

## **Bible plan readings and reflections**

### **The Bible Course – Week 1**

#### **Introduction**

This plan is designed to help you read the Bible for yourself. As you read the passages you'll discover key stories, people and events that track the content of *The Bible Course* and help you prepare for each session.

We suggest you set aside around 15 minutes each day to read the passages and the accompanying reflection. If possible, try to find a regular time and a quiet space to do this. Ask God to help you understand his word and take notes if you are able to.

As you work through this plan, you'll maximise your experience of *The Bible Course* and develop a regular habit of reading the Bible at the same time.

#### **Day 1: Entering the story – quenching our thirst for meaning**

**Read: Psalm 139.1–18**

##### **Reflect:**

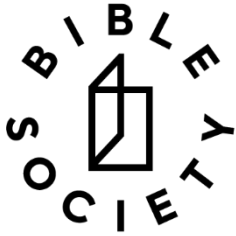
The popularity of film franchises like Marvel and Star Wars stems from their capacity to open us up to beautiful and strange new worlds. Entering them feels like an escape. We forget our troubles and let ourselves (for a couple of hours) believe in better. The Bible does this too. It opens us up to a whole new world.

When we open the Bible, says Eugene Peterson, 'we enter the totally unfamiliar world of God, a world of creation and salvation stretching endlessly above and beyond us'.

But the biggest difference between the Bible story and all other stories is that it doesn't take us out of the world but places us right in it. It's God's story, written to help us make sense of the world and give us a hope that is sure.

Life has never felt frailer. Neither have our own stories. Yes, reading the Bible means stepping into an unfamiliar world, but stick at it! Because God, the author, invites everyone to anchor their own frail story in his story.

Could the Bible and the beautiful story it tells be the very thing we need to navigate life and its challenges well? Hold on then – this could get life-changing.

**What does our reading say about the story we live in?**

We see a world that was made by a master-sculptor who crammed creation with traces of his character. The world bursts with evidence of God and when we see this it changes everything. When we realise our human story has an author, the world goes from being an unfortunate accident or a sick joke to being a beautiful design. Everything has been made *on purpose* and *for purpose*.

**What is our purpose?**

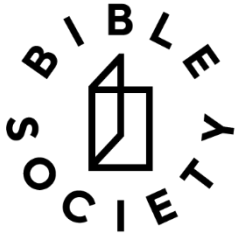
We are made for worship and relationship.

God crafted you into being. You're not random or insignificant. You have been fearfully and wonderfully made. He willed all this for you to know him and worship him (Psalm 139.14).

See how we all belong to this larger story? We all have an author, who has written the days of our lives with meaning. If your life seems devoid of meaning and true relationship, buying more stuff or seeking new experiences won't help. We were made on purpose, for purpose and it's only when we see our true purpose in the one true story of the world that we enter into the life we long for.

**Respond**

Pause and ask God to make this journey through the Bible story one that is life-changing.



## **Day 2: Creation, beauty and humanity – the origins of everything**

**Read: Genesis 1.1—2.3**

### **Reflect:**

How's your sight? When you look around, do you see things clearly? I'm not talking about whether you're short-sighted or have 20/20 vision. I mean, when you see the world, do you truly see? Elizabeth Barrett Browning famously penned these words:

*Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries ...*

They're haunting words. We can be fully present here on earth and yet fail to see; surrounded by the divine, but plucking blackberries.

### **What do we learn about God and creation from Genesis 1?**

Genesis 1 provides a snapshot of God forming and filling the earth. God brings order and life out of darkness and chaos. He populates the earth with people, made in his image to rule it, and to know and love him.

This is our true normal; a shared living space with God himself.

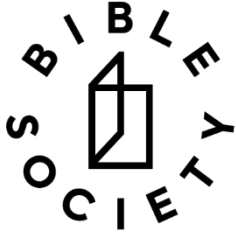
The creation account closes with God surveying all that he made, revelling in how 'good' (verse 31) creation is, and then resting. The end goal of God's creation is rest – sabbath (Genesis 2.2–3). There is no more to do, only to rest. Could this be why the best rest is after a full and fulfilling day's work?

Perfect peace existed between God and human beings, between humanity and creation. There was so much good on display! God made a beautiful world, and we were made to steward and cultivate it for greater growth (verses 28–30).

Echoes of our true normal are seen today. Splendour-filled sunsets, awe-inspiring mountain views and heroically sacrificial acts from human beings. All of them tell of the beauty and goodness of our creator God.

### **What does this mean for us today?**

Survey our world today and you see anxiety, hurry and much darkness. Why? Have we have lost our sight? In our search for joy and satisfaction, have we run to created things rather than to the creator himself?

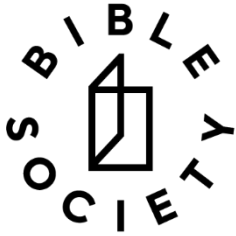


St Augustine famously wrote, '*You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.*'

May God give us fresh sight.

**Respond**

God is relational and creative. Take time to enjoy him and his creation. Cook a favourite meal, go for a walk outside without your phone, enjoy early morning coffee with a friend or just simply breathe. Taste his goodness in the everyday.



### **Day 3: Temptation, the fall and evil – where it all went wrong**

**Read: Genesis 3.1–24**

#### **Reflect:**

What's wrong with the world? You only have to venture onto social media to find a million different and compelling answers to that question. There's so much disagreement around the 'why' but many agree on the 'what'. The bottom line is that the world isn't as it should be.

The ancient text of Genesis still provides us with the most compelling explanation for why there's so much beauty *and* brokenness in this crazy, complex world of ours.

Genesis 1 and 2 provide us with the pattern, the design woven into creation for our flourishing. Like the grain in a piece of wood, there is an integral pattern. We were made for God, but we've also been made with the ability to make choices: to go with the grain of creation or to go against it and be left in a mess.

It all begins with a question: 'Did God REALLY say?' (verse 1).

#### **What does this question tell us about the origins of evil?**

Evil originates when the authority and goodness of God's word are questioned. God's word is perfect; it was given for the flourishing of humanity. God is no kill-joy – he's the joy-giver! The serpent's question causes humanity to doubt the goodness of God and focus on the restrictions he set rather than the blessings he poured out. The promises of rebellion are great but deliver so little. Sin (rebellion) is a sickness we all bear.

#### **What are the consequences of rebellion?**

God is too holy, too good and too just to leave sin unpunished, and so he banishes humanity from its true home (verse 23). The flaming sword and cherubim are symbols of the impossibility of return (verse 24). The perfect peace of creation is lost for good – or so it seems.

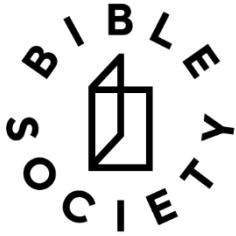
#### **Where are there signs of hope in the story?**

Sin stains the story but God's mercy still triumphs, through an 'offspring of a woman' (verse 15) who will crush the head of evil. He will be hurt in the process, but he will triumph. Do you hear the echoes of Jesus?

God refuses to give up on his creation and that means he refuses to give up on you.

#### **Respond**

Spend some time reflecting on how we are implicated in this rebellion. Understanding our need of rescue fuels our wonder when we realise God has not given up on us.



#### **Day 4: The flood, the ark and the rainbow – time for a new start**

**Read: Genesis 6.5–8; 8.1–9.29**

##### **Reflect:**

‘Why can’t I change?’ Have you ever asked yourself this question? You may have resolved to change your lifestyle, break a bad habit, or listen more and speak less. The Bible continues to give us the most compelling explanation for the complexities of our human nature. Within us all there is a deeper problem, and until it’s dealt with it will always be there. This is why true change is so hard.

Once out of Eden, the story portrays the expansion of the human race. With its expansion comes a spreading darkness. No wonder God’s ‘heart was deeply troubled’ (Genesis 6.5).

##### **How is the God of the Bible different from how we might think?**

God is not a robot. He’s tender-hearted and feels deeply. Sin saddens him and forces him to act decisively. He recognises a need for a new start: the whole human race will be wiped out through a mighty flood, except for one family.

##### **What does the flood reveal to us about God’s nature and ours?**

There’s more here than extreme weather fronts. Sin requires judgement. The ark here is a symbol of mercy triumphing over judgement. One family is chosen to be saved, not because Noah was perfect but because God is perfect, and he’s set on restoration not destruction. Noah’s rescue can be our rescue. We deserve judgement too, but God has made a way of escape.

God saves Noah’s family *from* judgement, *for* a purpose. Using virtually the same words he spoke to Adam, God commissions Noah as the new Adam to ‘be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth’. The rainbow is the sign of God’s promise (Genesis 9.13). It symbolises the hanging up of his war bow, meaning he will not give up on his people.

But our condition is revealed by what happens next. Noah gets drunk, passes out naked in his tent and is humiliated. The world has been given a wash, but something’s gone wrong on the inside. The heart of the problem is the problem of the human heart. That’s the message of the flood.

##### **Respond**

God longs to restore you and he often uses other people to show us this. Today, take a first step towards restoration by sharing with a friend an area of your life that you know needs to change but is proving to be difficult. Ask them to encourage and pray for you.



### **Day 5: The tower, the promise and Abraham – God's got a plan**

**Read:** Genesis 11.1–9; 12.1–9

**Reflect:**

Pride often comes before a fall. Can you think of an example in your own life?

#### **How is this reflected in Genesis 11?**

In Genesis 11 humans gather to build the Tower of Babel, declaring 'we will make a name for ourselves' (verse 4). These are outrageous words. The aim? To reach God. To be like him. To be independent of him. This is our human nature. We always want more; we're always building towers.

Rarely are we content with who we are and where we are. No amount of money, career success, or dream realisation brings us to a point of 'enough'. So we constantly seek 'to make a name for ourselves'. But God towers above our towers. Note how he has to come 'down' just to see what they built. God confuses the people's language and scatters the humans who were competing with him.

#### **Note all the promises God makes in Genesis 12. What does this mean for us today?**

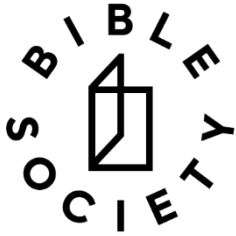
With the world falling apart, Genesis 12 cuts to one man, Abram, who's minding his own business in Mesopotamia. In verses 1–3 God tells Abram that through him and his descendants, God will initiate and carry out his plan to fix creation. God promises to gather a people (a great nation) into a place (the promised land) and through them he will bless the world (global blessing).

The Lord tells Abram to set out for the land he's been promised. Filled with doubts and fear, he falters along the way, but God is faithful. We also struggle on the road we call life. Temptation and fear can easily derail us, but rescue relies on God and not on Abram. So it is for us today.

The God of the Bible is a promise initiator and a promise keeper. God has a plan for the whole of creation. It's no exaggeration to say that the whole of the rest of the Bible is an outworking of these promises that God made to Abram. They find their fulfilment in Jesus. His entry into the story changes everything.

#### **Respond:**

Whose name do you want to make great? Ask God to help you glorify his name in your life today.



## **Day 6: Isaac, the sacrifice and the substitute – a big test of faith**

**Read: Genesis 22.1–19**

### **Reflect:**

‘Because I told you ...’ Few responses are more frustrating to hear as a child. Why can’t we have more sweet treats, visit the toy store or spend extra hours on the iPad? Many a longing has been denied with this favourite parenting phrase. A parent can see the end result (probably vomit or tears!) when the child cannot and sets a restraint for their own good. The child obeys, not because they can see the end but because they know the person in command can see it for them and they’re learning to trust their judgement.

### **Why would God’s request to Abraham have been so shocking to him?**

Genesis 22 is crunch point for Abraham and his faith in the promises of God. The story would have felt shocking then, as it does for us now. God asks Abraham to take his ‘only son’ (verse 2) and sacrifice him in the ‘land of Moriah’. Why would he do this? After all, God’s promises all hinged on Isaac, the miracle child! But Abraham trusted that God had a good purpose behind the tough ask, so he went fully prepared to obey.

### **How does God rescue?**

At the very last moment, God intervenes (verse 11). With Abraham's knife poised mid-air to sacrifice Isaac, God provides a substitute. A ram dies in place of Isaac. Abraham’s faith in God comes through. God is never going to go back on his promises.

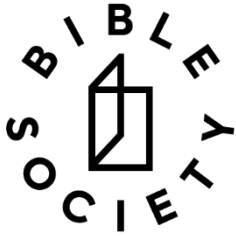
Today, the land of Moriah is thought to include Jerusalem. In some traditions, this rocky outcrop was known as Golgotha, or Calvary – the very place where Jesus the Messiah was crucified. Abraham did not have to sacrifice his only son because centuries later God sacrificed his. The story of Abraham and Isaac points us to God the Father and Jesus the Son.

