



# ESSENTIAL 100

Your journey through the Bible  
in 100 readings

**SMALL  
GROUP  
STUDIES**

# ESSENTIAL 100

## SMALL GROUP STUDIES

### INTRODUCTION

These studies are designed to pick up on topics and issues raised during each set of five days' readings. The hope is that as people meet each week, they will be given plenty of opportunity to share what God has said to them during the course of the preceding days, and any questions or difficulties which have been encountered, looked at and addressed by the group as a whole. Overall, the group meetings will:

- deepen understanding of the material
- provide an interchange of views and insights
- encourage continuation in the journey through the book.

### OUTLINE OF STUDIES

**Interactive introduction:** A short time enabling the group to start interacting on the subject matter. Linking this into an opening time of worship will create cohesion to the study.

**Overview of the previous five readings:** This can be handled in a variety of ways depending on the nature and size of the group. Encourage group members to give feedback on their readings. This could be by way of sharing reactions to what they have read, or more specifically by asking open questions such as: What has excited you? What has puzzled you? What has challenged you? If, however, there is a wall of silence, the leader should be ready to summarise major points. Leaders need to be aware of the temptation to provide all the answers too quickly. Work on the assumption that the group will produce the answers – and only step in as a last resort.

**Going deeper:** This is the heart of the session, when we really get to grips with the material. Insights from all group members should be encouraged, with an emphasis on the practical outworking of the Bible passages in the lives of group members. There will inevitably be differences of opinions, and these should be handled sensitively – hopefully resulting in deeper understanding rather than polarisation of narrow-minded views.

**Personal challenge:** It is essential to encourage group members to ask: What has this said to me? What difference is it going to make to my view of God? To my daily life? This personal application is the key to allowing the Holy Spirit to use the Bible to change lives.

### POINTERS TO DEVELOPING A SUCCESSFUL GROUP

**Good preparation:** Give prayerful consideration to all parts of each study. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in leading the session, particularly in dealing with issues arising in discussion for which you had not planned.

**Other resources:** Draw on other resources to complement the material. Useful articles and tips on small groups can be found on the church@home website: [www.scriptureunion.org.uk/churchathome](http://www.scriptureunion.org.uk/churchathome).

**Variety:** Use different methods to stimulate discussion, raise issues and collate information. Resource books such as *Multi-Sensory Prayer* and *Multi-Sensory Church*, by Sue Wallace, will provide a host of ideas.

**Sensitivity:** Be sensitive to the needs of each person in the group. Some will need encouragement to share their thoughts and insights, whereas others will need holding back. Develop a framework in which everyone present feels relaxed and able to share at whatever level they are comfortable with.

**Support:** Foster an affirming ethos in the group, providing a forum into which every group member feels able to contribute if they wish, where there is mutual encouragement to continue on their journey through the book, and when any member has difficulty grasping certain points, providing helpful explanation.

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# ESSENTIAL 100

## SMALL GROUP STUDIES

### 1 IN THE BEGINNING

#### Interactive introduction

Encourage each group member to say what element of creation they appreciate most and why. Use this as the basis for worship and praise to God for the wonder of his creation.

#### Overview of the previous five readings

Encourage the group to give feedback on the readings. This could be by way of simple summary or by sharing reactions to what they have read. Open questions such as: 'What has excited you?' 'What has puzzled you?' 'What has challenged you?' will help this process. Resist the temptation of providing the answers too quickly. Work on the assumption that the group will give feedback and only step in as a last resort.

- God was from the very beginning. He took the initiative to create people and gave them two distinctives: God's life and God's standards.
- The first sin was not about sexual intimacy, but rather the questioning and challenging of God's will, followed by disobedience, resulting in a breakdown of relationship with God.
- God is not watching and waiting to catch people out, as if it gives him pleasure to punish. Rather, sin causes God pain and grief.
- Noah's first response on leaving the ark was to worship God. God looks for people to seek him humbly and follow his ways.
- The sin surrounding the building of the tower of Babel was not the technological achievement it represented but the pride that went with it.

#### KEY POINTS

The fall of man results in the first of God's promises to man: the seed of the woman will redeem fallen man... so the messianic line begins.

Later in Genesis, God makes his first covenant with mankind: never to flood the earth again.

#### Going deeper

This week's study has three core themes which could be explored: creation, sin, and worship. Creation is potentially a 'hot potato' which could result in significant waste of time. You will need to decide in advance whether it will be appropriate to have a discussion on this as part of this study, or defer it to another occasion. Ensuring you are well read on all sides of the argument will be key to a successful interchange of views. Failure could mean people leave the meeting feeling frustrated or that the study had been a waste of time!

- *Creation*: What do you consider to be the important issues surrounding the Bible's account of creation? How can the Biblical view of creation be reconciled with scientific knowledge today? What impact does 'God as creator' have on your view of him?
- *Sin: the heart of sin is rebellion against God resulting in a breakdown of our relationship with him.*  
There are two categories of sin we should identify:
  - a) sins of commission – doing things which are wrong, and
  - b) sins of omission – where we fail to do something we should (James 4:17).Explore these two categories by coming up with specific examples which fit into each. Is there a tendency to focus on one or other group? Read Galatians 5:19–21 and Matthew 25:41–46 and then discuss the challenges these passages raise.
- *Worship*: when we experience something really good in our lives, what is our first response? Do we simply enjoy it, or do we first express our appreciation to God? In practical terms, what should we learn from the account of Noah?

#### Personal challenge

Of the issues discussed, which do you struggle with most? Are you doing something you know is wrong? Or can you identify an attitude which is not really what God would want? Spend a few minutes in silence identifying your area of weakness, praying that God will help you change where it matters. If appropriate for your group, allow time to pray for each other.

Remembering Noah's response of worship, spend a few minutes thanking and worshipping God for the fact that he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

## 2 ABRAHAM, ISAAC and JACOB

### Interactive Introduction

Find out from each group member where they were born, and then talk about the different places they have lived over the years. Share the reasons why each move took place, and the significance for their lives of new homes, job, friends, relatives, children etc.

Using a map, ensure that people know where Abraham was born (Ur) and show how he initially travelled to Canaan via Mari and Haran.

### Overview of the previous five readings:

\* Remember to provide an opportunity for group members to share things God has shown them during the past week.

- God chose Abraham for a special relationship. Abraham showed great faith by obediently leaving his home at God's direction.
- God promised that, despite Abraham and Sarah's age, they would have children of their own – and hence his covenant to make Abraham the father of a great nation would be fulfilled.
- Abraham immediately obeyed God's command to go and sacrifice his son. At the most critical moment, and without realising it, he made one of the most significant and profound statements of these early chapters: *God himself will provide the lamb.*
- Jacob tricked Isaac and received the blessing. He fled, travelling north on a 500-mile journey to Haran. After about 60 miles he had an encounter with God, resulting in a statement of commitment: *The Lord will be my God.*
- Deep-rooted guilt led Jacob to the point of needing to be reconciled to his brother. Esau demonstrated the highest level of grace as he welcomed back his long-lost brother.

#### KEY POINTS

Abram is chosen by God to become the father of his special people. Initially the Covenant is one sided, God promises to create a great nation, but soon it becomes a 2 way contract, with all God's people sealing the deal by circumcision.

The messianic line is traced through Abram, Isaac, Jacob and Judah.

