the Bible as your own personal 'prophet'. Because we have this amazing ability to go our own way, we need the Bible to speak to us every day to remind us that 'this is what the Lord says...'

Forsaken the Lord!

▶ **Read Isaiah 1 v 1-17**

From v 1 you'll learn that we need to know about the circumstances into which the prophets are speaking; and that will vary from prophet to prophet. Isaiah is speaking to 'Judah' in the South at a time when the northern Israelites are being taken captive by the Assyrians. Jeremiah, however, speaks later on, when Judah themselves are about to go into captivity—to Babylon.

▶ **Re-read v 2-4.**

You get the picture? God is charging His people with *the* most serious crime. They

have been warned over and over again, but they won't listen. They are utterly corrupt (v 5, 6) their country has been flattened by the Assyrians, leaving only Jerusalem itself to survive (v 8)—and yet still they insist God is pleased with their token worship. Not so (v 10-14)! What God wants to see is a genuine turning to Him, evidenced by justice and compassion on the ground (v 16, 17).

❓ *What verses connect particularly with you? Is God exposing something in your life? What must change?*

A glorious future!

▶ **Read v 18, 26-31**

The prophets do this all the time. God's people are justly condemned and sentenced. The situation is so bad it looks utterly hopeless. But then the prophets hold out God's amazing, undeserved love and forgiveness for all who will turn to Him! And, while the immediate future may be bleak, they always point us forward to the glorious future God has planned for His people, when they will be free from the sin that plagues them now.

Yes, you've got it—it's the kingdom Jesus brought in at the cross.

❓ *So have you asked Him to forgive you yet? Praise God now for the promise of v 18.*

Old Testament				New Testament		
Law	History	Poetry	Prophecy	Gospels	Letters	Revelation

The prophets are sometimes divided into two groups. The Major Prophets are: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel. The Minor Prophets are: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

GOSPELS: All about Jesus

▶ **Reading:** Mark 15 v 21-39

Do you love Jesus? It's a question that cuts through a lot of side issues and gets to the heart of things. As we have been seeing, the whole direction of the Bible is towards and about Jesus Christ—He is right at the heart of God's plan for the world. And the Gospels are where the wraps are taken off and Jesus is revealed. 'Gospel' simply means 'good news'—Jesus is God's good news for His world.

There are four Gospels, but only one consistent message about Him. Before you can respond to Jesus' call we need to know who He is, and what He has done. All four Gospels make that clear. They are not really biographies in the strict sense, for most of Jesus' life gets missed out altogether. They all focus on His purpose for coming—from four different angles you get the same message. Jesus came to die and rise again—for us.

Who he is

▶ **Read v 21-39**

It was a really strange thing to say about a dead man. Yet for this hard-bitten Roman centurion, it seemed the only explanation. He had seen a few crucifixions and one thing he knew for sure, having witnessed the day's extraordinary events. He knew the limp, bloody, lifeless human body before him belonged to no ordinary man—'surely this man was the Son of God!'

Mark has taken great pains to show us this in his Gospel. He shows Jesus doing things and saying things that *only* the Son of God could ever have the authority for. And at every turn, the crowds have been left awestruck. When you read Mark's Gospel, ask yourself—can Jesus possibly be anyone other than God's own Son, sent from heaven?

What he did

He died. That was the whole point. In a sense, the mocking of v 30, 31 is true—Jesus, God's Son *won't* come down from the cross. Not because He didn't have the power, but because he knew He had to stay there to save His people. As Jesus put it earlier, He came to 'give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10 v 45).

So what?

Jesus' call is to follow Him and experience everything He came to bring: forgiveness, new life, a purpose in this life, and the sure hope of eternal life with Him.

▶ **And what else? Read Mark 8 v 34-38**

pray thru'

So—do you love Jesus? Jesus who is God's Son and who came specially to die on the cross to save people like you and me from our sins?

Then tell Him, thank Him, praise Him!