When we can’t see or understand what God is doing, we can trust him. Our faith holds up because we trust a faithful God. Our fickle world gives us enough reason to have trust issues. We’re accustomed to being let down, but we can have deep confidence that God has and will come through for us: ‘He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all’ (Romans 8.32).

### **Respond:**

What is going on in your life that you don’t understand or can’t see God at work in? Fall back on the promises of God and speak them over your struggles.





## **Day 7: Joseph, the coat and the dreams – down to Egypt**

**Read: Genesis 37.1–36**

### **Reflect:**

There's a beautiful, ancient Japanese art called 'Kintsugi' that involves piecing broken pottery back together using liquid gold or silver. What was broken is made more valuable and more beautiful because of its 'scars'.

The book of Genesis has taken us from the cosmic view of the creation and the catastrophic fall of humanity, to a close-up view of one chosen family. Hand-picked by God, this family would bring blessing, restoration and reconciliation to the world. But this family probably isn't like what you would expect.

### **Observe the examples of dysfunction in the family of Joseph**

The whole story of Abraham's lineage is messy. And this is no ordinary family mess: this is deep, distorted, disgraceful mess. Jacob's clear favouritism towards Joseph, fused with Joseph's arrogance and the jealousy of his brothers, leads to a plot to kill him. To save having blood on their hands, they decide to sell him into slavery 'down to Egypt' (verse 28) – and make a profit on the deal.

The golden boy turns slave boy. But God had a plan. In every twist, every disappointment, every long wait, God was working. Joseph's story is a kintsugi story. God was putting back the pieces to create something of greater worth. He was writing a better story all along: Joseph ended up as prime minister, becoming a saviour figure during a huge crisis.

'When the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians ... Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt, to Joseph, to buy grain because the famine was severe' (Genesis 41.56–57).

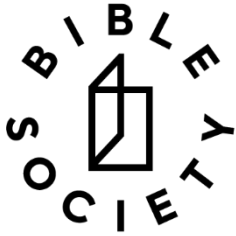
When Joseph's brothers fear that Joseph will take revenge against them for selling him into slavery, Joseph says: 'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives' (Genesis 50.20). He's able to forgive them because he's seen that was God at work, even in the mess.

### **What does this mean for us today?**

We may not be able to see it right now, but God is always at work in the mess. God is the master of kintsugi. He's into recycling! He can take the rubbish in our lives and make something beautiful out of it again. TODAY, he is working all things for good (Romans 8.28).

### **Respond**

These days, we don't often stop to reflect. Take a moment to look back and trace the careful hand of God in your life.



## Week 2

### Day 1: Egypt and slavery – God’s people in trouble

**Read:** Exodus 1.1—2.10

**Reflect:**

In 2003, Aron Ralston, an American mountaineer, fell into an isolated slot canyon in Utah and found himself trapped, his wrist pinned to the canyon wall by a boulder. Worse than being stuck and helpless was that no one knew he was out there (watch the film *127 Hours*)! It's one thing to be in trouble. It's another thing to be in trouble alone. The people of Israel knew the feeling; they were oppressed, enslaved and cried out to God for help.

The fruitfulness of Israel was now a threat in the eyes of a new Pharaoh. He forced the people of Israel into slavery and set up labour camps for them. To limit their population growth, Pharaoh ordered a mass infanticide, but God raised up midwives of faith to protect Israel’s babies. God honoured their courage. And he still does so today. He sees the heroic acts that no one else sees. So, keep choosing to have faith, even when you’re afraid.

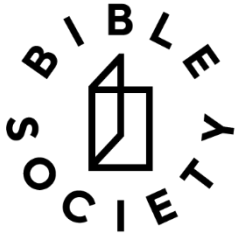
Then, the story zooms in on a desperate act from a desperate mother. Placing her baby in a basket and hiding it among the reeds at the river bank, she did not know what would become of him. But God had plans for the child. He brought the ‘ark’ – the Hebrew word for the basket – to the attention of Pharaoh’s daughter, who ‘drew’ Moses out of the water. God worked through the danger and led the child to safety, even fixing up Moses’ mother as his nurse. What a turnaround! This wouldn’t be the last time Moses experienced God drawing him out of trouble.

God is rarely mentioned in these passages, but his hidden hand directs the events that protect Moses and Israel’s future. The people of Israel are not alone in their troubles.

In life we can feel as though we’re in the waters, desperate and alone, wondering whether we’ll sink or swim. But God is near. And he’s working out a plan for our good even when it feels like our lives are threatened and out of our control. If you’re in the water today, put your trust in him! You’re not alone in your troubles.

**Respond**

Find some time this week (grab a coffee if you can) to encourage and be encouraged by a friend. God often uses other people to lift us up out of the waters.



## **Day 2: The wilderness, the bush and the name – the call of Moses**

**Read Exodus 2.11–3.15**

### **Reflect:**

In the film *The Lion King*, Simba, the son of the king, blames himself for his father's death and runs away from his failure into the wilderness. But the wilderness becomes his place of reckoning and reformation.

God met with Moses when he was at his lowest point. Moses had done the human thing when fear and shame run wild – he'd run! But in the wilderness, God had Moses exactly where he wanted him. The God of the Bible is into recycling. He takes our screwed-up lives and brings good from them.

God speaks to Moses from a burning bush and calls him to play a lead role in the unfolding drama of the Exodus. Who would have thought it? If you had known Moses in his earlier years you would have concluded: 'If God can use him, he can use anyone!'

And that's the point.

Moses arrived in the wilderness full of fear and shame. He left with God-inspired courage and confidence. What happened to him?

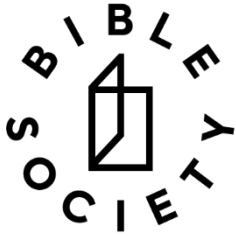
Moses received a revelation that changed everything for him and the people of Israel, for ever.

The eternal God, the one who does not combust or rust, the one who has no beginning or end, spoke to him. He revealed himself to Moses in a new way. He told him his name – the great 'I AM' was with Moses!

Now remember, the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew. And in Hebrew, 'I AM' roughly equates to YAHWEH. So if you hear someone refer to Yahweh, or Jehovah, they're using the divine name that God revealed to Moses at the bush. This name was so sacred that the Jews would not speak it, so they used the word 'LORD' (Adonai) instead. Throughout the Old Testament, you will see LORD written in capital letters. Why has someone left the caps-lock on? Because beneath that word, lies this sacred name of God.

So, when the early Christians said 'Jesus is Lord', they were consciously using a title that corresponded to the name of the God who spoke to Moses. God had appeared again – not in a bush but in the flesh.

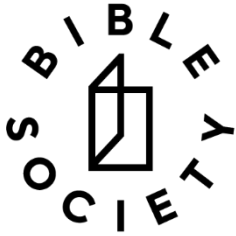
Are you in a wilderness season? Is fear running wild in you?



God can cause the wilderness to be a place of reckoning and reformation. In the wilderness God brings game-changing revelation. Wherever you are in life, Jesus' appearance in flesh shows us the great 'I AM' – the unchanging and all-powerful God – is for us and not against us. Whatever the task and however big the struggle before us, we can be confident that we're not alone. He is with us always.

### **Respond**

What difference could this revelation make in your fight with fear today?



### **Day 3: Final plague, Passover and the Exodus – the way of freedom**

**Read: Exodus 12.1–50**

**Reflect:**

Many of us associate meals with remembering. Some meals take us back to our childhood, some remind us of lost loved ones and others cast us back to moments of celebration. God knows this. He made us this way. And this is why, on the night he rescued the Israelites, he prescribed the menu for a meal they'd never forget.

#### **What did God do to ensure that the people of Israel would be rescued from the final plague?**

Since Moses' return to Egypt there'd been a battle of the gods (chapters 4–11). God picked a fight with the Egyptian 'gods', one by one, and won every round. He confronted the 'gods' of the Nile, the Sun and even Pharaoh himself. God exposed all of them for what they truly were. Pharaoh was on the ropes but remained hardened, so the final plague was God's knockout blow.

But how could God rescue the Israelites from the plague? After all, they weren't innocent. Judgement would come knocking at their door, too. But instead of passing through, the angel passed over. Why? Because judgement had already taken place for the Israelites.

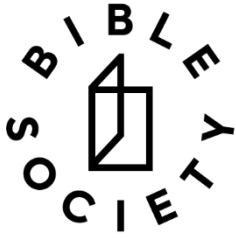
God ordered their way out. The blood of a young lamb without defect was painted above and on the side of the door frames. The blood covering the door meant that when the angel arrived it knew a death had already occurred. The blood became Israel's protection.

God knows how forgetful we are. This act of Passover was to define Israel as God's chosen and rescued people. So, through a meal, God made sure Israel would never forget. Exodus was celebrated with a symbolic meal.

#### **What does this mean for us today?**

The Passover celebration goes on today. Exodus 12 points us to the ultimate exodus, achieved in Jesus. Jesus reinterprets the whole Passover to be about himself. The Apostle Paul says that on the cross, 'Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed' (1 Corinthians 5.7). He died so that we might live! Judgement passed through him, so it might pass over us.

So we remember today. We remember Jesus' body, broken for us, with bread. We remember Jesus' blood, shed for us, with wine. It all reminds us that through him, we can experience true exodus – forgiveness and freedom!



### **Respond**

The Passover meal was to be celebrated in homes. How can you as a family or with friends remember and enjoy God's rescue together?



#### **Day 4: Mountain and covenant – God meets his people**

**Read: Exodus 19.1–25**

**Reflect:**

As the epic tale *The Lord of the Rings* concludes, an exhausted and weary Frodo and Sam lie in the wreckage of Mordor, resigned to dying there, with home a hopeless dream. Enter the eagles who swoop down and pluck them from danger and carry them safely home.

#### **What reminder does God give the people of Israel in verses 3–6, and why?**

Moses had been here before. At Mount Sinai (Horeb), God had met him in a bush but now he meets with him from a mountain ablaze with his presence. This time God calls not one person, but a nation. But before calling the people of Israel, he reminded them of the past. They had been exhausted and weary, enslaved and oppressed, but God swept in like an eagle and bore them up on his wings. Like vulnerable chicks the Israelites were surrounded, but God, the mother eagle, plucked them out of their enemies' hands and carried them to safety.

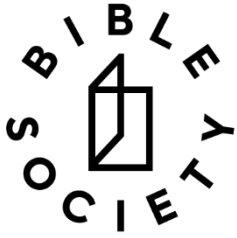
How do you view God? In this passage, God is compared to a passionate mother eagle who won't lose sight of its own. God loves us with a tender, personal, but fierce, love.

God reminds before he calls. The order is important. Israel is *to be God's 'treasured possession ... a kingdom of priests and a holy nation'*. God reminded Israel of all he'd done so that they'd know their purpose came from a place of security. Israel's purpose wasn't to earn the love of God, but because of the love of God.

With privilege comes responsibility. As the hand-picked conduits of God's love to the world, the Israelites were called to show off how good and holy God is. They weren't called to create a subculture, but to display what it means to be truly human.

#### **In verses 12–25, the people prepare and God comes down. What do we learn here about God?**

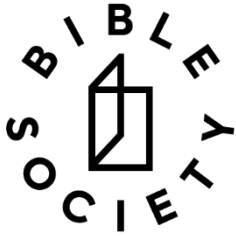
God is eager to be with his people, and yet Moses is told to *set limits* for the people to prevent them from touching or climbing the mountain. Because God is so holy and so perfect, none of them would have been able to enter his presence and live. There's a tension between his eagerness to be near and his holiness that sets him apart. God had to come down onto the mountain.



### **Respond**

AW Tozer once said: 'What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.' How do you see God? Does this passage challenge the way you see him?





## **Day 5: Commandments, thunder and lightning – God lays down the law**

**Read: Exodus 20.1–21**

**Reflect:**

Apple's screen-time limiter enables you to place a boundary around your 'screen-time' consumption. Deep down we all know we need boundaries – good boundaries protect us and enable us to flourish.

### **What did the law mean for Israel?**

The law was God's way of saying, 'I care about you.'

Notice the order here. God first delivered the Israelites from Egypt, and THEN gave them the law. The law was never a means of salvation but a way of being blessed within the covenant. You may think Christianity is all about trying to do enough or be good enough for God to love you. It doesn't work like that. It never has. Salvation is by faith, not by works.