### Going deeper

- Failure does not result in God abandoning us. Consider the ways that Abraham and Jacob failed. What caused the failures? What did God do in each circumstance? What can we learn from this which we can apply to our failures?
- Discerning God's direction is often very challenging for us. We want to know the full details of the 'journey' upfront. How should we handle times of not knowing the exact details of what God wants? Encourage group members to share ways God has revealed his plans to them. Draw out biblical ways of hearing God speak today.
- Think through the implications of God's promise in Genesis 28:4 and Jacob's profession of faith in 28:20–22. To expand your thinking on this, look at Galatians 3:14.
- Reconciliation is often much easier in concept than in reality. Draw out from your group the faults and qualities exhibited by Jacob and Esau. Read the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21–35) and Jesus' words in Matthew 6:14–15. What are the key principles we need to incorporate into our relationships?

### Personal challenge

From the issues discussed, what does God want to say to you? What reassurance do you need from God that he still loves you despite failure, and that he has great plans for your future life? If you are sensing God moving you on into something new, allow the Holy Spirit to give you peace, even if you can't see the whole journey. Pray that he would clearly show you which way to go – one step at a time. Or, is there someone with whom you have had a fundamental breakdown of relationship? What is God calling you to do to see it restored?

Spend the closing minutes praying about these issues. If group members are able to share what God has been saying personally to them, then pray specifically about those areas. Otherwise pray generally that each member of the group would experience affirmation of God's love, direction for the future and grace to be people of reconciliation.

### 3 THE STORY OF JOSEPH

#### Interactive introduction

*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* has been a top West End musical for many years. Find out if group members have seen it or participated in it, and get them to share when and where this was. Encourage them to talk about which parts they liked most. You may even want to suggest going as a group to see it.

#### Overview of the previous five readings

- Joseph's dreams resulted in intense anger among his brothers, leading them to sell him into slavery in Egypt.
- Despite advances from Potiphar's wife, Joseph's integrity held true. A further time in prison provided opportunity for him to explain the dreams of other prisoners, and of Pharaoh himself.
- The famine made it necessary for Joseph's brothers to go to Egypt to get food.
- Despite all that his brothers had done, Joseph still loved them dearly. A few tricks, however, were going to be played before they were let off the hook altogether!
- Joseph made himself known to his brothers.

#### Going deeper

When we go through difficult times or temptations, we can respond in a number of ways. Work through the past week's Bible passages identifying the range of situations Joseph was faced with, which had the potential of a positive or negative response. With each, highlight the different emotions he could have experienced (eg pride, arrogance, rejection, jealousy, resentment, anger). Explore the positive ways Joseph responds:

- ensuring the offences against him don't fester
- showing himself morally strong when tempted
- being willing to minister to others
- trusting that ultimately God is in control.

Through discussion, draw out steps that can be taken to build similar response patterns into our lives.

#### Personal challenge

This study could stir a range of painful emotions which God wants to deal with. Some in the group may be feeling hurts from years ago which have lain unresolved or which have festered into bitterness and resentment. Others may be going through times of isolation, be victims of injustice or be feeling uncertain about how present difficulties can be resolved. The study is an important reminder that even when everything seems to have fallen apart around us, God still has a plan and he is in control. Encourage people to express their pain in ways that are appropriate for them, and then pray specifically for those who have opened up in this way.

## 4 MOSES AND THE EXODUS

### Interactive introduction

Get the group to draw up a list of biblical characters who, from a human point of view, were surprising choices as people for God to use. Identify people that group members know or have known who have been used in significant ways by God, despite obvious shortcomings or difficulties.

### Overview of the previous five readings

- As an Israelite baby, Moses was miraculously rescued by one of Pharaoh's daughters. Having grown up in the Egyptian court, on impulse he attempted to set the Israelites free from slavery by force – resulting in his need to flee the country.
- Many years on, God spoke to Moses from the burning bush.
- A sequence of plagues hit Egypt, allowing opportunities for Pharaoh to let the people go.
- A climax came with the celebration of the Passover supper.
- As an amazing demonstration of God's power, the Red Sea was parted, and the Israelites crossed to the safety of the wilderness.

#### KEY POINTS

The Passover was to be a key symbol and foreshadowing of the death of Jesus, the lamb of God, slain to rescue God's people from death.

### Going deeper

Moses was an ordinary man with an extraordinary mission. The following issues are well worth exploring.

- God wants to continue using people in their old age. What does this say to your church in an era when society considers those over 50 as having less to offer?
- 'Trust' and 'obey' are key words from these readings – with Moses' call to go to Pharaoh; the challenges of the signs before Pharaoh; and, finally, the action required for the parting of the Red Sea. What does this have to say to us, both for life in general and for those times when God specifically calls us to do something?
- Explore the implications of the Passover supper in terms of judgement on Egypt; as a symbolic reminder for the Israelites for the years ahead; and as it points ahead to the life and death of Jesus.

### Personal challenge

Is God calling you to fulfil a certain task which you are holding back from? Do you feel that you are too old to be used? Or too young? Acknowledge that God is in no sense ageist, and then offer yourself again to be used by him. Affirm the fact that although most of us are 'control freaks', there is a strong biblical mandate to trust and obey.

## 5 THE LAW AND THE LAND

### Interactive introduction

Begin by getting the group to share experiences of people who have been key players in the development of their faith. This could be a Sunday school teacher from childhood years, a minister or friend.

### Overview of the previous five readings

Having escaped from Egypt by several mighty demonstrations of God's sovereign power, we have now seen some of the events which followed as the people of Israel meandered through the wilderness.

- The Ten Commandments were given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, not to lay down a set of rules to take away the people's pleasure and freedom, but rather to act as a framework for their relationships with God, each other and material possessions.
- The making and worship of the golden calf revealed the vulnerability of the Israelites' faith.
- Joshua was appointed to succeed Moses, and it is evident from the outset of his leadership that he had learnt many lessons from watching Moses.
- Joshua listened and obeyed God, as he was directed to cross the River Jordan. Setting up the stone memorial would be a reminder of what God had done, for generations to come.
- Joshua once again listens and obeys God in the directions he's given for the taking of the city.

#### KEY POINTS

The covenant between man and God takes a step forward with the introduction of the 10 Commandments. The people of Israel must abide by them as God's Holy Nation. Although Jacob had had 12 sons, the subsequent 12 tribes of Israel do not include Joseph, but his 2 sons Ephraim and Manasseh instead. Levi, which became the priestly tribe, were considered different to the rest, so did not inherit a region of the promised land. The covenant God had made with Abram to give him a land, is fulfilled.

### Going deeper

- Take a look at the Ten Commandments. Explore the impact they have on our relationships either with God, with each other or with material possessions. (In your preparation spend some time looking at the implications of each of the commandments. Use other resources as appropriate.)
- Identify those commandments which Jesus built on and took to a deeper level of application. Explore the implications of these developments. (See Matthew 5:17–20, 21–22 and 27–28.)
- Joshua was characterised by 'bold faith' and 'humility'. Explore these two characteristics in relation to life and ministry: the benefits and the pitfalls.
- The account of Rahab is both surprising and challenging. On the outside, she appears to be a very unsuitable person to be saved, yet her response to the living God meant she was kept safe when the walls of Jericho fell. Think about people groups that could be represented by Rahab. How are they viewed by the church? Are there encounters in the life of Jesus which demonstrate a similar learning point?

### Personal challenge

Allow God to bring to your mind any people groups against whom you may have prejudice. Ask God to reveal and remove those barriers and pray that he will give you a genuine, loving acceptance of them.

Some people have a fantastic knowledge of God, yet are lukewarm in their walk with God. Others are really on fire for God, yet have very limited understanding of him. Although these are generalisations, encourage group members to think about which category they mainly fall into – and then spend time praying that all group members would be strengthened in the weak areas of their spiritual lives.