Old Testament				New Testament		
Law	History	Poetry	Prophecy	Gospels	Letters	Revelation

The Gospels are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Luke's Gospel is the first section of a two-part work. The second part is Acts, which describes how the early believers spread the message of the gospel throughout the ancient world.

LETTERS: Truth to live by

► **Reading:** 1 Thessalonians 1 v 1-10

It's a whole new ball game, living as a Christian. It's not an 'add-on', to give your life that bit of purpose or spiritual dimension that it lacked. When we put our trust in Jesus, He comes to take over! In a very real sense we have changed kingdoms, and we need to learn how to live in this world for Jesus.

But we're not the first ones! The letters in the New Testament were written to people who had just had their lives turned upside down by Christ. There were the religious types (Jewish background) who needed to learn to stop trusting in religion and focus on Jesus alone. And there were the pagan Gentiles who needed to learn to get rid of wrong patterns of living, out of love for Christ. You're in there somewhere!

Real letters to real people

All the letters, like letters we might write, were written to real situations. There is a need for encouragement, or correction, or teaching about a certain topic. And there is nearly always a practical section about how it all impacts our daily living. As we read these letters, we need to try to get into their shoes—then God's word to us today really begins to touch us.

First read the background to the first readers of this warm, encouraging letter:

► **Read Acts 17 v 1-9**

Be encouraged!

► **Now read 1 Thessalonians 1 v 1-10**

This is a letter to brand new Christians. The passage in Acts records how Paul preaches the good news about Jesus in this town on his second missionary journey. There was so much opposition to Paul that he couldn't stay. But what he could do a little later was write this letter to encourage the young believers to keep going.

- ❓ *If you were in that testing situation, what verse would you find particularly encouraging?*
- ❓ *If you're a new Christian, which thought do you find most encouraging?*
- ❓ *If you're an older Christian, how do these verses help you see how to encourage those who are young in the faith?*

5/10/16 It's never easy starting to live for Jesus. You may have to face opposition from friends and family. Or it might come in more subtle ways (eg: being distracted from loving Jesus, or discouraged by temptations). It is vital to get help and support from the kind of teaching these young Christians were receiving. Find a church that teaches, from the Bible, how to live for Jesus.

Now let v 2 shape your prayers and v 9 set your agenda for the day...

Old Testament				New Testament		
Law	History	Poetry	Prophecy	Gospels	Letters	Revelation

Paul wrote many of the letters in the NT: Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1&2 Thessalonians, 1&2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon. Hebrews is by an un-named author. James, 1&2 Peter and 1,2&3 John are named after their authors.

REVELATION: Eye-opener

► **Reading:** Revelation 22 v 1-21

An old school caretaker told me he was reading the book of Revelation. ‘The book of Revelation! Do you understand it?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes’, he assured me. ‘I understand it.’

‘You understand the book of Revelation! What does it mean?’

Very quietly the old janitor answered: ‘It means that Jesus is gonna win’.

It’s a sad irony that there’s so much confusion among Christians over a book called ‘revelation’! Really, it is intended as God’s eye-opener to help Christians stand firm in times of fierce opposition. To help us to see God’s view of things when to us it looks as though we’re going under.

Apocalyptic!

Revelation is written in a special style of writing called ‘apocalyptic’. It takes a whole lot of (often Old Testament) imagery, which was familiar to the readers then, and uses these pictures to create a powerful, almost visual, representation of truths. The style is ideally suited to show us God’s angle on our messy world—and especially His plans for the future. Rather like looking at an impressionist painting, the danger is to focus in on the strange detail when we should be stepping back and asking what the message is.

The end result

► Read Revelation 22 v 1-21

We really need to cling on to that caretaker’s one-liner. Revelation warns of some pretty bleak times ahead for God’s people. Maybe life looks grim for you right now and you wonder how you can keep going as a Christian. ‘But Jesus is gonna win.’ When all the opposition, pain and struggle has come and gone, what will be left is beautifully pictured in Revelation 22. The ‘Lamb’ refers to Jesus; for He was sacrificed for sins like an OT lamb.