### **How do we apply the Old Testament laws today?**

God's commands are not walls hemming us in, they're more like scaffolding holding us up. They're designed to build us up into the people God has made us to be.

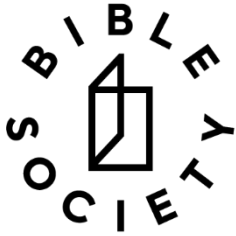
There are three basic categories of laws:

First, civil laws. Some laws were given to help Israel function as a new nation. But God's people are no longer a political state. So, these civil laws are no longer the law of the land for us. However, they still contain transferable wisdom.

For example, in Deuteronomy there was a rule that houses had to have a low wall built around the edge of the roof, so children didn't fall off – in other words, it's basic health and safety of the kind we have today.

Second, ceremonial laws. These included food laws and rituals, including laws about cleansing from all sorts of skin diseases and bodily fluids. The key here is that in the Old Testament, holiness was expressed physically. So, washing rituals symbolised the importance of clean living. Today, what was external has become an internal reality. We don't need to perform cleansing rituals because Jesus has made us clean on the inside.

Finally, moral laws. This category is summed up in the Ten Commandments. They transcend culture or race and give a universal guide to living God's way. So, Jesus came not to abolish these laws but to enable us to fulfil them. In one of his sermons, he declared:



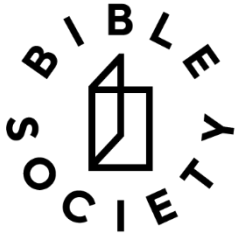
'You have heard that it was said: "Do not commit adultery" but I say, whoever looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart' (Matthew 5.27–28).

Jesus' teaching goes beyond the letter of the law to fulfil the spirit of it.

So when reading Old Testament laws, it's helpful to think: are these civil laws, ceremonial laws or moral laws? And how might that affect the way they apply to us?

**Respond:**

Reflect on one of God's laws and seek to apply its wisdom practically today.



## **Day 6: Grapes, giants and decisions – on the brink of the promised land**

**Read: Numbers 13.1–14.9**

**Reflect:**

Google Maps has changed life as we know it. We're never lost any more. We have no need to ask for directions! The journey from Mount Sinai to the promised land was meant to have been an 11-day trek, but the Israelites didn't enter the land for 40 years. They didn't have a problem with directions. Instead, their problem was trust.

### **What set the response of Caleb and Joshua apart from that of the rest of the spies?**

We often think that courage is the absence of fear. But fear is unavoidable. It's as natural to us as breathing. What really matters is how we deal with it. Will we let it take hold of us, or will we take hold of it? True courage isn't the absence of fear, but a resolve to carry on despite the fear.

Caleb and Joshua saw the same land as the other spies. They saw the giants and felt the fear of being like grasshoppers before them. What set them apart from the others was what they did with the fear: they trusted God. *'If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us,' they said (verse 8).* There wasn't a shred of doubt in this response. They chose to believe God and not give in to their fear. This is real courage.

Read on and you'll see that God honours the 'different spirit' he sees in Caleb by including him among the people who will enter the promised land. Caleb's example shows us that God sees the heroically difficult acts that no one else sees. God loves it when his people follow him wholeheartedly and trust him completely. It may feel difficult to be different to others right now – it takes more courage to live with faith than with fear – but God sees and God honours.

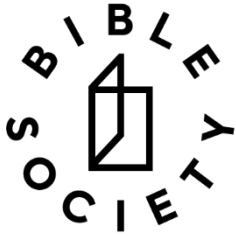
### **Now what?**

The report from the spies was that the land was filled with opportunities (big grapes) and threats (big giants). Now, isn't that life? God promises great things but we also face giant-sized challenges. What matters is how we respond. God doesn't ask us to be super-human but he does ask us to trust him today.

What giants are you facing right now? It's OK to feel fear, but don't give in to it by leaving God out of the equation. If God is for us, we can step out in faith.

### **Reflect**

Read Romans 8.31. What difference can this truth make to your life today?



**Day 7: Exodus and us – our quest for freedom.**

**Read:** John 8.31–36

**Reflect:**

This week we've been deep into the book of Exodus and the theme of freedom. We've seen that through Moses, God set a nation free, but freedom can also be problematic.

'Like a first date, freedom is something we instinctively want but without being sure how to make a success of it.' Andrew Ollerton in *The Bible: A Story That Makes Sense of Life*

Western culture is obsessed with the pursuit of freedom. But are we making a success of it?

Human trafficking is illegal yet operates today in secret and continues to reap its reward. An estimated 27 million slaves contribute to the billion-dollar wealth of the industry. The chains of injustice and inequality continue to shackle the world we live in.

In the Exodus story the enslavement of the Israelites was both obvious and physical. But we can be just as trapped on the inside – imprisoned by fear and anxiety, guilt and shame, anger and bitterness, habits and addictions. Our escape attempts never last and rarely help.

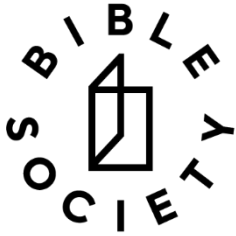
True freedom can seem so far off. We dream of freedom like a castaway at sea dreaming of the shore, but when we arrive there the shore can be a horror worse than the sea itself. Bono's famous line, 'I still haven't found what I'm looking for' is the collective groan of western culture.

This is why Jesus came. He came so we can experience true freedom and come home to God. In John's Gospel, Jesus warns that 'everyone who sins, becomes a slave to sin'. But God's Son then makes a stunning promise: 'If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed!' As The Message Bible translation puts it, 'you will be free through and through'.

The Son set us free by dying the death we deserve, so that we might be brought back to God. When we're brought back to God we find our way back to who we were made to be. This is true freedom – becoming our true selves. God made us to know and to love him, to reflect his beauty to the world. Jesus makes that possible all over again. So, if you feel like you've still not found what you're looking for, turn to the Son. He can make you free through and through!

**Respond.**

Could you become a freedom fighter today and join the A21 campaign?



### **Week 3**

#### **Day 1: Joshua, the call and the promise – be strong and courageous**

**Read: Joshua 1.1–18**

**Reflect:**

Fear. We can't seem to get past it.

Despite the so-called 'progress' of society, fear remains. Access to the news 24/7, scaremongering and social media contribute to an atmosphere of fear that fills our world. Fear has become the backing track to our lives. Whether it's about finances, family, health, or stepping out into the unknown, we all feel fear. But fear doesn't have to have the final word in your story ...

#### **What was the cause of Joshua's fear in the story?**

On the border of the promised land, Joshua knew it was far from being theirs. Moses, their leader, was no longer there and Joshua knew he had large sandals to fill! But God doesn't call the equipped; he equips the called. He tells Joshua to be 'strong and courageous' (verse 6), to not be afraid (verse 9), and to take the land given to them (verse 3). Are these just empty words? God's attempt at a pep-talk?

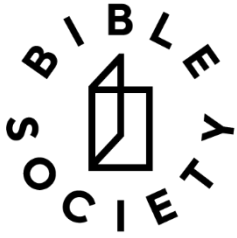
Joshua's story shows us that God's words are never empty. He does step up to lead the Israelites and God fights their battles. The Bible is filled with unbreakable promises that mean we can have confidence and hope today, despite life's challenges.

#### **What promises does God make to Joshua? What do they mean for us today?**

We often associate courage with the absence of fear. But true courage is not the absence of fear, it's the resolve to continue onwards in spite of fear. Courage means holding on to something greater than the fear. Joshua had something greater to hold on to. And so do we.

God promises Joshua his presence will go with him. He promises to never leave him (verse 5). He promises success through obedience (verse 8) and victory in battle (verse 3). With God by his side, Joshua will not fail.

Likewise, with God at our sides we don't need to fear. God has shared the victory with us already in his son Jesus (1 Corinthians 15.57). However great your fear, however impossible your task, you can have courage today. The God of the Bible says to you, as he did to Joshua, 'Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.'



**Respond**

'God doesn't call the equipped; he equips the called.' How can this truth encourage you today?



## **Day 2: The judges, the cycles of rebellion and the warning – Israel stuck in a loop**

**Read: Judges 2.1–23**

**Reflect:**

We live in the age of music streaming. We know little of broken records but not long ago, a broken record could get stuck and it would play the same notes over and over again.

### **After Joshua's death, what was Israel's story?**

A new generation grew up knowing 'neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel'. They'd forgotten everything God had done. This was always a danger as they entered the promised land. The surrounding peoples worshipped many different gods.

The god of rain was called Baal. The Canaanites believed he controlled the harvest. Canaanite gods were bribed to get them to do what you wanted. You could do this through cultic rituals, shrine prostitution and even the horrific practice of child sacrifice. When it didn't rain, Israel was tempted to turn to these other gods rather than trusting in the Lord.

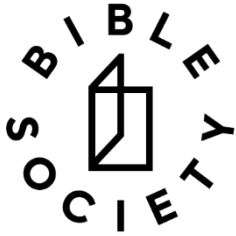
In response, God showed Israel his heart (verses 1–2). He reminded them of their story and his fierce commitment. God's language here is the language of marriage, not of business. It's covenant, not contract. The Bible does not present God as an invisible, emotionless force in the sky; rather, we see his emotions running deep. His love is passionate.

They failed to see how damaging their worship of Baal was for their soul and community, so God gave Israel over to their desires and into the hands of their enemies. This handing over is a form of judgement from God, but it's an act of mercy, not cruelty. It shows Israel their need of him.

### **What does God do in response to Israel's unfaithfulness? What does he do today?**

God's mercy does not stop there. He goes on to raise up judges (verse 16). He provides a means of rescue. Despite their rebellion, God remembers his commitment. The faithfulness of God to rescue us does not depend on the goodness of people but on his own nature.

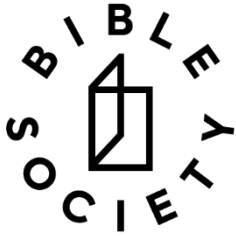
God created us so he could love us, but we've walked away from him. The story of the Bible is that he comes running after us! God has loved us to the point of death.



### **Respond**

The cycle of rebellion described in the book of Judges is similar to what we experience today. What negative cycle are you stuck in? Go to Jesus. He understands and he's mighty to save – he can set you free!





### **Day 3: Ruth, Boaz and Bethlehem – there is a redeemer**

**Read: Ruth 1.1–22; 4.13–22**

**Reflect:**

There are many great stories and tales in the world. There are not many more moving than the book of Ruth. Set in the dark and painful time of the judges, the book of Ruth sparkles like a diamond.

There's romance. If you're getting started in a relationship, Ruth is packed with practical wisdom that you can glean from.

There's also redemption. Boaz in the town of Bethlehem (ring any bells?) is referred to as a kinsman-redeemer, because he rescued his widowed relative, Naomi, from debt. Boaz points us to Jesus; he's our redeemer, bringing us hope and a future.

#### **What does the story's opening scene teach us (chapter 1)?**

Ruth, a hurting widow, journeys with her widowed mother-in-law Naomi, who was originally from Bethlehem in Judah. As a Moabitess, Ruth would be an outsider in Naomi's homeland. Naomi instructs her to return to Moab, where there might be more for her. Ruth chooses to go with Naomi (verses 17–18). Committing to Naomi meant choosing the unknown, but Ruth was all in.

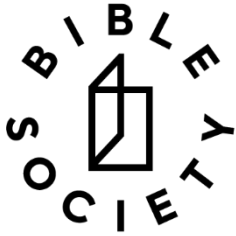
#### **In what ways does Boaz point us to Jesus?**

In a time when there was no welfare state, God cared and provided for Ruth and Naomi. His hidden hand led them to the fields of Boaz. Boaz observed the law of God by allowing Ruth to glean from the edges of his fields, and he made Ruth his wife. Marriage made Boaz a protector and provider for Ruth and her family. The marriage meant Ruth and Naomi were no longer poor and desperate but welcomed into a new home and life. Jesus invites those struggling today into a similarly life-changing relationship with God.

The story of Ruth finishes with a family tree. Ruth and Boaz have a son, Obed. He was the great-grandfather of King David. David was in turn the great, great, great (times a few) grandfather of none other than Jesus Christ – born in Bethlehem! That means Ruth is in Jesus' family tree.

**ABRAHAM — JUDAH — BOAZ  
RUTH — DAVID — ..... — JESUS**

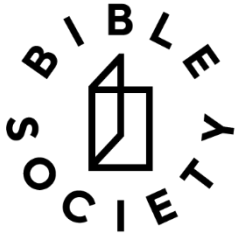
Just consider this – Matthew opens his account of Jesus' life with this genealogy! Surely this is no way to start a story?