## 6 THE JUDGES

### Interactive introduction

Think about the four main characters from the readings:

- Deborah: unlikely choice in a male-dominated culture, yet with great courage to fulfil God's call.
- Gideon: reticent leader, yet willing to be used if God was really calling.
- Samson: great start with a supportive and committed family, yet with areas of weakness that hampered work.
- Ruth: life had dealt tragic blows yet still she sought to be faithful in life and service.

Ask the group to consider which of these they relate to most closely and why.

### Overview of the previous five readings

- The period of the Judges is hallmarked by a cycle of disobedience and defeat. The Israelites failed to learn lessons from their own history. Yet, in the midst of the unfaithfulness, some characters stood out from the crowd, pointing people back to God.
- Deborah, the only female judge, was obedient to God's call, showing great courage in the face of adversity.
- Gideon, a reticent leader who wanted to be doubly sure that the call was really from God, placed his total trust in God's ability to win the battle, not simply the size of the army.
- Samson, with God-fearing parents who set apart their son from birth, rebelled against the constraints of his parents' religion, resulting in humiliation and captivity.
- Ruth used personal tragedy to develop character and a lasting testimony instead of allowing it to make her bitter and resentful.

### Going deeper

This set of readings includes issues which could evoke deep-rooted sadness and frustration. Within your group there are likely to be those who have children or grandchildren whose minds and hearts are closed to issues of faith. This can be very painful. Throughout your discussions, such people need to be shown sensitivity and understanding, coupled with supportive love.

- Which is harder: discovering God's will or obeying it? What appropriate methods should we use to know for sure that it is God who is calling us to pursue a certain path?
- Think about Christian families who have experienced children or young people going off the rails and turning their backs on God. Explore reasons why this might happen, the resulting feelings and attitudes. Consider appropriate ways the churches can support families going through the trauma of rebellion.
- Compare and contrast the reactions of Naomi and Ruth. How can we help people come through times of personal tragedy in ways which result in the development of strong and positive character traits?

### Personal challenge

How do you view those who have gone off the rails? Do you need God to soften your heart towards them? How have you handled tragedy in your life: has it left you bitter and resentful? If so, allow God to break into that area to bring healing and wholeness. Or if you have never had such an experience, pray that should there be such an event, you would be spiritually equipped to respond like Ruth.

Close the session this week by praying for Christian families who have children who have fundamentally rebelled against God. Pray that the parents would receive comfort and hope, and pray that God's infectious love would draw these lost ones back to himself.

## 7 THE RISE OF ISRAEL

### Interactive introduction

David's success in his battle against Goliath is certainly one of the most well known events recorded in the Bible. Get your group to share examples from their own lives when they have achieved some great challenge. It could be something physical, practical, relational or spiritual.

### Overview of the previous five readings

- Hannah cried to God for a son – and was given Samuel.
- The people of Israel wanted to have a king like other nations. Unhappy with theocratic rule, they demanded a human ruler – and were given Saul.
- The failure of Saul to be the leader God had looked for led to Samuel anointing David as king. With David's defeat of Goliath, it wasn't long before Saul was filled with consuming jealousy.
- Despite attempts by Saul to kill him, David responded by sparing Saul's life – just one indication among many that David was walking closely with his God.
- Finally David became king, leading to a period of great success for the Israelite nation.

#### KEY POINTS

The people of Israel wanted to be like other nations and have a human King. There follows a succession of Kings who ruled with varying levels of success. Honour to God resulted in prosperity, turning from him, led to all sorts of problems.

### Going deeper

- What qualities did Hannah display which we should emulate?
- The people of Israel, God's holy nation, wanted to be like the surrounding nations and have a human king. As Christians, we are called to have Jesus as our king, yet often desire to be like those around us. Identify areas in life which can lead to similar conflict, and thereby threaten to compromise our holiness.
- Compare and contrast the sequence of events surrounding the reigns of Saul and David. Where did Saul go wrong? What lay at the heart of David's success? What can we learn from this for our lives?

### Personal challenge

David sought God's direction with an open heart. He celebrated all God had done and was doing in his worship. He sought to focus on God's priorities in his life. These are three elements which reflect an attitude which gives God his rightful place as king. Do those characterise our lives? And when God works through us, do we have the humility that gives the credit to him, rather than thinking it has been in our strength? Think about these things, praying that God would highlight where we are just 'doing things our way' as Saul so often did, and that we might instead develop a heart which gives God his rightful place.

## 8 THE FALL OF ISRAEL

### Interactive introduction

Elijah sank into a pit of despair. We all encounter problems, but one of the greatest antidotes is focusing on good things God has done, giving hope that we will come through our current crisis. Get the group to share one good thing God has done in their lives. Make sure this is not dominated by anyone who seems to have a daily Mount Carmel victory! Ensure such people don't stop others sharing their (apparently) less spectacular experiences. Use these testimonies as a way in to praising God that he is living and active. As he has delivered in the past, so he will do in the present and future.

### Overview of the previous five readings

- King David was so successful, yet despite his openness to God's will and way and the significant growth of the kingdom, he failed big time through the events surrounding Bathsheba – not just the affair, but the murder of her husband and the attempted cover-up.
- Solomon sought wisdom, but he, too, had a failing – dabbling in idolatry.
- The dedication of the temple was an amazing event. The temple itself was awesome, the Ark of the Covenant was of great significance. But these were nothing compared to what happened that day: *the glory of God filled the temple*.
- From the pinnacle of Israel's success, we move to the depth of failure characterised by Ahab and Jezebel. Add Elijah into the equation and we have a really exciting sequence of events as he is fed by ravens, offered accommodation by a widow, heads up the remarkable showdown on Mount Carmel – but then flees, feeling rejected and in total despair.
- God had promised not to destroy the world with another flood, but this time he used the Babylonians as his instrument of judgement on the city of Jerusalem.

#### KEY POINTS

Disputed rule resulted in the Kingdom dividing, with Israel in the north and Judah in the south.  
Repeated turning from God ultimately meant only one thing: defeat by their enemies, exile and captivity.  
God however was not forgetting his covenant, and all the time there is the promise that 'a remnant will return'.

### Going deeper

- It is a sad fact that people live very private, isolated lives. We don't like other people butting into our business. Proverbs 27:17 says: *As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another*. What are the benefits of this and how can we appropriately work it out in our churches?
- What was the difference between Saul and David, as one was removed but the other given a second chance? What can we learn from this about repentance, forgiveness and God's grace?
- What things run the risk of becoming idols which we worship today?
- Worship is not simply what we do but who we meet. The dedication of the temple was most memorable for one reason alone: God turned up in all his glory and filled the place. How can we make sure that the mechanics of worship don't get in the way of an encounter with the living God and experience of his glory?
- We've seen two sides to Elijah's character: victorious on Carmel, vanquished on Horeb. What can we do to develop on-fire faith yet reduce the risk of spiritual and emotional burnout?

### Personal challenge

Ask the group to consider whether their response to sin is like Saul's or David's. As an affirmation of the total forgiveness of God, your group could write their confessions on pieces of paper and then burn them (with care!). Or write symbols or letters representing sin on denture cleaning tablets, then dissolve them in water as a sign that they are no more.

Reflect for a few minutes on worship. How can worship become a more meaningful experience?

Pray the group will develop an open accountability which will enable their faith to grow and their integrity to be maintained. Pray that people will continue engaging with God's Word on a daily basis.