- ❓ *What are the main things in this passage, about God’s future, to hold on to?*
- ❓ *What, and who, is in the middle of this glorious ‘city’?*
- ❓ *What does that teach us about life as God’s people then—and now?*

pray thru’

Christians need continually to be seeing things from God’s view—for that’s the real, lasting view. We need to remember where this world’s passing things fit into God’s eternal plans. If you are not yet a Christian, think seriously about the two possibilities of being forever inside, or forever outside Jesus’ kingdom (v 14, 15). If you are a Christian, pray about how you are spending your time now in view of God’s plans for your future.

Old Testament				New Testament		
Law	History	Poetry	Prophecy	Gospels	Letters	Revelation

Other parts of the Bible have sections written in the same style, including sections of Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah, as well as parts of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21.

JONAH: Reluctant prophet

22

▶ **Reading:** Jonah 1 v 1-3

Hot tip to start with today... Two questions to ask of an Old Testament book:

❓ *Why was it in the Old Testament?*

❓ *Why is it in our Bibles at all?*

We'll be trying to answer those questions over the coming days.

▶ **Read Jonah 1 v 1-3**

A surprising choice: v 1

This is a classic commissioning of a prophet (like 1 Kings 17 v 8). The Sovereign Lord speaks to His chosen prophet. But His choice is surprising. Jonah is from the rebel northern state, Israel (see 2 Kings 14 v 25)—not the loyal, southern state of Judah. What's more, unlike Amos or Hosea, Jonah hadn't roasted Israel for its sins. Rather, he'd forecast nationalist military success. The book's OT readers would have been expecting a classic prophet-hero—like Elijah. Not someone like Jonah.

As we'll later see, Matthew 12 v 39-41 tells us that Jonah is an early version (or prototype) of Jesus—God's ultimate prophet. So, as we read through Jonah, don't put yourself in Jonah's shoes. Try and jump into the shoes of his readers.

A glorious mission: v 2

Nineveh was a pagan city. So, in the mind of OT readers, well beyond God's favour. But not just any pagan city. For

God's people, Nineveh, the capital of the great empire, Assyria, was Israel's enemy, that had persecuted God's people terribly.

▶ **Read 2 Kings 18 v 13-15**

What an honour for Jonah! To pronounce judgment against such a place. As a fervent nationalist, you'd have thought he'd have loved it.

Flat out rebellion: v 3

But Jonah was no Elijah. He ran away, immediately, in the opposite direction. Instead of going east to Nineveh, he got all his air miles together and went west to Tarshish (probably in modern Spain or Sardinia). OT readers would have been deeply shocked. What a prophet! Surely he wouldn't get away with it—even Tarshish couldn't be beyond God's reach (see Psalm 139 v 7-9).

But why this strange behaviour? Grab a sneak preview of the reason:

▶ **Read Jonah 4 v 2**

Jonah hated this enemy so much that the suspicion God could love them, and want to save them too, was too much to handle.

pray thru'

How about you? Is there some group, or individual that you would be happier to see kept away from the loving arms of God?

❓ *And yet God still chose Jonah! With all his weakness, bigotry, reluctance and cowardice, he was God's chosen man. What does this say to you...?*

Whose God is He?

23

► **Reading:** Jonah 1 v 4-16

It was a glorious commission to proclaim judgment against the foul pagans of Nineveh (v 2). It is strange to refuse it.

► Read Jonah 1 v 4-16

❓ *What does this tell us about God, Jonah and the pagan sailors? Make three lists before you go on...*

But the lord...

Verse 4 would have got a loud clap from Jonah's readers. His escape was completely hopeless. The Lord was in control of the whole show...

- **Nature**—Who sends the storm (v 4)? Who overrules the casting of the lots (v 7)? Who makes the sea wilder (v 11-12) and wilder (v 13) to make sure that judgment happens? Who makes it calm again (v 15)?
- **The prophet**—God uses Jonah to proclaim the truth about Himself to the pagan world (v 9, 12). This is the first time we hear Jonah speak. He's a prophet to the pagans whether he likes it or not!
- **The pagans**—God uses the heathen sailors to preach to the prophet (v 6, 10) and to bring about his judgment (v15)!