Mathew wanted us to know that Jesus came from a family of outsiders so that those who feel like outsiders can be brought in. Jesus came from a messy family line for those who live messy lives! The story of Ruth is a gateway into the heart of God. Whoever you are, whatever you've done, however you're feeling – God flat out loves you.

### **Respond**

Inspired by Jesus' heart for widows and refugees, how could you serve those who are suffering?



#### **Day 4: Samuel, the voice and the vision – hear the word of the LORD**

**Read: 1 Samuel 3.1–21**

**Reflect:**

Leaders influence. Leaders change things. In the world of sport or business, the right leader can turn the tide for teams or organisations.

The final verse of Judges highlights the desperate need for leadership in Israel:

‘In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.’

To turn the tide God needed to appoint the right leader.

Enter Samuel.

#### **What does Samuel do when God speaks?**

Ministering under the priest Eli, Samuel learns to hear the word of the Lord. During those days the Bible records that a word from the Lord was rare so it’s no wonder that Samuel initially failed to see what was going on.

Eli instructed Samuel to respond to the voice by saying, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’ Samuel learned the practice of listening to the voice of God; this would go on to shape his life and leadership. In order to lead with integrity and renew Israel as a nation, he’d need the voice of God directing and strengthening him.

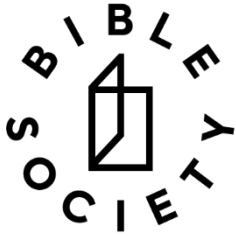
God was calling Samuel to a giant-sized task. He was calling him to be the servant priest of Israel, a faithful prophet of God and judge for the people. He was to be the new leader that would turn the tide for Israel.

#### **What can we learn from Samuel’s example today?**

Samuel had real spiritual authority because he’d learnt to listen to the voice of God. Have we learnt to do the same today? We have grown accustomed to leaders without integrity but God wants to raise up leaders who are not like the leaders of this world. He wants leaders who turn the tide – not shaped by the world but shaping the world around them.

Do we have lives and rhythms that are set to ‘hear the word of the LORD?’

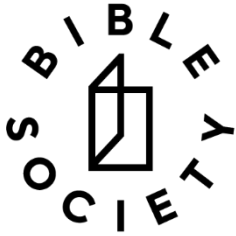
**Samuel finishes by sharing words from God to Eli. How does his example apply to us today?**



First Samuel listened. Then he spoke, faithfully, hiding nothing from Eli despite the word being tough to bear (verse 18). In a world that desperately needs to hear the word of the Lord, have we chosen to hide out of fear? Let's rediscover true integrity by first listening and then speaking the truth with love.

**Respond**

Hearing the voice of God starts with us stopping and listening. Spend five minutes of today being still and silent.



### **Day 5: David, the giant and the stones – God’s servant brings victory**

**Read: 1 Samuel 17.1–58**

**Reflect:**

We love an underdog story. From *Rocky* and *The Karate Kid* to modern films like *1917* and *Creed*, Hollywood has made a fortune out of the underdog narrative. What if our love for the underdog has been wired into us by God?

The story of the Bible often has God choosing not the strongest, the wisest, or the eldest to carry out his purposes. Instead, he chooses the outsider, the forgotten one, the youngest, even deceivers and doubters. God loves an underdog story, perhaps because the underdog's triumph tells of the might of God.

#### **What’s the story up until now?**

Saul was an impressive choice as king – he was the tallest and most handsome man in Israel. But he also had a shadow side. His insecurity and anger only grew during his reign. His inner character did not match his outer strength. So Samuel was told to look for Saul’s replacement. Enter David – the least likely candidate to be king! He was the youngest, and presumably the smallest, of eight brothers in the household of Jesse. Outwardly he was not impressive. But God, who knows and sees everything, examined David’s heart and found something far more important.

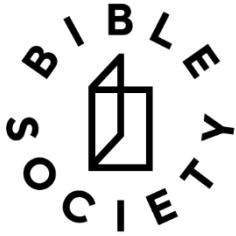
#### **What is the state of Israel and their leader when David arrives on the scene?**

David arrived on the scene not for a fight but as a delivery driver! Everything changed though when he saw the giant Goliath defying ‘the armies of the living God’ (verse 26). Saul and the Israelites were paralysed by fear, but David couldn’t stand back and let this go on. He knew God’s glory was at stake.

Despite criticism from his brothers, a doubting king, a mocking enemy and a lack of armour, David drew his courage from God. He knew the ‘battle is the Lord’s’ (verse 47). So with one smooth stone he floored the nine-foot giant Goliath, cut off his head and allowed the rest of Israel’s army to triumph over their enemies. Similarly, like a warrior, Jesus stepped into our battle with the giants of sin, sickness, evil and death and won the decisive victory for us. What David did for the people of Israel, Jesus has done for the whole world on the cross – his is the greatest underdog story ever.

#### **Respond**

Read Romans 8.31–39. Because of Jesus, we really are ‘more than conquerors’. Speak these truths over the giants you are facing today.



## **Day 6: The king, the dream and the baby – the wisdom of Solomon**

**Read: 1 Kings 3.1–28**

**Reflect:**

‘If you could ask God for one thing, what would that be?’ Now that’s a conversation starter! Maybe try discussing it around the dinner table with family or together with friends.

How we answer this question shows us where our hearts are. King Solomon did not have to dream up this moment. He lived it. His answer revealed a deep and righteous desire.

He had walked in the ways of his father David (verse 3), and devoted himself to God with lavish offerings (verse 4). Then God appeared to Solomon with a most unexpected invitation.

### **What can we learn from Solomon in this moment before God?**

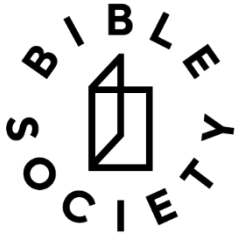
Daunted and afraid, Solomon fell to his knees; he felt his inadequacy deeply (verses 7–8). God wasn’t insulted by Solomon’s doubt and fear. Instead he provided the resource he needed. Today, you might be feeling the pinch of inadequacy or be overwhelmed with fear at a task or a situation before you. Remember that God is near and he has the resources you need.

Solomon asked for a discerning heart (verse 9) and this pleased the heart of God (verse 10). Solomon knew that above everything, wisdom is the way to live and lead well.

### **Solomon was presented with an impossible situation. What does his response teach us today?**

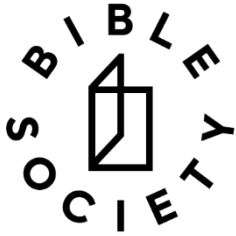
Our sin-fractured world can bring us deeply complex and painful moments. Wisdom does not take us out of the pain; rather it teaches us how to navigate it well. In the story, Solomon’s wisdom preserves a child’s life and prevents injustice. Wisdom does this. It’s the foundation to doing good to others and the world in which we live.

Solomon later wrote that the ‘fear of the LORD’ is the beginning of all wisdom (Proverbs 1.7). To want wisdom means to look to God. In a messy and complex world, there can be no better place to turn. You may feel daunted and afraid. You may feel overwhelmed at the complexities of life and wonder how you can make it through or make a difference. Remember that God is with you. Remember that wisdom begins with him.



**Respond**

How can you apply the wisdom of God found in the Bible to do good to the world around you today?



## **Day 7: Judges, kings and Jesus – the ultimate judge**

**Judges 3.7–11 and Romans 8.1**

### **Reflect:**

In 1953, at her coronation in Westminster Abbey, Elizabeth II was crowned Queen. Dressed in royal robes, she was adorned with the crown jewels – including the Star of Africa, the largest cut diamond in the world, valued at over £400 million. Despite all that, the Queen was handed a book and told: ‘We present you with this book, the most valuable thing this world affords.’ It was a plain copy of the Bible, just like ours. When we pick up the Bible, we hold in our hands something more precious than the crown jewels.

This week our readings have focused on some high-profile leaders in the nation of Israel. Most of us will never come close to shouldering the responsibilities of a judge like Deborah or a king like David. But all of us can lead influential lives, whether monarchs or mothers, prime ministers or plumbers, and the Bible is an endless source of wisdom to guide us.

### **A brief recap ...**

With God’s help, Israel took possession of the land of Canaan. By the end of the book of Joshua, Israel had settled in the territory God promised to Abraham and ‘the land had rest from war’. However, the next part of the story was hardly ‘and they lived happily ever after’. Instead, Israel, meant to be the solution, became part of the problem. God’s covenant people compromised with the surrounding nations and ended up living like everyone else.

God raised up leaders to guide his people – charismatic judges like Samson – and anointed kings like David. But even these leaders struggled to live God’s way and often set a bad example. Israel’s story is a warning to all God’s people. When we take our eyes off him, it’s easy to get stuck in negative cycles of thought and behaviour. How is that an ongoing challenge for you today?

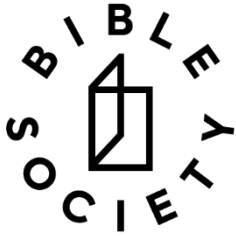
### **What hope can Jesus give us today?**

However, as we fast-forward through the Bible’s story, we’re pointed to the ultimate leader, Jesus. He is God’s anointed one. He can deliver us from cycles of sin and negativity. His Spirit empowers us to change. As the New Testament puts it: ‘There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ (Romans 8.1, ESV).

### **Respond**

Ask God to show you the power of his word so you can live a life of influence that leaves a godly legacy.





## Week 4

**Day 1: Prophecy, call and hope – peace within the storm.**

**Read: Jeremiah 29.4–11**

**Reflect:**

‘Life isn’t about waiting for the storm to pass ... It’s about learning to dance in the rain.’  
(Vivian Greene)

This week we discover the overarching theme of exile as we prepare for the next session of *The Bible Course*.

The exile was the darkest period of Israel’s history. The Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, smashed up the city that David had established and burned down the temple Solomon built. Jerusalem was left in ruins and God’s people were deported to live in a foreign land.

But exile is more than just an event in the big Bible story; it’s a deep metaphor for what we experience today. Life and its challenges remind us that things aren’t as they should be. We live in exile right now.

Yet into the darkness, hope shines. God raised up prophets who warned of judgement but he also promised that the best was yet to come. Knowing this, we can learn to dance, even in the rain.

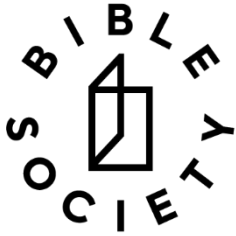
### **Jeremiah writes a letter to the exiles. What hope does he give them?**

Jeremiah writes to those in exile to say God will not forget them. In fact he says that in exile God still has a plan. When 70 years have passed he will come for them and bring them back. Israel may have dark days ahead, but God is with them even in exile and he gives them hope of a better tomorrow.

When the tunnel gets dark, God promises there is light at the end. Jesus’ death and resurrection tell us that there is always a future and a hope. Jesus has promised to return, too, bringing us back to God. Exile is not forever.

### **What does Jeremiah 29 teach us about living well in exile today?**

Remember, Israel spent 70 years in exile; 70 years of being away from home. Christians are referred to as ‘exiles’ in the New Testament. We live away from home, because our true home lies in the new heavens and new earth. Those 70 years of waiting can’t have been

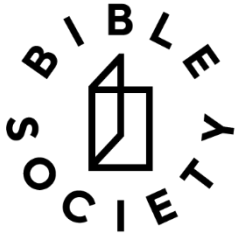


easy, and neither is our waiting today. But the story of the Bible should inspire us to wait well. We can win away from home!

God asked Israel to seek the peace and prosperity of the city. He didn't ask them to wait until the storm passed, but encouraged them to dance in the rain! God wanted Israel to shape and improve the city of their exile. Christians are exiles, but we're also called to be influencers.

**Respond**

What could it look like for you to dance in the rain today?



## **Day 2: Elijah, King Ahab and the fire – it's decision time**

**Read: 1 Kings 18.1–39**

**Reflect:**

Are you a natural decision-maker or not? Where you choose to eat out or what film you watch is probably of little consequence but when it comes to spiritual indecision in the Bible, the consequences are far greater.

### **What does God do about Israel's indecision?**

God formed and called Israel to live under his rule and reign. Kings governed Israel and were subject to God too. Throughout the whole land, God's word was meant to be the final authority. But King Ahab and many others had little regard for God and his word. Ahab's marriage to Jezebel saw the introduction of Baal worship in Israel. So God sent the prophet Elijah as his mouthpiece. Despite the risks, Elijah spoke words of warning, calling the people to make a choice.