## 9 PSALMS AND PROVERBS

### Interactive introduction

Focussing on Psalm 23 and verse 1, encourage the group to write a paraphrase of it, incorporating some aspect of their day to day life. Use these as the basis for opening worship. Alternatively, get the group to write their own Psalm using the following model. Provide each person with a piece of paper, large enough to be folded 8 times. Tell them to write an address of praise to God. Eg 'God I worship you', across the top of their piece of paper. Get everyone to fold back that line of writing, and pass the paper to the person on their left. Next line everyone writes an aspect of God's character starting: 'because you are...' Fold and pass on. Next line: Another aspect of God's character starting: 'and...' Fold and pass on. Next line: Two things about how wonderful creation is Fold and pass on. Next line: Something God does for you. Eg 'You guide me' Fold and pass on. Next line: a message to Jesus with because in the middle. Eg 'I love you because...' Fold and pass on. Final line: A resolution. Eg 'therefore I will. Pass on and open.

Use some of these Psalms as an opening act of worship.

### Overview of the previous five readings

- David used his own experience as a shepherd, to highlight key aspects of God's nature and character.
- David acknowledges how sinful he has been in the way he acted with Bathsheba. He seeks God's mercy and forgiveness with a view to publicly declaring the goodness of God.
- Psalm 103 is an overflow from David's heart of wonderful characteristics of God: forgiving, healing, redeeming, renewing, revealing, compassionate, endlessly loving, faithful, ruling.
- The Proverbs of Solomon provide wise sayings to lead us into godly living. Living by them results in protection from evil and its consequences, and provision of happiness and well being.
- Solomon highlights contrasts we face on a regular basis: Wisdom and folly: Humility and pride: God's will and human action.

### Going deeper

- Living in an age which emphasises the loving and forgiving heart of God means that confession can become all too easy. David affirmed that God doesn't want "sacrifices of burnt offerings" Psalm 51:16, but how can we ensure that sin is treated seriously, and responded to with a broken and contrite heart?
- What can we learn from David's example, highlighted by his son Solomon's words in Proverbs 4: 3 - 4?
- Acts 3: 19 - 20 speaks of refreshing being a consequence of repentance. How do these fit together and what is meant by spiritual refreshment ?
- Draw out from the Bible, actions by God which demonstrate the reality of some of the qualities David lists in Psalm 103.
- Wisdom and knowledge are very different things. To put simply, wisdom is demonstrated as we use our knowledge wisely. In 1 Corinthians 1: 20, Paul highlights the distinction between worldly wisdom and the wisdom of God. Encourage your group to draw out specific examples where this is the case.

### Personal challenge

In what areas of your life are you living according to the wisdom of the world, rather than the wisdom of God? Pray that the Holy Spirit would re-order your thinking, pulling it back in line with God's will.

## 10 THE PROPHETS

### Interactive introduction

Get the group to name as many of the prophets mentioned in the Bible as they can, ensuring they don't simply stop at those who have Bible books named after them. Explore with the group what the prophets in the Bible were like, who they were and what role they fulfilled. As the leader of the group, ensure you have a good understanding of these characters to ensure an accurate and complete picture is created. Take note of the information on p.77, but you may also need to refer to a Bible dictionary.

### Overview of the previous five readings

The five readings in this section look at five of the prophets.

- **Isaiah:** the heavyweight of the prophets, outlasting several kings. A clear emphasis on warning and judgement, hope and salvation. God will send a Saviour to save his people, and, despite being spoken 800 years before the birth of Jesus, we discover many prophecies fulfilled in his life.
- **Jeremiah:** a young man given a frightening message. Yet God took him beyond his human ability, providing the confidence to declare God's warning plus his desire to forgive.
- **Daniel:** had a fundamental commitment to developing his relationship with God no matter what the consequences. Whatever his role, he sought to serve his God, knowing that trust in him would be honoured.
- **Jonah:** a wonderful account of a prophet who tries to run from God. In so doing he discovers that God can not be hidden from, but he rescues and offers a second chance to those who repent. Although Jonah delights in God's grace for himself, when it is shown to the Ninevites, he is far from happy.
- **Malachi:** throughout this book, Israel is challenged about her unfaithfulness: religion which has become routine, loss of commitment within marriage and the failure of God's people to tithe. Judgement is always the consequence of sin.

#### KEY POINT

Fundamentally, the prophets were God's spokesmen. Although predicting the future was part of what they did, their main function was to declare God's view in the midst of compromise and waywardness. Warnings, as well as a call to repentance and change, were integral to their message.

### Going deeper

- There are many ordinary people in the Bible whom God uses to fulfil his purposes. Think about some examples. What is it about these people that makes them God's choice? How is it that they are able to fulfil the enormous task God gives them? (Characters such as Moses or David would be ideal people to focus on)
- Some people think that certain people are called to 'full time Christian work' whilst others do 'ordinary jobs'. Explore whether a case for this can be made from what the Bible teaches. If everyone is called to be full time Christian workers in whatever line of work God has placed us, what are the implications for how we do our jobs and at the same time fulfil our calling? What are the implications from this, for Churches equipping members to serve?
- 'People of great faith, love grace.' Most Christians are keen to affirm God's grace which reaches out to 'sinners' out there in the world. But what about when God's grace reaches to those we feel undeserving of forgiveness, or how about when people within our churches fall short? Incorporate the parables of 'the lost sheep' and 'the prodigal son' into the discussion. (See Luke 15, also Romans 3: 23)

### Personal challenge

Ask yourself whether you have a league table of sins, with the result that some people don't really 'qualify' for God's love and forgiveness. Allow the grace of God to sweep through your heart and mind to the point of owning the fact that all have sinned and fall short of God's glory, but that His love embraces anyone who truly repents welcoming them into his family. Secondly, have you felt God might be calling you to a specific task, but have shied away due to feelings of inadequacy? Ask the group to pray about this for you, that his call would be clarified, and that you would have the faith to lay your life completely at his disposal.

## 11 THE LIVING WORD

### Interactive introduction

Give each group member a piece of paper and get them to write down as many names of Jesus that they can think of. Feedback lists. Encourage each person to choose one which has particular significance for them, and then share which one and why. Use this as a way into an opening time of worship of Jesus for who he is.

### Overview of the previous five readings

- Using language from Genesis 1, John begins his gospel by rooting the person of Jesus in the God-head. Involved from the beginning of time, Jesus is 'God made flesh'. As his gospel continues, John explains that by believing in Jesus for who he really is, opens up the way to a living relationship with God.
- The unlikely choices of Elizabeth and Mary, are the people God decides to use as mothers for John and Jesus. Without fully understanding how this will come to pass, they commit themselves to God's purposes.
- The greatest miracle of all time, Jesus' birth, takes place in the very ordinary context of a stable. The first people to meet him were shepherds, and despite the fact that Jesus was still only a baby, their lives were transformed by the encounter.
- John the Baptist, the 'greatest prophet' (Luke 7: 24-28) proclaimed a threefold message: Judgment, hope, but most importantly, he introduced Jesus to the public arena.
- Jesus is baptised and then goes into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil.

### Going deeper

- Both Zechariah and Joseph were forced to face up to challenging situations in view of how God was going to use their wives. When a family member is called to a specific task within local church life, this can result in significant pressure on home and family life. Explore the issues this raises in terms of God's expectations and those of the church, as well as support towards one's spouse. How do our responsibilities to our families fit into the equation?
- Talking about our faith with our families can be quite a difficult thing to do. So can enabling others to enter the spotlight instead of ourselves. Explore what can be learnt from the life of John the Baptist in these two areas?
- Temptation is something everybody experiences. It is all too easy to highlight certain temptations and ignore all the rest. Spend time exploring the range of things we may be tempted in, and the different ways temptation comes. Look at 1 Corinthians 10: 12-13. What "ways out" are there? Jesus used the scriptures, Paul taught about the full armour of God (Ephesians 6: 10 – 18); explore how both can become effective defences against the attacks of Satan, rather than simply theological rhetoric.