The judgment on jonah

What about Jonah? He is taken from the ship's hold, from the sleep of complacency (v 5-6). He acknowledges the truth (v 9-10), admits his guilt (v 12) and is hurled to apparent death (v 15). And God

uses pagan words and pagan hands to bring it all about—an even greater disgrace...

Pagan praise

But this is the real surprise... **Praise from pagans?!**

- **Pagans created and cared for by God.**
Instead of sinking the ship and destroying them, God keeps the pressure on them until they identify the guilty man.
- **Pagans for whom the prophet died.**
Jonah told these sailors the truth about the Lord (v 9) and he 'died' to save them from the storm. A foreshadowing of Jesus, who really died instead of others...
- **Pagans who praised the Lord (v 16).**
Their understanding was limited. But their words have the mark of sincerity. They feared God (not gods), they offered sacrifices and vows to Him (v 16), to Israel's special God...

This concern for pagans wouldn't have sat easy with many OT readers. Not quite the judgment they'd applauded in v 2. God's sovereignty used to save pagans, and humiliate his servant... how odd!

time out

Be honest... What kind of people do you find it hard to believe that Jesus (the Lord's ultimate prophet) cares for? Think about it... Maybe you feel unlovable yourself? Think carefully about the Creator's loving kindness to you.

Saved... by grace!

24

▶ **Reading:** Jonah 1 v 17 – 2 v 10

▶ **Read Jonah 1 v 17 – 2 v 10**

The disgraced Jonah is saved. It would have sent a striking message to the original Israelite listeners about their own salvation and about what their God thinks of pagans.

Rescued rebel

As the Lord's prophet, Jonah was Israel's representative. The people of Israel may have cheered at him ending up in the sea, as good as dead (1 v 16). But see what happens now (1 v 17). Not only does God choose a deeply flawed character in the first place. He now bothers to rescue him. Judgment is involved—2 v 2-6 makes it clear that Jonah has effectively gone through 'death'. Somehow God's law and justice are being satisfied here.

Saved by grace

▶ **Re-read v 2-9**

But grace is the major point. God has rescued Jonah – physically from death by the fish (v 17) and spiritually from his sin. Jonah's prayer in v 2-9 outlines the process:

- he saw his need (v 4-6)
- he cried to the Lord (v 7)
- his loyalty was now to the Lord (v 8-9)
- he was grateful for grace (v 9) .

Why is this passage in the Old Testament? Jonah's readers should have realised that they were in desperate need of God's saving grace—like their prophet.

The Old Testament had continually told them:

- they too were sinful (Leviticus 4 v 1-2)
- they needed rescuing through judgement (Exodus 12 v 12-13)
- they were saved only because of the Lord's love (Exodus 34 v 6-7)
- and they were rescued to serve Him (Deuteronomy 6 v 5).

Sounds familiar...?

▶ **Read 1 v 16 and 2 v 8-9**

Did you spot the deliberate comparison in chapters 1 and 2? Two lots of vows—both brought about by God, both times through creation—wind and waves, waters and fish.

? *But which comes first...?*

It is striking that the pagans are making vows to the Lord long before Jonah does. It's the pagans He brings to Himself first! But the Lord is Israel's God. It was Jonah who had all the privileges of living under God's word, but who is dragged reluctantly to humble obedience. This story would have driven a sense of deep shame into the hearts of the first readers. And what about you...?

pray thru'

Praise God that He calls people we think are beyond His reach. Pray now for a couple of friends, family, colleagues, people in positions of authority you'd have put in that category.

? *Do you truly believe that God can rescue them?*

The sign of Jonah

25

▶ **Reading:** Matthew 12 v 38-42

The New Testament passage that refers to the ‘sign of Jonah’ is vitally important for understanding this strange story of the runaway prophet. It is a general principle that we follow in *Explore*. We allow the Bible to interpret the Bible for us.