### **'How long will you waver between two opinions?' (verse 21)**

Imagine a bird walking along a branch that forks. The people of Israel were doing the spiritual splits – they'd got feet in both camps. So the prophet challenged them to make a decision. An altar was set up and the prophets of Baal prayed, danced and cut themselves. Nothing happened. Then as Elijah prayed, the God of Israel sent fire from heaven that consumed the altar. On that decisive day God showed who Israel should choose to follow.

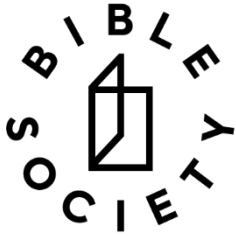
### **What does this story mean for us today?**

Perhaps you've also been wavering – doing the spiritual splits, scared to fully commit. It's a painful way to live. With God it's all or nothing. We can't have him and other gods too. But the best thing about going all in with the God of the Bible is that he won't let you down. When the odds were stacked against Elijah, God caused fire to fall. He proved his trustworthiness to Israel then and he will do the same for you today. If we go all in with him, we find he's already all in with us. Just look to Jesus.

As Paul said in Romans 8: 'If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?' (verses 31–32).

### **Respond**

What choices do you need to make so that you're living wholeheartedly for God?



### **Day 3: The prophet, adultery and reunion – the faithfulness of God**

**Read: Hosea 1.1–11; 3.1–5**

**Reflect:**

The Bible is a love story but not in the Hollywood sense. It's probably the messiest love story ever told. At times it's deeply heartbreaking, but this is what makes it the love story of the ages.

The story of Hosea is the love story of the ages in a single book of the Bible. It's about a prophet who lived in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Following Israel's split, the ten northern tribes no longer had access to Jerusalem and the temple so they decided to set up alternative worship sites. They made two golden calves to worship. The Bible refers to this as idolatry and it's expressly forbidden in the Ten Commandments.

One of the prophets God raised up was Hosea. Hosea was about to embody the love of God towards his wayward people, highlighting the heartbreak caused by Israel's choices.

#### **What do we learn about God and Israel in Hosea's story?**

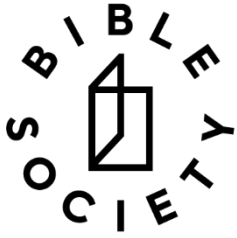
God told Hosea to marry Gomer, who cheated on him with other men despite Hosea showing her kindness and love. Her adultery leads to her enslavement. In the culture of that time, Hosea could have had her put to death. Instead, God meets with Hosea and says: 'Go again and love the adulteress woman, who is loved by another man ... [love her] even as the LORD has loved Israel' (Hosea 3.1).

Hosea's repeated forgiveness towards his adulterous wife, mirrors God's love, patience and mercy towards his unfaithful people.

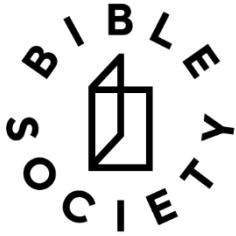
#### **What does this story mean for us now?**

To God, idolatry is like spiritual adultery. To love anything or anyone more than God is like cheating on him. Most of us don't have golden calves in our living rooms but in our hearts we can be worshipping idols just the same. We pursue substitutes for the real God in status and image; property and possessions; hobbies and holidays. But eventually we wake up to the reality that only the love of God truly satisfies. And that's the shocking message of Hosea: God remains faithful even when we cheat on him.

Hosea goes through the shame of buying back his own wife from prostitution. Imagine the talk around town. Picture the stares on the walk home. Hosea goes to extreme lengths to win back his wife. So has God through Jesus, who endured the shame of the cross so that we could be won back as his.

**Respond**

Sometimes we convince ourselves we could never be loved by God. The story of Hosea is a picture of God's love for you. Maybe it's time to let yourself be loved?



#### **Day 4: Hezekiah, Isaiah and the siege – God delivers his people**

**Read: 2 Chronicles 29.1–11; 32.1–23**

**Reflect:**

Losing a job, the loss of a loved one, or stress and anxiety can all cause us to feel overwhelmed. Perhaps you've had to deal with news, even this week, that was so hard to stomach you felt you could go no further. If you're in this space, you're not alone.

#### **What was Hezekiah's desperate situation?**

When the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom, they also besieged Jerusalem in the South. The king of Judah at the time was Hezekiah. He was understandably afraid and considered early surrender. Assyria was a world power and its people thought the God of Israel was just like the gods of other nations they had defeated – a work of human hands (2 Chronicles 32.19). They'd soon find he wasn't.

When surrounded by enemies, Hezekiah experienced God's protection surrounding him.

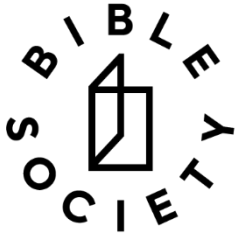
#### **What do the responses of Hezekiah and God teach us today?**

Fear could have paralysed Hezekiah. Instead, it dropped him to his knees. He and the prophet Isaiah cried out in prayer to heaven (2 Chronicles 32.20). But they weren't praying as a last resort; prayer was their primary weapon.

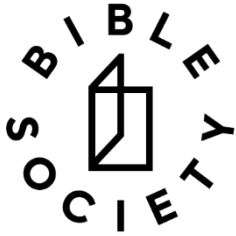
Hezekiah's backstory shows us that his heart was turned to God. Chapter 29 relates his first moves as king. He cleansed the temple, not of cobwebs but of idols. Hezekiah made sure the people's story would not be the same as that of the previous generation, who had turned their faces away from God. Hezekiah's example can be ours too. We are not tied to generational trends. Things can change!

Hezekiah did what was 'right in the eyes of the LORD' (2 Chronicles 29.2). He trusted God and saw a nation turn back to him. But still, the enemies came. Committing to life under God's rule doesn't necessarily spare us from attack. Instead of turning in on himself and despairing though, Hezekiah sought God. God heard his cries and, without breaking a sweat, he sent the enemy packing.

Nothing that threatens you can stand against the God of the Bible. Take heart: God fights the battles of his people.

**Respond**

Hezekiah both prayed and took action to repair the weak parts of the wall (2 Chronicles 32.5). Prayer and practical steps are not at odds with one another. Why not look to do both today?



### **Day 5: Defeat, exile and Babylon – when darkness falls**

**Read: 2 Chronicles 36.1–23, Psalm 137.1–9**

**Reflect:**

When darkness falls, where do you run to?

It matters little who you are, what you do or what your status is. Things go wrong, the bottom can fall out of life, darkness falls on us all. But when darkness fell on Israel it should not have come as a surprise.

#### **What was Israel like in the days before the exile?**

The exile was not a random event in Israel's history. As strange as it sounds, God made sure the people of Israel would be granted their desire to live without him as their ruler.

It's OK to struggle with this, but the Bible is clear that God was just giving the people what they wanted. He was not quick to cast the people out of the land; rather, he sent messenger after messenger to warn them of the danger because he had 'pity on his people'.

The prophets were like God's lifeline for Israel to take hold of so they could be pulled out of deadly waters. But they refused to listen. With all their might they tried to stay afloat, but going our own way without God invariably ends up drowning us. The people of Israel were only in darkness because they'd turned away from God who is light!

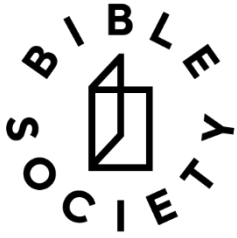
#### **What does Psalm 137 teach us about the experience of exile? How can we have hope today?**

Heartbroken and homesick, the psalmist invites us into the pain of exile. This is a psalm of lament, filled with a longing for home and a desire for God to enact justice, punishing the enemies of his people who gloated over their misery. From the place of darkness and pain, the psalmist turns to God for comfort, trusting that he will make things right.

God's love is a loyal love. He doesn't forget Israel, even when they forget him. He moves the heart of Cyrus, the new king of Persia (2 Chronicles 36.22), and orders the return of God's people to their land.

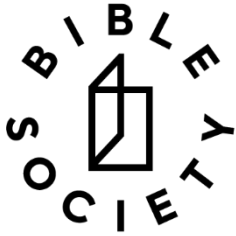
Who would do that for a people who were so unfaithful? Only the God of the Bible. When we are unfaithful, he remains faithful to his promises – God always stays true to his character. When the storms come, it's knowing where you're headed (the end of the story) and who you belong to (you're loved by God) that gets you through.





### **Respond**

It is right to lament. Passages of lament in the Bible help us express our emotions to God when we're hurting. Read Psalm 137 again and let yourself feel the pain of exile.



## **Day 6: The servant, suffering and hope – the Messiah is coming**

**Read: Isaiah 52.1–53.12**

**Reflect:**

We are hope-based creatures, constantly creating stories or pictures of the future. Hope for the marathon runner is the picture of the finish line. For those of us going through the daily grind, it might be the holiday or the house that the grind pays for. There's no force in life more powerful than hope. The people of God were about to need it more than ever.

Isaiah wrote to the Southern Kingdom of Judah warning them that unless the people turned back to God, his patience would run out. But into the darkness, hope shines.

### **What is the hope of Israel in exile according to Isaiah?**

Speaking through Isaiah, God described a person he called his 'servant' who would one day free the people from the chains of oppression. What a picture to cling to – God was promising to send a rescuer!

In Isaiah 52, God told Jerusalem that a new time was coming so his people should put on their 'garments of splendour' (verse 2) and be ready to burst into song and dance (verse 9). And he says the same to us today.

### **How can God say this to suffering people?**

God knew what he was doing and what Judah needed – a king who would fight and overthrow their oppressors, but not in the way they expected. The Messiah – God's chosen and anointed one – fought not with swords and spears but with silence and suffering. God was raising up a saviour-king like a root out of dry ground and there would be nothing warrior-like about him (Isaiah 53.2–3). Instead, he would be despised and cast out, but through his suffering, the servant was to achieve the greatest victory of all.

### **What does this hope of a servant mean for us today?**

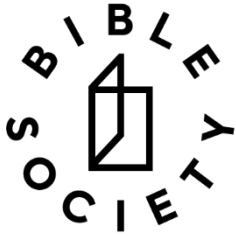
Isaiah points us to Jesus, the one who laid down his life, suffering on our behalf, to save us from exile – our separation from God and his Kingdom. On the cross we see him take the punishment for our sin so that we can be at peace, reconciled with God. The hope for the world is in Jesus, the servant-king, because one day, just as Jesus has been exalted (Isaiah 52.13), God will exalt those who trust in him.

Despite deep injustice and suffering, Jesus was faithful to God and to us to the very end. Knowing he was faithful then, do we really think he'll abandon us now? He will not.



### **Respond**

Jesus was a man of sorrows. Whatever you're going through, Jesus knows what it's like.



### **Day 7: Return, rebuild and wait – the best is yet to come**

**Read: Nehemiah 1.1–2.20**

**Reflect:**

When was the last time you were deeply moved on behalf of others? Could our 24/7 access to news and social media be leading to compassion fatigue? Does frequent exposure to the suffering of others around the world lead to a hardening of our hearts and a sense of helpless apathy?

Nehemiah's story points to a desperate need to recover our sense of compassion – because true compassion always leads to action.

#### **What moves Nehemiah compassion?**

Nehemiah was working in a highly respected role as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes in Babylon (around 445–444 BC). He could have ignored the reported troubles in his homeland but his heart was so attuned to the promises of God that he couldn't help but weep when he heard about the sorry state of Jerusalem and its ruined walls. Nehemiah mourned for days, fasting and praying, confessing the sins of the people of Judah and asking God to hear his prayer for help and restoration.

Do we weep over the state of our cities, towns and villages – our world? Do we cry out to God for change and restoration?

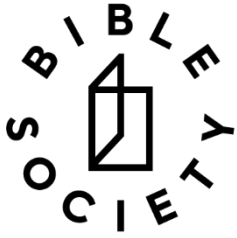
#### **What can we learn from Nehemiah's prayer?**

On his knees, Nehemiah confessed Israel's sin and asked God to remember his promise that if his people turned back to him and kept his commands he would gather them from wherever they'd been scattered and bring them back to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1.8–9).

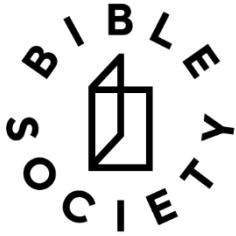
God is still in the restoration business today; our sin has taken us far from him, but God doesn't change in his desire to be reconciled with us.