### Personal challenge

Meeting in a small group provides a wonderful opportunity for mutual accountability within a framework of love, trust and acceptance. This was looked at in the 8<sup>th</sup> study, but has there been any subsequent difference? Encourage your group to ask if they are willing yet to challenge and be challenged? Would they be able to admit to the group that they are being tempted in certain areas? Are there meaningful ways that help could be given or received within your group, to ensure that temptation is not succumbed to? And when temptation is yielded to, would they feel able to confess their sin to one another knowing they would still be loved and accepted? Examine personal feelings on this and then, spend time privately praying about any temptations currently being faced.

## 12 THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS

**Note:** There may be people in your group with prodigal sons or daughters, and today's study may stir painful emotions. Be ready to respond with love and support if this becomes apparent.

### Interactive introduction

Divide your group into twos or threes. Ask each group to choose a parable that Jesus told, and then re-think it into a modern equivalent context, using a totally different setting and set of circumstances. Allow time for each group to present their modern parable.

### Overview of the previous five readings

The strength of Jesus' teaching resulted from two main things. First, he adapted what he taught according to the group he was addressing. Secondly, his life wholeheartedly reflected the words he spoke. His words and deeds were in total unity as he lived out the message he declared.

- The sermon on the mount, the most well known and far reaching of all Jesus' sermons. He defines true happiness, talks about the importance of influencing others, and significantly increases the expectations found in the Old Testament for God's people.
- The Lord's prayer highlighted two main focal points for prayer: worship and requests. However it becomes clear that prayer is not just a formula of words, but needs to become an extension of a lifestyle with an 'Our Father' focus.
- The parables of the sower, the weeds, the mustard seed and yeast, are all used to highlight issues surrounding the ongoing battle between Christ and the evil one; the Kingdom of God, and the powers of darkness.
- Jesus uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to stress that God doesn't look for men and women with all the right answers, but for those with empathy and compassion resulting in action. God is able to use the outcasts, not just the 'religious', as instruments for good.
- The parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son, teach that Jesus has a heart for the lost, wanting to reclaim and restore them, repairing broken lives.

### Going deeper

- We live in an age which loves entertainment and anecdote. Preachers often feel under pressure to 'perform well' rather than 'preach with power'. What should the role of preaching be? Look together at Matthew Chapter 5. What elements do you find within it? With this in mind, formulate a definition of what God would class as a good sermon?
- Our prayers all too often become shopping lists whereas it is clear that adoration, confession, and thanksgiving should also be core elements. Get your group to find Psalms which have an emphasis in each of these areas.
- With reference to Matthew 6: 6, 8, 18 and 32, note how 'The Father' is integrally involved in each of the activities mentioned. How can we develop an 'Our Father' lifestyle, whereby all of life becomes prayer?
- The parable of the sower is one of the best known parables of Jesus. Read Matthew 13: 1 – 23 and explore the implications of the 4 lots of seed. What steps could your church take to reduce the risk of the first three outcomes?
- 'God is more interested in repentance than punishment.' 'The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints'. Look at John 3: 16 – 17, Luke 19: 10 and Galatians 6: 1 - 2. Using these verses as well as the parable of the prodigal son, explore how this compares to attitudes within church life. In what ways should these perspectives be demonstrated?

### Personal challenge

Think about the parable of the Lost son. Where would you place yourself in the parable? The son who has wandered off? The father keen to welcome back and restore? The older son, self righteous and unforgiving? Or another person not mentioned in the parable, looking on, slightly detached? For anyone who has strayed, coming back to church is one of the hardest things imaginable, made harder by the all too frequent reaction from others. Allow the Holy Spirit to challenge you regarding your attitude to 'the prodigals', then pray that your church would be a place oozing with God's restorative love.

## 13 THE MIRACLES OF JESUS

### Interactive introduction

The miracles of Jesus clearly pointed to who he was. There are many testimonies of God doing miraculous things in this day and age. Find out the group's experiences of healing. See whether anyone has personally experienced or witnessed it, either supernaturally received, or through the wonder of medicine. Encourage them to share what God did. In view of the sensitivity of the subject matter this week, it would be good to begin the session with an extended time praying about the topic which is to be embarked on: praying for wisdom, understanding but most importantly for sensitivity within the group, as some may have experienced significant pain when a loved one wasn't healed or God didn't intervene in a miraculous way despite great faith. Pray that although these things may be outside our own experience, that nevertheless we would be open to whatever God wants to say.

### Overview of the previous five readings

- Jesus send out the 12 disciples to cast out demons and heal the sick. This is followed by the feeding of the 5000, Peter's statement regarding Jesus' true identity and concludes with the transfiguration.
- Jesus walks on the water, and Peter, with an amazing step of faith, gets out of the boat to do the same.
- A man blind from birth is healed by Jesus resulting to a very negative response from the religious leaders.
- Jesus casts out demons from a man living in the region of the Gerasenes.
- The death of one of Jesus' friends becomes the springboard for not just another miracle, but a living parable of what lay ahead in his own life. It is an emotional chapter including an affirmation of faith by Martha, Jesus showing the depth of his involvement with people by openly weeping, and then in an extraordinary demonstration of his authority, raising Lazarus from the dead.

### Going deeper

Understanding the implications of Jesus' miracles for the life of the church is perhaps the most difficult, complex and problematic issue any Christian has to wrestle with. It has the potential of evoking strong feelings and opening up deep wounds. Great sensitivity is needed as you work through this topic, starting with an affirmation that there is much that we do not and cannot fully understand. Always be ready to break away from your prepared study if it becomes apparent that someone in the group needs to be helped or comforted in some way.

- Begin the discussion by getting the group to overview the range of miracles of Jesus, looking at the context and the consequences of each. Ensure that it is understood that the miracles were designed to highlight and emphasise the verbal teaching he was giving to the crowds. They were not 'stand alone magic tricks'. As with Peter, allow these truths to lead to a re-affirmation that Jesus is 'The Christ of God'.
- Read Mark 6: 6 – 13. Talk through the experience of the disciples as Jesus delegated responsibility to them, to heal the sick, cast out demons and preach the Kingdom. How would they have felt as they went, and what would have been the consequence? Consider what prevented people from seeing and accepting that this was a clear demonstration that God's Kingdom was being established on earth?
- Ephesians 1: 18 – 20 speaks of the power of God at work within us. Talk about ways that God's power should be manifested in our individual lives, and within the life of the church.

### Personal challenge

Jesus often took time out to be alone with his heavenly father, to commune with him and receive from him. Spend the closing minutes in quietness, allowing God the opportunity to minister to individual needs, clarify people's thoughts, as well as engendering a passion to see God move in power within and through the church.

Close by praying that each group member would know the power of God at work within their life, and would live with the confidence that nothing is impossible for Him.

## 14 THE CROSS OF CHRIST

### Interactive introduction

Focussing on the death of Jesus provides a perfect opportunity to share communion. If this is appropriate within your church's tradition, consider starting or closing in this way.

Encourage group members to build up a mental image of the whipped Jesus carrying his cross through the city and being nailed to the cross. Draw out what people are seeing, thinking and feeling. Then quote Isaiah 53: 6: "the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" and allow these reflections to lead into a time of confession followed by worship.