▶ **Read Matthew 12 v 38-42**

Wanting a sign: v 38

Despite the miracles Jesus had done, the Pharisees were plotting to kill Him (Matthew 12 v 14). So it seems unlikely this was a very genuine request. But, superficially at least, they were asking for evidence that Jesus was the Christ—God’s chosen King.

Only one sign: v 39-40

Jesus sees through them (v 39). He won’t give signs on demand. There would only be one sign—His resurrection from the dead—just as Jonah was rescued from death by the fish (v 40).

An unheeded sign: v 41

The orthodox Pharisees would not repent—unlike the ancient pagans of Nineveh (v 41). Not even the preaching of Jesus (the ultimate Jonah) or the resurrection (the ultimate sign) would convince them. No wonder the Ninevites would be qualified to condemn them. How does Jesus help us understand the book of Jonah? Jesus clearly thought:

• **Jonah’s rescue is a sign that he’s God’s prophet.** This isn’t spelled out in Jonah—but it is implied in Matthew 12. Just as Jesus’ resurrection will confirm who He is, the original ‘sign of Jonah’ will confirm to the Ninevites that Jonah is from God. That’s why the Ninevites repent, as we’ll see in Jonah chapter 3.

• **Jonah’s rescue was a powerful sign to the unbelieving Ninevites.** The God who demonstrates that Jonah is His chosen spokesman through the miraculous rescue, also shows that He is a God who is in the rescue business. The sign made the Ninevites both tremble... and hope! The same is true of Jesus’ resurrection. Check out how Peter, who had been in a similar situation, explains it to the first Gentile (non-Jewish) converts:

▶ **Read Acts 10 v 34-43**

time out

That’s the sign that we’re to show to people. They may be initially attracted to a caring church, our changed lives, or even the excitement of our singing. But they must hear and believe the message of judgment and hope contained in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the only sign that we have been given. And what a sign!

Note: If you want to continue using *Explore* after this book finishes, then you should order now! See the inside back cover for details!

What a result!

26

▶ **Reading:** Jonah 3 v 1-9

▶ **Read Jonah 3 v 1-9.**

Back to Jonah... *The second half of the book recaps some of the lessons of the first two chapters.*

Been here before...?

The beginning of the chapter is a bit of a *déjà vu*. See how 3 v 1-4 follows the pattern of 1 v 1-3. It's the same but different... So, the Lord is sovereign and gracious. He gives Jonah a second chance (though Jonah's readers might not have done). And Jonah is a changed man! He's now thoroughly obedient—or so it seems.

At nineveh—finally...

Nineveh is vast (v 3). Ultra-pagan—the Sodom of its day (remember 1 v 2?). Now we hear the Lord's message in detail. It is a message of judgment—but He gives them 40 days' grace. And, with it, just a possibility of a different outcome...

Penitent pagans

▶ **Re-read v 5-9**

We've seen penitent Jonah. We've even seen penitent pagans. But here is the real lesson for Jonah's first readers. Penitent Nineveh! Now there's something you don't see every day...

- **Total penitence.** Jonah preached and the Ninevites immediately believed the word of the prophet who'd been rescued from death. All of them believed –

the king and his nobles, all citizens (from the greatest to the least), even the animals. They did it with fasting, sack-cloth (mentioned three times) and ashes—all classic symbols of repentance.

- **Genuine penitence.** And it wasn't just religious ritual either (v 8). They called urgently to God. And they turned away from evil and violence (they were famous for persecution, remember?)
- **Humble penitence.** Like the sea captain of 1 v 6, they were quite clear that mercy wasn't theirs by rights. They knew they would be spared only by the sheer grace and compassion of God. They weren't trying to twist God's arm with their repentance. They were throwing themselves on His mercy.

Nineveh knew next to nothing about the Lord! Jonah's hearers could hardly have avoided the sting. They knew Him so very much more. Was their penitence as total and genuine and humble as the Ninevites'?

pray thru'

And is ours? After Christ, we know even more about the Lord. So that means we have even less excuse than even Jonah did!

? *How do you feel about your sin?*

Pray about it, urgently, now.