Nehemiah asked the king to let him go to Jerusalem. When he arrived, he found a city without walls, unprotected. Living there would have felt as unsafe as sleeping in your house with the front door wide open. Many of the returning exiles lived out in the countryside in fear.

Despite opposition and the scale of the task, Nehemiah inspired the people to rebuild. Then, he and Ezra the priest worked to reform the people according to the Law of Moses. Ezra read it, explained it and led the people in repentance and recommitment.

**Respond**

Do you see ruins that need rebuilding in the world? Let the story of Nehemiah take you from dreaming a dream to living it. Let compassion take you to God in prayer and move you to action today.



## Week 5

### **Day 1: Messiah and the Gospels – Jesus enters the story**

**Read: Luke 1.1–4**

**Reflect:**

What memories do you have of studying literature in school? The best books leave you feeling something or considering a change of perspective. That doesn't happen unintentionally. Authors write with a purpose and carefully craft their words to achieve it. The Gospel writers are no different; they write with intention.

#### **What do we learn about Luke's purpose in writing?**

One of the most frequently asked questions about the Bible concerns its reliability. After all, sensational stories sell books but are they based on facts? Are the accounts of Jesus' life trustworthy?

Luke's Gospel is one of the earliest accounts of Jesus' life. He starts by telling us how and why he wrote. There's nothing cryptic about this preface!

Luke wanted to capture the authentic testimonies he heard on paper so that Theophilus could have 'certainty of the things' he'd been taught. He wanted Theophilus (whom we know little about, but his name means 'friend of God') to have confidence that Jesus really is who he claimed to be. Luke set out the story of Jesus's life to answer people's doubts, showing how he fulfils the story of God, Israel and indeed the whole world!

Luke's 'method' will satisfy many readers. He was a doctor, so he knew the importance of taking care and being orderly. Read his work and you'll see that he consulted primary sources, and records history, not hearsay.

Unlike most biographies, the Gospels only briefly mention Jesus' first 30 years. Instead, they focus on his final three years of ministry, and particularly his final week, as if to say, 'This is not a typical end – his death is the climax of his life!'

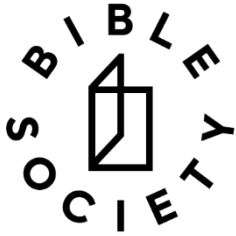
The Gospels are no ordinary biographies, because Jesus is no ordinary man. He's God entering his own story and walking onto the stage of human history. So, the clear intention of the Gospel writers wasn't just to record a great life from the past, but to call people, both then and now, to put their faith in Jesus.



After reading the Gospels, we must face the most important questions of all: *do we believe Jesus is who claimed to be – the Son of God? And, will we make him our Lord and Saviour?*

**Respond**

Are you struggling for certainty today? Who can you be honest with and together work through your doubts today?



## **Day 2: Angels, a virgin and a song – the coming of Jesus**

**Read: Luke 1.5–56**

**Reflect:**

Have you ever tried putting a face to a name? Maybe you've conversed with someone via email for a long time or listened to someone on the radio without ever seeing their face. When you finally have the chance to meet, perhaps they look different to how you imagined them.

Luke begins his Gospel account with a flurry of angelic activity. All of heaven knows that something major is happening on earth. At last, God is putting a face to the name!

### **What do we learn about Jesus and his mission from Luke's opening chapter?**

Why Mary? And why Nazareth? The action didn't take place in the commercial centre of the world and Mary was no influencer! But that's exactly the point. God ignored all the rules of an effective PR campaign and chose the unlikeliest place and the most unlikely circumstances. God made himself an outsider, so the outsider can know that God knows them. God's heart is for the nobodies from nowhere and, ultimately, he came to bring the outsider in. How? Look to his name.

'Jesus' (verse 31) comes from an ancient Hebrew name pronounced Yeshua and it means 'the Lord saves'. Connecting Yeshua with the name 'Joshua' causes everything to fall into place. God used Moses to lead Israel out of captivity, but it was Joshua who led them into the promised land. Jesus is our new Joshua. And he doesn't just break the chains of oppression, he's the one who leads us into a wide open place. He's a rescuer and guide for the oppressed and the hopeless.

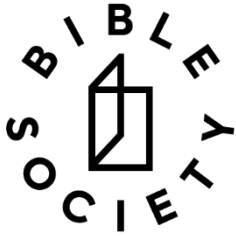
He was also to be given the throne of David (verse 32). We may not feel the weight of that statement, but Mary did. Look to her joyful song of praise to God for what he was about to do. It speaks of her amazement that God was including her in his plans and thankfulness that he was keeping his word.

God had promised David a descendant who would establish his everlasting Kingdom (see 2 Samuel 7.8–16), and rule with love and justice. God kept his word! Jesus arrived as saviour and king. He made a way for us to be saved, giving hope to the world and establishing a reign that will last for ever.

### **Respond**

Let your heart sing Mary's song, because Jesus is saviour and king!





### **Day 3: Temptation, healing and preaching – the ministry of Jesus**

**Read: Luke 4.1–44**

**Reflect:**

God is not distant. He doesn't keep us at arm's length, even when we might expect him to. Involving ourselves in the mess of this world doesn't always seem worth it but, when it comes to God, Luke's Gospel bats that notion away.

Luke wants us to know that Jesus is the saviour of all people. And, in order to save people, he had to get his hands dirty. We have a God who doesn't turn his nose up at our mess but rather takes it on himself.

#### **What did the temptation of Jesus (verses 1–13) mean for him then and for us now?**

God's Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. Hoping that Jesus' resolve would be weakened after 40 days without food, the devil tried to entice him into various sins: from using his power to satisfy his own desires, to worshipping someone other than God, to putting God to the test.

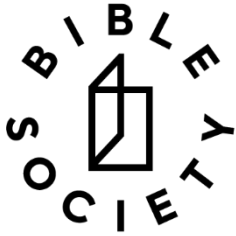
Jesus left the wilderness victorious, ready to begin his public ministry. And the suffering he experienced wasn't without purpose. Hebrews 4.15 speaks of Jesus being a leader who is not 'unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses,' because he *was 'tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin'*. When we turn to him in our struggles, he truly can understand what we're going through.

Equally important is the fact that Jesus successfully resisted the devil and did not sin – not in the wilderness or at any time afterwards. In an echo of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden, the devil tempted Jesus to turn a stone into bread and eat. But where they sinned, Jesus did not. Jesus is the new Adam and in him humanity gets a new start. Where once the relationship with God was broken, Jesus makes a way for it to be restored.

#### **What do we learn about the priorities of Jesus' ministry in verses 14–44?**

Jesus knew what it was to be busy, but he never lost his compassion for people. He healed the sick and drove out evil spirits because he cared deeply for individuals. Both his teaching and his actions provided a glimpse of how the world is meant to be and how it one day will be.

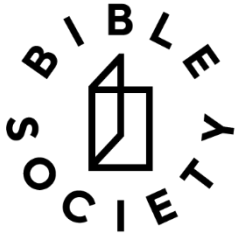
Jesus poured himself out for the people and we get a subtle hint of the toll this took on him when Luke records that *'at daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place' (verse 42)*. When people found him and made yet more demands he had to stick to his priorities: 'I must



proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent' (verse 43). Jesus was focused on reaching as many people as possible.

**Respond**

Ask God to help your life reflect the priorities of Jesus and equip you with everything you need.



#### **Day 4: Calling, confession and transfiguration – the identity of Jesus**

**Read: Luke 9.1–36**

**Reflect:**

Have you ever been part of a dysfunctional team? Because of the world we live in, there's a good chance you have.

Israel was a dysfunctional team. God originally called them to display his goodness and love to the surrounding peoples, promising Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation and 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you' (Genesis 12.3). But the Old Testament records Israel's dysfunctional teamwork: they couldn't remain united and on task.

Jesus' mission as the Messiah was to mobilise a new team that would display his sacrificial love.

#### **What did Jesus call and equip the 12 apostles to do (verses 1–6)?**

From a hated tax collector to an average Joe, Jesus really knew how to pick a team! This new team didn't have it all together but when Jesus gave them his authority, everything changed. Jesus is still doing this today; he's still picking ordinary people, empowering them with his Spirit and sending them out with authority.

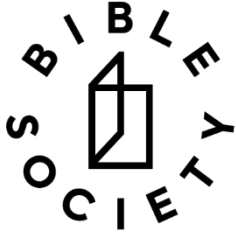
Reminiscent of the 12 tribes of Israel, Jesus called together the 12 apostles and sent them out as his representatives to proclaim the Kingdom of God and heal the sick – a remarkable demonstration of his love, goodness and power to save.

#### **What does Peter's confession (verses 18–20) and Jesus' transfiguration (verses 28–36) tell us about the identity of Jesus?**

Peter announces his conviction that Jesus is the promised Messiah and then, about eight days later, Peter, John and James go up the mountain to pray with Jesus and see him in a changed state – they get a glimpse of him in his future glory.

Moses and Elijah appear too, representing the Law and the prophets of the Old Testament. Notice what they talked about – Jesus' departure, or literally his 'exodus'. Jesus had come to bring about the ultimate exodus, not just for Israel but for the whole world!

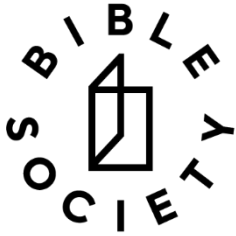
Finally, cloud descends on them, the sign of God's presence, and a voice declares, 'This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him'. These events dramatically reveal and confirm Jesus' divine status.



But don't miss Jesus' words to his disciples in verses 21–27. It must have been confusing to hear him say that he must suffer, be rejected and even die. Here is the paradox that runs throughout the life of Jesus – he is the king, but not the one we would expect: not born in a palace, but in poverty; not ruling by the sword, but by God's word; not oppressing others, but suffering for others. His crown was made of thorns.

### **Respond**

Do you ever feel useless or inadequate? Jesus sees beyond our outward appearance and says, 'I want to use you to change the world!' Follower of Jesus, remember the call and the authority you go with today!



## **Day 5: Parables, miracles and the cost – the call of Jesus**

**Read: Luke 18.1–43**

**Reflect:**

Jesus was a master teacher and storyteller. He knew how powerful stories can be and he made a habit of telling them. Stories can get past people's defences and open them up to new perspectives. Parables were his way of communicating to the open-minded and simultaneously concealing truth from the closed-minded.

Will we let the stories of Jesus open us up or close us off to his central message about the kingdom of God today?

### **What do the parables of Luke 18.1–14 teach us about the nature of God's Kingdom?**

From Jesus' time to today, we often find that the things we value are in opposition to the values of God's Kingdom. God's value system turns everything on its head. The Kingdom of God is where insiders are outsiders, and outsiders are insiders. Do you feel like an outsider today? Through his stories Jesus teaches that we should never give up on prayer because God is close to the hurting and the lowly, and he is concerned with justice.

Jesus' stories also reveal what true religion is. It's not about our outward appearance, but our hearts. Unless we humble ourselves, acknowledging our total reliance on the mercy of God like the tax collector in verse 13, although we might look 'good' on the outside we will remain unjustified before God.

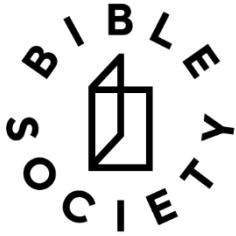
Humility is the entry point for the beautiful new world of the Kingdom of God. This is so different from the values our world preaches.

### **What do we learn about the call of Jesus in the experience of the rich young ruler?**

Ultimately, the rich young ruler was asking Jesus, 'What do I need to do to find real life?' Jesus' response was, 'Sell all your possessions.' Why did he say this? Because Jesus knew the young man loved his possessions more than he loved God. His response to Jesus showed he was in danger of trading eternal life for the immediate satisfaction of wealth. If we're honest, we're all in danger of making a similar trade.

The disciples were baffled by Jesus' observation about how difficult it is for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of God. 'Who then can be saved?' they asked.

Jesus' response was: 'What is impossible with man is possible with God.'



Jesus makes the impossible possible. Jesus came to call back people who had traded away life with God for lesser things, be they rebels or young rulers. Jesus came to call back you and me.

The invitation from Jesus is clear – he says, ‘Come to me. Let me make the impossible possible for you.’ Have you responded to the call?

### **Respond**

‘For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’ What difference could this teaching make to your day today?