### Overview of the previous five readings

- Judas agrees to betray Jesus, but despite knowing this, Jesus still chooses to celebrate Passover with him... and Peter, who Jesus knew would deny him. The last supper was to be a powerful reminder in the years ahead of how Jesus' body had been broken and his blood shed for all who believe.
- Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss, and is subsequently arrested. His trial begins, with not even a hint of justice or fairness. Peter denies even knowing Jesus, and the final decision on Jesus' life rests with Pilate.
- Jesus is sentenced to death, whipped, crucified and dies, but not in defeat: 'it is finished' is his final cry of victory, the price has been paid in full. Jesus' body is taken from the cross and buried.
- On the Sunday morning, the tomb is found to be empty. The resurrected Jesus appears, first to Mary, then to the disciples, and also to two travellers on the Road to Emmaeus. Jesus shares breakfast with the disciples after a night fishing, followed by the moving account of Peter's reinstatement.
- The final appearance of Jesus to the disciples includes the promise of the Holy Spirit, their commission to be his witnesses, and then his ascension into heaven, with the promise, 'as I go, so I will return'.

#### KEY POINT

The death of Jesus becomes the final confirmation and seal of the new covenant God had made with mankind. No longer would regular animal sacrifice be required, Jesus, the perfect sacrifice had been offered.

### Going deeper

- Probably every Christian has at some point either actively denied Jesus or at very least, remained silent about their faith. Talk through Peter's circumstances (John 18) and draw comparisons with situations we might face today. Read Matthew 10: 17 – 20. How can we prepare ourselves for such eventualities and what can we do when such circumstances occur?
- Some say that if there was only some evidence for the resurrection then they would believe. It is really important that as Christians we can clearly articulate the evidence which does exist. Talk through the following 5 pointers to the truth of the resurrection:
  - The disappearance of the body
  - The range of people who met the risen Christ
  - If there had been no resurrection, the disciples would have known Jesus was a con man
  - The transformation of the disciples: fear to confidence
  - The rise of the early church
- The life and death of Jesus made it possible for anyone to become a member of God's family. Spend time exploring what a person needs to do for this to happen, and help the group to think through how to clearly and concisely communicate this as opportunity arises. Key verses to have in mind include: Romans 3: 23, Romans 6: 23, Ephesians 2: 8 – 9, John 5: 24. (Many people find acronyms useful in succinctly explaining how to become a Christian. E.g. RAC: Repent of sin, Accept Christ as Saviour, Commit to life under his Lordship.

### Personal challenge

There may be some group members feeling like Peter did: knowing they have failed, feeling guilty, yet wanting to start over. Ensure that there is opportunity for affirming the grace of God and His offer of forgiveness and another chance.

Others in the group might well be feeling a bit like Thomas... needing visible confirmation of what they believe, struggling to hold onto their hope in Jesus. Pray for each other that there would be such a real experience of God's presence that it would leave no doubt that Jesus is alive.

## 15 THE CHURCH IS BORN

### Interactive introduction

Get your group to 'experience' the events of Acts 2. Split the group in half, with one group being the disciples and the other being the crowd present in Jerusalem for the feast. Encourage everyone to relax and close their eyes, as you set the scene.

Read Acts 2: 1, then ask the 'disciples', what are you feeling at this moment? Encourage one or two to give simple adjectives to describe their feelings.

Read verses 2 – 4, and then ask the same question.

Read verses 5 – 6, and ask 'the crowd' what they are thinking and feeling.

Move into a time of open prayer, asking that each group member would have a new encounter with God as His Spirit moves through this study.

### Overview of the previous five readings

- After waiting in Jerusalem as Jesus had instructed, the day of Pentecost arrives with a dramatic out pouring of the Spirit, resulting in courage for the believers and mass conversions amongst the crowds who had gathered from far and wide for the feast.
- The disciples begin putting into practice what Jesus had taught during his earthly life. On the one hand, amazing demonstrations of power, on the other, a complete sense of unity and mutual care amongst the believers.
- Stephen is stoned to death, becoming the first Christian Martyr. This is followed by an immediate spread of intense persecution.
- Philip is led by the Holy Spirit onto the desert road to Gaza, where he has the opportunity to explain his new faith to a man from Ethiopia, in charge of the queen's treasury.
- Peter has a life changing vision, through which he comes to understand that God now wanted Gentiles as well as Jews to have the opportunity to become members of his holy nation.

#### KEY POINTS

It becomes clear through the book of Acts, that God's covenant relationship is now being extended to embrace a people group above and beyond the Jewish nation.

Working for the extension of this Kingdom now becomes the responsibility of every member of God's community.

### Going deeper

- Clearly there was a significant connection in Jesus' mind between 'Power' and 'Mission'. The issue of 'Waiting' for God's time also stands out. Explore these three words, seeking to understand the implications for the church today.
- Sadly the person of the Holy Spirit is all too often either neglected or mis-conceived. The New Testament makes it clear that entering God's family can only happen if the Holy Spirit is involved. Explore together the following passages which embrace a number of ways the Holy Spirit seeks to act in people's lives.

John 3: 5-6

John 16: 7-15

Acts 2: 17-18

Ephesians 5: 18

(Note: the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the spirit will be looked at in a later study.)

- God never said that being part of his family would mean all our problems and struggles would disappear. What can we learn from the death of Stephen? Are there implications for people in other parts of the world facing severe persecution, and what are the challenges for ourselves?
- How does God 'nudge' people today, to do something, or go somewhere like Philip? What safeguards should we apply to ensure it is Godly direction, not just 'my idea'?
- The New Testament makes it clear that through the death of Jesus, barriers which divided people into sub groups have all been removed, whether those of nationality, social standing or religious background. How should this challenge and transform the attitude of the church, as it evaluates being an inclusive organism?

### Personal challenge

Encourage the group to think about sharing their faith with others. Do we seize opportunities or back away from them? Do we rely on our own eloquence and personal confidence, or on the Holy Spirit to empower us? Give space for God to speak, direct and challenge. Paul told the believers that there was always more for them to know of God in their lives. 'Be filled with the Spirit' (Ephesians 5: 18) is not simply an event, but should be an ongoing experience. Encourage group members to individually consider whether they desire to have a deeper experience of God's Spirit, and if so, to pray for such an in-filling.

## 16 THE TRAVELS OF PAUL

### Interactive introduction

The previous days readings were the result of Paul's dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Today's study would be the perfect opportunity for members of your group to share how they made a decision to follow Christ. Use these stories to lead into a time of praise to God for the fact that he calls people into his family, and the way he relates uniquely to each person on a one to one basis.

### Overview of the previous five readings

- Saul, the angry antagonist of Jesus' followers, has an encounter with Jesus, is called by God, and then, with the support of other believers becomes a wholehearted believer.
- Paul and Barnabas journey together to share the good news. Showing remarkable courage, their sole intention was to see others become members of God's family.
- There was conflict within the early church as to who 'qualified' to be classed as true believers. The dispute was handled constructively as the believers met together, provided opportunity for people to state their views, yet remaining open to the leading of the Holy Spirit.
- Paul remains totally focussed on God's call. He waited on God for direction, he sometimes (it would appear) went the wrong way, but even going the right way often resulted in a far from problem free life!
- Paul is arrested and put on trial. This was no unfortunate end to a wonderful ministry. Rather it enabled him to preach the good news to more significant political figures.