Jonah's three blasphemies

27

► **Reading:** Jonah 3 v 10 – 4 v 3

► Read Jonah 3 v 10 – 4 v 3

God has been merciful to Jonah (1 v 17) and now He's being merciful to Nineveh. But Jonah doesn't like it at all.

❓ *What exactly is wrong with the way Jonah reacts? Try to understand his tortured logic before you read on...*

'I told you so' v 1-2a

'I was right all along', says Jonah. 'My word has come true.' His attitude hasn't changed much since 1 v 1-3. He forgot then who was the sovereign Lord and who was the prophet. Now he's done it again. And he's so busy gloating about the truth of his own word, that he fails to notice the power of God's word—powerful enough to save even the wicked Ninevites.

pray thru'

Praise God, using the words of **Philippians 2 v 6-7**, for the attitude of His prophet, Jesus, who 'made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant'.

'Your grace is wrong...' v 2

Jonah knew about God's grace (see Exodus 34 v 6). But as far as he was concerned, God's grace was for Israel and definitely not for the arch-pagans of Nineveh. Showing mercy to the Ninevites was taking things too far...

time out

Are you ever tempted to think that God's grace is wrong? Would the deathbed repentance and God's acceptance of someone who had tortured us or our children for our faith seem unfair?

'I might as well be dead' v 3

The ultimate insult! 'If you're just going to do what you want—not what I want—I'd rather be dead, why did you bother to rescue me back in Chapter 2?' Jonah is throwing the equivalent of a 2-year old tantrum in the supermarket. Unreasonable. Irrational. And worst of all totally ungrateful.

apply

Does this attitude sound a bit familiar? How often do we resent God for not doing what we want Him to do?

Are you a Christian to do His will (whatever it is) or just to get the benefits? Christ, the 'real' Jonah, was willing to die to play His part—and, of course, He's the model for how we live and what we expect from following Him.

► **Read Luke 22 v 42, 1 Peter 2 v 21**

Gracious and compassionate

28

▶ Reading: Jonah 4 v 4-11

▶ Read Jonah 4 v 4-11

Look at the way God teaches Jonah—a series of questions, a powerful visual aid and a (knock-out) punch line.

God asks: Jonah is angry

❓ *How do you think Jonah should answer the question in v 4? Why doesn't he?*

It seems that Jonah is wallowing in his own frustrated anger and self pity. He finds a good spot to watch what's going to happen to the city. He wanted these enemies destroyed, and he's furious with God that they have found forgiveness. And maybe furious with himself that he had a part in it! He experienced the reality of 2 v 9, but hates the fact that these enemies have had the same experience!

God provides: Jonah is faint

▶ Re-read v 6-8

Three times God provides—the vine, the worm and the sun. Three provisions from God, who is totally free to do what He wants with His creation—vegetable or human. Jonah now feels the weight of the hand of God—he should be humbled...

God asks: Jonah is angry

▶ Re-read v 9

But humble is not the word to describe Jonah! He's as arrogantly angry as he was before.

God explains—Jonah is..?

▶ Re-read v 10-11

Here we come to the punch line of the book. God is teaching Jonah that...

- **He is gracious.** Jonah cared about a measly vine because he lost out when it died. He hates vast Nineveh—full of humans and cattle—because they do nothing for him and Israel. But the Lord is full of compassion for His human creation—despite their rebellion against Him. Jonah is quick to demand judgment: God is quick to have mercy.
- **He is sovereign.** Jonah's pathetic attempts to make God do what he wants are useless! The Lord can do what He wants. He's got the right to be gracious—and He's got the right to destroy. At the end of the book, there's no doubt about who's in control. It's God. And He has done what He wanted from the beginning.
- **He is the God of all creation.** He has been the Lord of creation throughout the book—think back to the storm, fish, pagan repentance, etc. Nineveh was made by Him and it's entirely appropriate that He should show them mercy. Of course, they don't deserve it—but then nobody does...not even Israel...do they, Jonah?

❓ *Which of these three characteristics of God do you think you're most likely to forget or ignore? Talk to Him about it now...*

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