## **Day 6: The trial, the cross and the tomb – the death of Jesus**

**Read: Luke 23.1–56**

**Reflect:**

The cross would be a strange marketing choice for any brand. No major corporation would buy into it. But this symbol of execution has now become the brand logo of a global movement. The cross tells us that God so loved the world that his son was crucified for us.

### **What do we learn about Jesus at his trial?**

Pilate's view of Jesus was clear – he had nothing on him. He also had the power to free him, but he was under pressure to condemn him and Jesus made no defence.

Jesus knew what had to happen; the prophet Isaiah had said it centuries earlier: *'He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter' (Isaiah 53.7).*

Jesus made sure nothing was going to hinder him from fulfilling his role. For sinful people to be made clean, a sinless man had to die in their place.

### **What are the implications of the cross for us and our world today?**

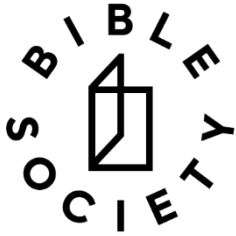
From midday to 3 pm, darkness fell. The curtain of the temple was torn in two as Jesus gave up his spirit. These are not random details; they communicate what the cross is about.

On the cross, Jesus soaked up all of God's righteous anger towards evil. On the cross, Jesus was banished into deepest, darkest exile. He went there so that we don't have to. On the cross, Jesus made a way for us to come into God's presence. For on the cross, the greatest ever swap took place: Jesus took the treatment we deserve, so that we might receive the treatment only he deserves.

In John Bunyan's book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the pilgrim – whose name is Christian – makes his way up a hill, with a grave at the bottom and a cross at the top. He has got used to carrying a heavy rucksack of sin but, as he comes up to the cross, the burden falls off his shoulders and rolls down the hill and into the grave. Forgiven and freed, he 'gave three leaps for joy, and went on singing'.

### **Respond**

Are you struggling today? Remember that for us to go free, Jesus had to die. **Knowing he was faithful to us then, do we think he'll abandon us now? He will not.**



## **Day 7: Resurrection and ascension – the victory of Jesus**

**Read: Luke 24.1–52**

**Reflect:**

Have you ever had a day where everything changed? Life has many ordinary days, but some stand out. Some involve decisions or events that alter the course of your life, such as wedding days and job interviews – once these days and moments happen, everything changes.

The Bible story is shaped like an hourglass. It all funnels down to a narrow point as the Messiah dies and rises again. It all centres on one weekend that changed the world.

### **What do the words ‘he is not here; he has risen’ mean for us today?**

Luke records women arriving at the tomb to tend to Jesus’ body with spices, as was the custom. The least they could do was give Jesus a dignified burial. Jesus really did die on the cross – you only bring spices to a tomb when you know there’s a dead body there.

But they’re met by two men who ask them, *‘Why do you look for the living among the dead?’ (verse 6). The one they’re looking for isn’t in the grave and there’s no need for spices because he’s alive again.*

When Jesus rose to life, he lifted humanity to new heights. He was the same person, yet totally transformed. This was a physical resurrection. This was a new creation.

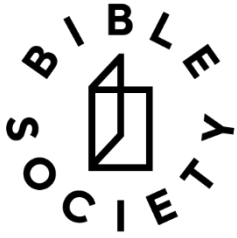
### **What do we learn from the disciples’ experience on the road to Emmaus?**

The two who walked away from Jerusalem felt hopeless and deflated. They really had let themselves believe that Jesus was the one who would free them from the oppression of Rome (verse 21). They’d believed in a story, but it wasn’t quite the one that God had written.

The risen Jesus met them on the road and took them through the Scriptures explaining how the whole story centred on him (verse 27). God was setting people free, not from Rome, but from their captivity to sin.

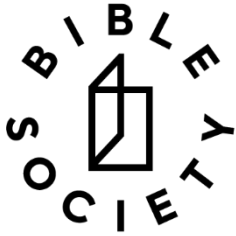
Like the two disciples, when we recognise Jesus and the significance of all that he has done for us, our hearts begin to burn and our spirits soar. God’s promises and plan did not fail and nothing can derail the hope we have in Jesus. Because the resurrection of Jesus really happened, our lives don’t end in hopelessness; instead, we have a sure and certain hope of eternal life.





**Respond**

Followers of Jesus are people of hope. How could you extend that hope to a hurting and disappointed world today?



## Week 6

### Day 1: Spirit, power, and a Jesus mission – to the ends of the earth

**Read:** Acts 1.1–5,8

**Reflect:**

Peter Parker, aka Spider-Man, is famous for roaming the skyline of New York and beating up the bad guys. This character first appeared in 1962 and he's still a favourite with many. But why? Perhaps it's because Peter Parker is as ordinary as they come and yet, within him, there's something extraordinary.

Followers of Jesus shouldn't expect to develop Spidey-senses or sticky fingers any time soon, but they should expect to receive power. Jesus' followers are both ordinary and extraordinary at the same time – everyday people with real power to do a lot of good.

### What do we learn from the opening of the book of Acts?

The book of Acts was written by the same author as Luke's Gospel – it's a sequel, telling us what happened next. The key is in the symmetry of the accounts. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus healed the sick and preached the good news. In Acts, Jesus' followers continued his work, healing the sick and sharing the good news of Jesus with the world.

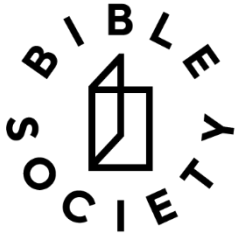
But how was this possible? How can ordinary Christians do the things Jesus did? If you were told to write like William Shakespeare, or sing like Pavarotti, or run like Usain Bolt, you'd probably have to admit, 'I can't!' And when it comes to continuing Jesus' ministry, perhaps your initial thought is, 'I can't!'

### What does the promise Jesus made to the disciples mean for us today?

But what if the same Spirit who empowered Jesus came to live in you? What difference would that make?

The word translated as 'power' in Acts is the Greek word *dunamis*, from which we get the English words *dynamite* and *dynamic*. The Holy Spirit empowers God's people to be dynamic agents of the Kingdom, continuing the ministry of Jesus in the world.

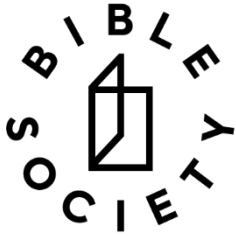
Note the scope of this mission. Ages before the invention of aeroplanes or the internet, Jesus charged his people with a global mission. He knew the scope of the Holy Spirit's power within each follower of his. Like fire, it spreads! And early Christianity spread like a wildfire despite fierce persecution. That fire is still burning today.



We have arrived at our own chapter in the Bible story. This is where we fit in, both ordinary and extraordinary, all at the same time. Jesus has empowered you to do good in the world! Are you up for it?

### **Respond**

With the Holy Spirit empowering you, how could you do good in the world today?



## **Day 2: The fire, the tongues and a new community – Pentecost**

**Read: Acts 2.1–47**

**Reflect:**

The story of Pentecost speaks of a new normal. It was a moment that meant the world would never be the same again. Pentecost invites us into a new normal as well, a life of fresh purpose and unshakable hope.

### **What happened to the disciples at Pentecost?**

Pentecost was an important Jewish festival celebrating the beginning of harvest. So imagine the streets of Jerusalem crowded with pilgrims from many different nations. Meanwhile, 120 of Jesus' followers had gathered to pray. Suddenly, a sound like rushing wind filled the room and 'what seemed to be tongues of fire ... came to rest on each of them' and they began to speak in other languages (verses 2–4). What on earth was happening?

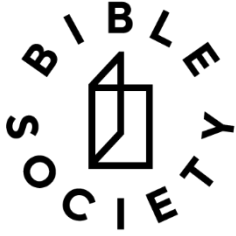
Firstly, the tongues of fire symbolised God's presence: remember Moses at the burning bush (Genesis 3) – unable to come near and told to remove his sandals because he was standing on holy ground, in the presence of the great 'I AM'. Remember Elijah on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), calling on the LORD to send heavenly fire and make his presence known to all the people as the one true God.

But whereas there was a distance between people and the fiery presence of God in the Old Testament, on the day of Pentecost, this same holy fire came to rest on God's people. God was taking up residence in the hearts of those who believed in Jesus.

And it wasn't just the 12 apostles who were filled with the Holy Spirit, but more than a hundred ordinary Christians. Whereas in the Old Testament, the anointing of the Spirit was reserved for kings, priests and prophets, now all God's people can experience this life-changing power.

Secondly, the foreign languages they began to speak symbolised international unity. As the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in other languages. They were able to declare the wonders of God so that everyone in the international crowd that was gathered in Jerusalem could understand.

In a dramatic reversal of the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11), people from different tribes, nations, and tongues are being reunited in God. About three thousand people accepted Peter's message and joined the believers that day (verse 41). The gospel hadn't even been spread beyond Jerusalem yet, but this gave a glimpse of a future day when people from all nations on earth will worship as one.

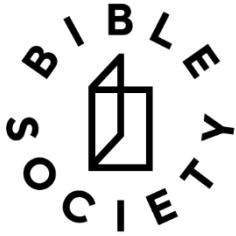


### **What does Pentecost mean for us today?**

Pentecost shows us that we can have real courage and community. The Holy Spirit set Peter free from fear and brought together a community of believers that served and supported each other like no other.

### **Respond**

If you took a red-hot coal out of the fireplace and put it on its own, it would quickly grow cold. Position yourself in community with followers who are full of the fire of the Holy Spirit today and stay hot!



### **Day 3: Stephen, the speech and the stoning – persecution**

**Read: Acts 7.1–60**

**Reflect**

Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch Christian who helped to hide Jewish people from the Nazis during the war. In the end, she herself was imprisoned.

As a young girl Corrie feared that she wouldn't have the strength to suffer or be martyred for her faith. She told her father this and he responded by asking her, 'When you take the train from Haarlem to Amsterdam, when do I give you the money for the fare?'

'Just before we get on the train,' Corrie said.

'That is right, and so it is with God's strength. Our Father in heaven knows when you are going to need things too. Today you do not need the strength to be a martyr. But as soon as you are called upon for the honour of facing death for Jesus, he will supply the strength you need – just in time.'

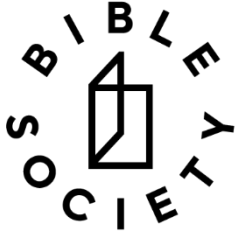
Corrie's story proved her father right. God gave her all the courage and power she needed.

#### **What did the martyrdom of Stephen mean?**

Stephen was not one of the apostles. His role among believers was to look after the needs of poor widows. Still, full of faith and the Holy Spirit, he was performing great signs and wonders which attracted attention. He was brought before the Jewish authorities and accused of speaking against the holy place and the law (Acts 6.13). He responded with a bold speech taking them all the way through the Old Testament to show how in following Jesus he was not against the law, because Jesus had fulfilled it.

This made the Jewish leaders furious and they stoned him. Stephen became the first Christian martyr, dying for his faith in Jesus. His vision of heaven standing open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God (verse 56) shows that in that moment he knew God's presence with him.

After this, hundreds of Christians were forced to flee Jerusalem in fear for their lives. But far from stopping Christianity in its tracks, it ended up spreading far and wide! Imagine the Jerusalem Church as a dandelion. The wind of persecution came and scattered the seed so that new churches took root and sprang up everywhere.



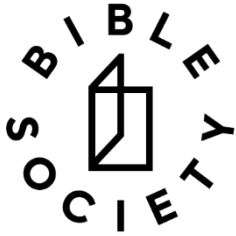
In Luke's Gospel, Jesus made his way towards Jerusalem in order to provide salvation for all people. In Acts, we see a reversal in the direction of travel. Jesus' followers made their way out of Jerusalem to offer the good news to the world. Christianity spread out, crossing national borders and cultural barriers. Stephen's martyrdom was a spark that ignited an unstoppable flame of gospel expansion.

### **What does Stephen's story mean for us today?**

In many places around the world today, following Jesus means risking your life. In other places, while a Christian's life might not be threatened, persecution remains. The gospel is always counter-cultural, putting believers at odd with the ways of the world. But just as Stephen knew the Scriptures and shared the gospel, so can we. And the strength Stephen found when he was persecuted is available to us too – God will never leave us or forsake us.

### **Respond**

Give thanks that you don't need to fear persecution because God is always with you.



#### **Day 4: Paul's conversion and calling – Damascus road experience**

**Read: Acts 9.1–31**

**Reflect:**

Have you ever 'done a 180' and completely changed a long-standing opinion or made a significant lifestyle change?