### Going deeper

- Consider the different ways people become Christians. Think in terms of timescale, levels of human involvement, context. Read 1 Corinthians 9: 19-23. What does this say to us regarding the ways we seek to reach out into our neighbourhoods with the Good News of Jesus? What safeguards are needed to ensure that identification with society doesn't lead to conforming with it, and a subsequent compromise of faith?
- Read Acts 15: 1 – 21. What is our attitude towards new believers? How are they received in your Church, particularly when elements of the 'old life' might still be being worked through? Are there pressures to conform to church expectations of behaviour, dress or language, and if so, are they appropriate? If not, what can be done about it?
- Many churches think that people have to have been Christians for a certain period before they can be used by God. Yet with Paul, his call to serve seemed to be integral to his conversion. Does the New Testament infer the need for a 'probationary period' or should we think in terms of every believer having a mission, a purpose, a call on their life? How can we determine what that call is, and then ensure every believers lives with a real sense of vision and purpose? How should we respond if along the way people make mistakes and try to go down a path which the 'Spirit of Jesus' does not allow them to go? (Acts 16: 7)
- Christians sometime say 'I know I'm doing what God wants because it has all come together so easily'. Or other say, 'it couldn't be God's will because there were so many barriers and difficulties!' Compare these view points with the situations Paul faced whilst he was walking the path God had chosen for him. What should we learn from this?

### Personal challenge

God doesn't simply call us to be part of his family as a static member, but rather as an active participant. Spend time in quietness seeking to clarify what purposes God has for your life. Are you simply wandering fairly aimlessly, or do you know the specific mission God has called you to, within life, within the local church? This may be a whole new way of thinking for some of your group members, and so help in thinking this through, and praying for God's will to be revealed, may be an important part of this closing exercise.

## 17 PAUL TO THE CHURCHES

### Interactive introduction

The past weeks readings have been looking at some of the letters Paul wrote. Most of them include moving references to his prayers for the believers to whom the letters were being sent. As an opening activity, get your group to create a prayer using some of the phrases Paul used in these letters. Having done this, split the group into pairs, to simply pray using these words, and incorporating the person's name. To help, here are some references:

Ephesians 1: 15-23,	Ephesians 3: 13-21,	Philippians 1: 3-11
Colossians 1: 9-12	1 Thessalonians 3: 12-13	1 Thessalonians 5: 23
2 Thessalonians 1: 11-12	2 Thessalonians 2: 16-17	2 Thessalonians 3: 5, 16

### Overview of the previous five readings

Each of this weeks' readings have taken extracts from some of Paul's letters.

- Romans 8: Paul begins with the basics of the Gospel, moves on to the tension between having our lives controlled by the sinful nature or the Holy Spirit, and concludes with an affirmation of the overall victory for those in God's family.
- Galatians 5 and 6: Paul identifies actions flowing from our sinful nature, being in tension with the type of life the Holy Spirit seeks to develop. He includes a serious warning: 'those who live under the influence of the sinful nature will not enter the Kingdom of God'.
- Ephesians 6: Paul makes it clear there is a battle going on between God and Satan, good and evil. In order to stand firm against both the blatant and subtle undermining of God's values, he highlights the need to be pro-active in being strong, standing our ground, standing firm, being alert, and praying in the Spirit.
- Philippians 4: Paul discovered we can know God's peace no matter what circumstance we find ourselves in. How? By praising God for who he is, by praying about the situation, and by turning our minds towards positive things. Writing from prison means Paul can write these words with integrity.
- Colossians 1: There was a serious risk that believers at Colosse were being drawn away from the true teachings of their new found faith. He addresses the matter by affirming them for their enthusiasm when they first received the good news of Jesus, and then re-states the central elements of the gospel message.

### Going deeper

- Romans 8: 28 is a very important verse, yet easily mis-represented. There are two popular interpretations:
  - a: that despite problems and difficulties occurring in our lives, God can use the situation and bring good out of it.
  - b: that everything that happens in our lives is planned by God, so good will come from it.Get your group to wrestle with these two view points, ensuring that at the end of the discussion people realise that option (a) is what Paul actually meant, and that (b) is just a view that is held by some people trying to justify and excuse their actions.
- There are two ways we can be helped to walk the path God wants us to:
  - a: help from one another b: help from the Holy Spirit.Discuss how both of these work in practice. Draw in Proverbs 27:17 and Galatians 6: 1 - 2. Discuss what it means to 'live by the Spirit', 'be led by the Spirit', and 'keep in step with the Spirit'. (Galatians 5: 16, 18 and 25)
- No one is safe! Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10: 12, 'If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you do not fall'. 1 Peter 5: 8 says that the devil is on the prowl, looking for Christians to destroy. How in reality can we 'put on the armour of God'? What does it mean in practice?

### Personal challenge

Think about your life at this time. Are you facing pressures, temptations, compromises of faith or lifestyle? Depending on the depth of relationships between group members, encourage them to share in pairs the areas identified. Affirm the words of 1 Corinthians 10: 13 followed by Romans 8:37-39. Encourage your group to think about the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5: 22-23). Are there any which you particularly struggle with? Encourage them to focus on these each day for the next week.

## 18 PAUL TO THE LEADERS

### Interactive introduction

Have a bit of fun getting your group to create as comprehensive a list of gifts from the New Testament as they can think of. Then allow some free thinking regarding other skills which they might want to add to the list. (In advance, thought needs to be given to how we appropriately distinguish between spiritual gifts and natural skills.) If the group knows each other well, encourage each person to write their own name at the bottom of a piece of paper. Pass the paper to their neighbour who writes a gift they feel the person has, at the top of the sheet. Fold it back, and then pass it on to the next person round. Keep doing this until each person receives their piece of paper back again.

### Overview of the previous five readings

- Paul outlines the high standards to be expected from Church leaders, in terms of personal character traits, family affairs, as well as their reputation within their local community.
- Money is not evil in itself, but we must ensure it is kept in its appropriate place. Love of it can lead to all types of evil, greed causes strife, but a focus on godliness brings contentment.
- Paul is Timothy's mentor and uses parallels with a soldier, athlete, farmer and workman to highlight the importance of staying focussed on the task called to fulfil.
- Paul concludes his writings with three final thoughts. 1. Suffering is inevitable for all who seek to walk with God. 2. Scripture explains salvation, trains us to live godly lives, and motivates us to good works. 3. Whatever God calls us to do, we must remain wholeheartedly committed to.
- There was a great deal of speculation about the return of Jesus, particularly when it would happen. Paul wants his readers to understand that this exciting event will definitely take place, but at a time no one knows. The challenge: to remain alert and committed whilst we wait.

### Going deeper

- Many Christians live under the misapprehension that God intends only a select few people to have roles within the life of the local church. Draw out key points from 1 Corinthians 12.
  - There are many different gifts, relating to different areas of service (v.4 – 5)
  - God decides who has which (v.11)
  - All are given for the benefit of the church (v.7)
  - There is no place for pride or inferiority when it comes to what gifts we have (v.21 – 25)Picking up on the list of gifts developed in the opening exercise, discuss the range of gifts in the New Testament, looking at Romans 12: 6 – 8 in addition to the Corinthians passage. Read the parable of the talents, Matthew 25: 14-30 and talk through the implications this raises for both the individual and the local church.
- Money is always a challenging topic for Christians. This week's study would be an ideal opportunity to look in detail at three areas:
  - What is God's attitude towards us accumulating money? Look at Luke 12: 16 – 21
  - What should our attitude to money be? 1 Timothy 6: 6 - 10.
  - What does the Bible teach about giving money? Key principles include: Giving regularly and in proportion to your income: 1 Corinthians 16: 2, giving cheerfully: 2 Corinthians 9: 7. You may also want to explore the Bible's teaching on tithing and freewill offerings.
- God has given us the Bible as a source of information but also as a means of transformation. Discuss the practical implications of 2 Timothy 3: 16-17. Draw into the discussion Hebrews 5: 11- 6: 3. What is the impact for church life if the local church is made up of people immature in their faith?
- Paul was Timothy's mentor. What are the benefits of mentoring? Are there ways this could be established within your church, perhaps with new Christians or between old and young people?

### Personal challenge

What gifts has God given you? How does he want them used in the life of the church?

Are you taking seriously God's expectations regarding the use of your money? Is there an action you need to take?

Is there someone God has placed on your heart, whom he wants you to come alongside? Pray quietly that God would confirm this and show you how to move forward with the idea.

## 19 THE APOSTLES TEACHING

### Interactive introduction

Paul was a great thinker, Peter a strong fighter, James a doer and John had a deep concern for love. Ask your group which of these four characteristics would they most closely associate themselves with, and then share their answers.

### Overview of the previous five readings

- This week's readings began with Paul's most well known poem of love. It answers the question, 'what is love' and then goes on to outline how following such a path is the most excellent way.
- In 2 Corinthians Paul highlights the connection between our status as new creations flowing from our reconciliation with God, and the subsequent responsibility to be ministers of reconciliation as we share the good news and hope of Jesus with those around us. God chose to place 'this treasure' (the good news of Jesus) in a very vulnerable container: our lives, clay jars.
- Peter's confidence comes from his encounter with the risen Christ. He is assured about the promise of new birth, as well as the future living hope, being with Jesus for eternity. Heaven is the believers true home, so we spend life on earth as strangers or aliens in a foreign land.
- James is a doer, and describes some of the practicalities of faith. He makes it clear that persecution should be seen as opportunity for growth. He speaks of control of the tongue and being keen to listen. Perhaps most well known is his challenge that 'faith without works is dead'.
- John identifies three essential aspects of true faith: 1) Belief in Jesus, in terms of agreeing with who he is, and a desire to follow his commandments. 2) Receiving the Holy Spirit and allowing him control within your life. 3) Loving others sacrificially.

### Going deeper

- Read Galatians 3: 26 – 28. Draw out from the group the three elements of reconciliation which the cross has made possible.
  - Between man and God.
  - Between people groups which would humanly speaking be at odds,
  - Amongst God's people.Discuss the sorts of tensions and divisions which can occur within the Church.  
To have integrity in our message, it is vital that we demonstrate a commitment to living as people of reconciliation. Look at Matthew 6: 14-15, Matthew 18:15-17, Colossians 3:13, and 1 Peter 4: 8, and discuss how differences and relationship breakdowns should be handled amongst people within the church.
- 'Faith without deeds is dead', James 2: 26. Explore the ways that we are to live which will demonstrate the faith we have. You may wish to draw into the discussion Matthew 25: 31 - 46 and Acts 4: 32 - 35.
- Peter affirmed with confidence an eternal 'happy ending', 1 Peter 1: 4. Spend time thinking about the main aspects of our eternal inheritance. (Key concepts: Prepared by God, eternal, no sin, suffering or sadness, dwelling in God's presence, worship) How do you feel when you think of Heaven? How does it affect the way you worship and the way you live now? (note 1 Peter 2: 11 – 12)

### Personal challenge

James spoke of the importance of listening to God through his word, and then acting on it. Picking up on the issues of living as people of reconciliation, spend some time asking God if there is anyone you need to be reconciled with. Allow the Holy Spirit to highlight any relationship which needs sorting, and then pray for the grace and opportunity to do so.

Close by praising God that our reconciliation with him, made possible through the cross, means we can look forward to eternity in his nearer presence.

## 20 REVELATION

### Interactive introduction

This is the final study in the series taken from Essential 100. An exciting journey of discovery through the Bible. It is a good opportunity to encourage your group to share things which have particularly stood out, surprised them or enlightened them during the journey.

Having shared, spend time thanking God for his word, for the many insights revealing who he is, and for the way that he has unveiled his plan of salvation through its pages.

### Overview of the previous five readings

- John is in exile on Patmos. Whilst worshipping he receives a new revelation of Jesus, that having come as saviour in the past, in the future he will come as judge. John also presents new insight into God's view of the Church.
- The seven messages to the churches reveal the depth of care Jesus has for His Church. He affirms the positives and challenges where they are falling short: both signs of his desire to see them achieve their potential.
- John has a vision of heaven, and although the events which will take place between now and then are at times complex and painful, the end result will be overwhelming as people of all tribes and nations centre their worship on Jesus, the lamb of God.
- John sees the end of the world like a joyful wedding celebration with Jesus and the Church, as bride and groom. Satan's destruction and the defeat of evil is guaranteed, so too the fact that believers will be saved.
- John envisages the overwhelming beauty of our eternal dwelling place: pearly gates, streets of gold, a river of life, all lit by God's glory (Rev 21: 23). Everything will be new and God will dwell with his people for ever.

#### KEY POINT

God's covenant will be finally completed through the populating of the New Heaven and the New Earth. This will be a place of perfection lasting for eternity.

### Going deeper

This week's readings again contain challenges for individual believers as well as for the local church.

- In Revelation 1, we find five aspects of John's experience. He worshipped. He was obedient to the word of God. He focussed on Jesus. He embraced the Holy Spirit. He endured suffering. Here we have a great example for developing our walk with God. Explore how each can be developed and embraced in our daily lives.
- Smyrna and Philadelphia, both poor and weak, received words of commendation, and no criticism. Discuss some of the implications of this for the church today, which often seeks to portray an image of success and power. In twos or threes, write a letter from Jesus to your church along the lines of the letters in Revelation. Try to find areas for praise as well as challenge.
- Judgement is a very sobering concept with many misconceptions. Explore this topic with reference to the following passages: (Ensure that members understand that all who have accepted Jesus as their Saviour and Lord, are guaranteed a place in Heaven for eternity)

When will judgement happen: *Mark 13: 32–37*    *John 5: 28-29*    *1 Corinthians 15: 51–53*  
*1 Thessalonians 4: 13-17*

Who will be judged: *Matthew 16: 27*    *Matthew 25: 31-33*    *2 Corinthians 5: 10*

For what will people be judged: *Matthew 7: 21–23*    *Matthew 12: 36-37*    *Matthew 25: 14–30*  
*Matthew 25: 31–46*    *Revelation 20: 12*

### Personal challenge

Each person is a member of the Church, so whenever criticism is levelled at it, we are all part of the problem. Spend time considering how you fit into the picture. Are you hot, cold or lukewarm? Alive or dead? Hard working for the Kingdom, or forsaken your first love? Faithful or compromising? Persevering or easily led astray? Be open to God challenging you and then respond accordingly.

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Over the past weeks your group has developed a really positive habit of reading the Bible regularly. They have built a wonderful framework of how the whole Bible fits together. From now on, as they read passages from it, they will understand how they fit into the whole picture, God's wonderful plan of salvation. Encourage them to continue building on what has been started. Ensure appropriate resources are made available to help them engage effectively with the Bible each day. Scripture Union produces an extensive range of resources for individual use and for small groups, covering many topics in a variety of styles. For advice and information, phone our mail order line: 01908 856006, email [info@scriptureunion.org.uk](mailto:info@scriptureunion.org.uk), log on to [www.scriptureunion.org.uk](http://www.scriptureunion.org.uk) or write to SU Mail Order, PO Box 5148, Milton Keynes MK10 2YX, UK.