The original Damascus road experience was Paul's 180-degree turn – from persecutor of the Church to follower of Jesus. Paul's life changed completely – and, in turn, he played a part in changing the entire Roman empire. God chose the most unlikely figure to change the nations.

#### **What happened to Paul on the road to Damascus?**

Paul was en route to imprison Christians in Damascus. From his perspective, it was not only blasphemous but ridiculous to worship Jesus of Nazareth – the man who'd been crucified by Israel's enemies, the Romans. How could he possibly have been God's chosen king, the Messiah?

But all it took was one encounter with the risen Jesus for everything to change for Paul. In his blindness, he saw the truth: Jesus is indeed the risen and victorious Messiah – he's the Lord of all!

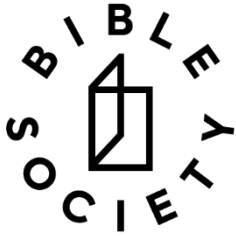
Jesus' question in verse 4: 'Why are you persecuting me?' (ESV) teaches us so much about his close identification with the Church. When Paul hurt Christians, he was hurting Jesus himself. Perhaps this was the origin of Paul's favourite analogy of the Church as the body of Christ, with Jesus himself as the head. Christ and the Church are one – we can't truly love Jesus and ignore his Church.

#### **What was Jesus' call to Paul and how does it relate to us today?**

The Damascus road experience was a game-changer. Until that moment, the gospel had only really spread from Jerusalem to Jewish regions – including Judea and Samaria. But after a period of preparation, in AD 46 Paul set off on the first of several mission trips to non-Jewish regions. The rest of the book of Acts is like a travel journal, recording what happened.

The former persecutor was now God's chosen instrument to proclaim his name! Paul went from cheering on the stoning of Christians, to being cheered on by God in the work of spreading the gospel.

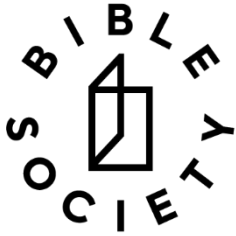




An encounter with Jesus changes everything. God saves people on purpose and for a purpose. Your life as a Christian isn't one of just waiting to get to heaven. There's more for you: God has given you good news to proclaim and people to serve!

**Respond**

Do you feel as though you're stuck in a rut? Has your faith gone flat? It only takes one encounter with Jesus for everything to turn around. Ask him to meet you today in the quiet and fill you with faith for what is to come.



### **Day 5: Controversy, the council, and the conclusion – simply grace**

**Read: Acts 15.1–35**

**Reflect:**

In the world of sport, ‘transfers’ happen all the time. In the Premier League, when a transfer completes a player’s allegiance changes. He has a new training ground, new kit colours, a new team culture to buy into and, for foreign players, perhaps a new language to learn.

Change can be disorientating and difficult. It can also take longer than we’d like. The gospel brings about a new normal – it’s our own transfer! We have a new team, new purpose and a new way to live – but let’s not downplay the fact that sometimes gospel change can be trickier and slower than we’d like.

#### **What was the issue facing the Church and why was it crucial for the Church to address it?**

Let’s not underestimate the scale of the change the gospel brought in the days of Acts.

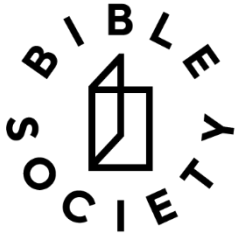
In the Old Testament, Israelite males were required to be circumcised as a symbol of their covenant relationship with God, and all of the people of Israel were required to keep his laws. These included restrictions on the foods they could eat and the extent to which they should associate with non-Jews. Gentiles who converted had to be circumcised to belong to the people of God and then keep the same laws.

But the life, death and resurrection of Jesus had changed everything. In his life, he perfectly fulfilled God’s covenant law; in his death he atoned for the sins of everyone – both Jews and Gentiles – who had sinned and broken that covenant; and in his resurrection, he gave his followers salvation and new life. Anyone, Jew or Gentile, who believes in Jesus is no longer under the condemnation of the law, but alive in Christ. They’ve entered into a new kind of covenant relationship.

Today’s passage sees some Jewish Christians struggling to catch up with the new normal. They weren’t sure if they had to continue operating under the old ways or what should be required of the Gentiles who were coming to faith. There was a lot of confusion.

So this is why a crisis meeting took place in Jerusalem. The apostles and the elders of the Church needed to consider what was at stake and make an authoritative decision for believers everywhere. The message went out, it’s not keeping the law that saves you, it’s your faith in Jesus. You don’t need to live under the heavy burden of all the old laws.

#### **What are the implications for believers today?**

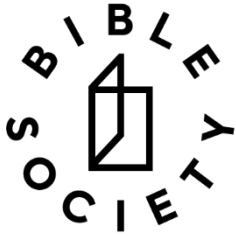


God never intended for Gentile believers to remain on the outside. He promised a tent so large it would reach to the ends of the earth. God always intended the good news to be for all the nations. 'He gave his one and only Son, that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (John 3.16).

Believing in Jesus is all that matters. This truth remains powerful today – being saved does not require Jesus PLUS being born in a Christian country, giving to charity or any other outward show of commitment. It all centres on Jesus.

**Respond**

Consider: do we create barriers that make it more difficult for people to receive the good news about Jesus today?



## **Day 6: Philippi, Lydia and a jailer – church planting in Greece**

**Read: Acts 16.1–40**

**Reflect:**

Have you travelled much in your life? People love to travel for the sights and the stories, and some even travel to ‘find themselves’.

Paul travelled a lot – not to find himself, but because he lived his life in step with the Spirit. As you read on in Acts, you’ll see that saying ‘yes’ to God and going where he was sent made for a life full of adventures and many stories to tell ...

### **How did God use Paul in Philippi?**

Speaking through a vision of a Macedonian man, God made it clear that he wanted Paul in Philippi. Why? Because he had lives to transform there.

First, we see Paul meeting Lydia, a wealthy and devout woman. God opened her heart to respond to the good news (verse 14) and he’s still in the business of doing this for people today. From the wealthy to the poor, from the respectable to the downtrodden, God is working in people’s hearts.

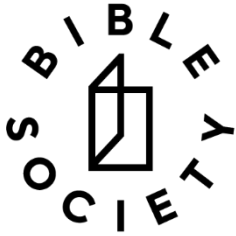
Lydia invited Paul and Silas to her home (verse 15). When the gospel opens your heart, it also opens your home. Hospitality and generosity are by-products of salvation. This may work itself out in slightly different ways in your life, but there’s no doubt that the gospel causes us to fling wide the doors of our lives to love and serve others.

Next, Paul encountered a slave girl who had a spirit that enabled her to predict the future. She was a money-making machine for her owners. As Paul commanded the spirit leave her, so did her commercial value. We don’t hear exactly what happened to her, but her old life was behind her, a new life was ahead!

Thirdly, when Paul and Silas found themselves in prison, they encountered a jailer. The foundations of the prison had been shaken and his prisoners supernaturally released. In fear of the consequences, he was ready to take his own life. But Paul and Silas led him to faith in the Lord Jesus, new life and rejoicing instead. And not just for him, but for his whole household (verses 31–34).

### **What do we learn about the power of the gospel in these conversion stories?**

We learn that the power of the gospel is unstoppable. No evil spirit, no human authority, no physical chains can stop it. Starting with Lydia and the jailer, God planted a church in

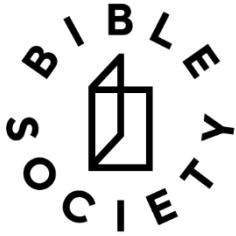


Philippi. It was a strange start, but later we learn, from Paul's letter to the Philippians, that this church became famous for its love for God and others. With Jesus as their model, generosity became their hallmark.

We shouldn't be discouraged today if we look at ourselves and our church community and wonder, 'How could God use this?' The gospel remains unstoppable. All we need to do is say yes to God.

**Respond**

In what ways can you say yes to God today?



## **Day 7: The viper, the gospel and Rome – to the ends of the earth**

**Read: Acts 28.1–31**

**Reflect:**

Do you love theatre? Seeing the Bible as an unfolding drama can be helpful. Hopefully by now you've seen and experienced the miraculous harmony of the Scriptures and how Jesus is its centre of gravity. But what if there's more? What if God, the ultimate screenwriter, has deliberately left space in the final act?

Drawing loosely on an analogy from Prof NT Wright: imagine a team of actors discover a long-lost Shakespearean play. Originally it would have had five acts but only four have survived. How should the actors perform the missing act and finish the show? Wright suggests that to do this successfully, they'd need to immerse themselves in the rest of the drama.

Knowing the story means entering the mind of the playwright and sensing the inner logic and heartbeat of his work. From this position they'd be able to improvise a fifth act in keeping with the whole. Today we hear the call of God to play our part in the fifth act of the drama of Scripture, to get to know him and his story in such a way that we act in a way that is consistent with his intention for us.

### **What do we learn about Paul and his mission towards the end of the book of Acts?**

We may be nearing the end of the book of Acts, but God isn't finished with his mission. On the island of Malta he protects Paul from the viper's bite so that he can go on to heal many on the island. You'd think that having been through so much Paul deserved a break!

Life is unpredictable and opposition to the gospel will always be there. So don't be discouraged if the trials feel relentless. They never stopped for Paul and they may not for you either, but keep going because God isn't finished with you!

Acts concludes with Paul following up the letter he'd sent to Rome with a visit. But it didn't go to plan. Paul was put under house arrest, to await trial before the emperor in Rome.

On death row, guess what Paul was doing? He didn't give up. He went on sharing Jesus with his guards – they were literally his captive audience! Paul was set on finishing well. Are you?

### **What does the end of Acts mean for us today?**

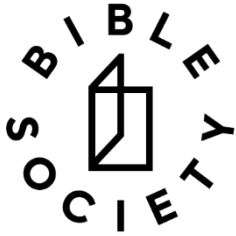
You'd be forgiven for thinking that Luke, the author, just ran out of ink at the end of this chapter. It feels so wrong to end here: shouldn't there be another chapter? But there is no



neat ending. And that's the point: there's no Acts 29, because we are writing Acts 29. The story continues.

**Respond**

How will you play out your role in the fifth act?



## Week 7

### Day 1: Living hope, the unveiling and our anchor – hope has a name

Read: 1 Peter 1.1–9

Reflect:

*‘Remember Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.’ (The character Andy Dufresne in the film Shawshank Redemption)*

Despite the horrors of Shawshank prison, Andy – locked up for murders he didn't commit – somehow never let his hope die. He pictured a better future for himself: a home by the ocean, a warm place where he'd live out the rest of his days mending boats. He didn't just picture it but worked patiently towards it, and his hope in this better story becoming a reality helped him to face the injustices and struggles of prison life.

### What was the basis for Peter's living hope?

Today's passage comes from the beginning of a letter that Peter wrote to believers who were scattered across territories controlled by the Romans, and were enduring suffering and persecution. Whether Peter was referring to a literal exile or a more spiritual one, the word captures an uncomfortable feeling of being foreigners – at odds with the world in which they live.

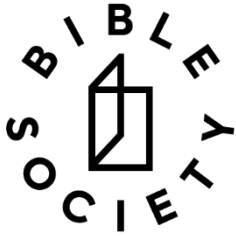
First, Peter encourages them by reminding them of what their saviour, Jesus Christ, has done for them. Then, he sets a vision of the future to sustain them in the present. Because Jesus has defeated death, nothing can extinguish the hope they have in him. Hope lives, because Jesus lives. He's secured for them an inheritance that will never 'perish, spoil or fade', and they're being shielded by God's power until salvation day (verses 4–5).

This, says Peter, is something to rejoice in, even as they suffer grief and face trials. The ultimate prize is secure. It will all be worth it.

### What difference does this living hope make for us today?

Those who believe in Jesus have the same living hope in him today, and eagerly await his return. Indeed, God has not left us in the dark when it comes to the end of the Bible's big story. The last chapter is called 'Revelation' which comes from the Greek word 'apocalypse', meaning 'unveiling'. The vision shared in the book is like God drawing back the curtains to give us a glimpse of the beautiful conclusion on the other side.

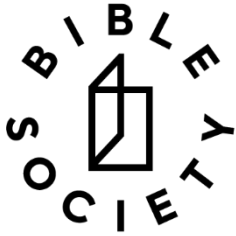




Just as sailors drop anchor to hold their boat in place and keep it secure in stormy seas, Jesus is our anchor. When the waters start to swell and the wind picks up, inexperienced sailors might begin to worry. But the experienced sailor has confidence in their anchor. This is what it looks like to have living hope today. Even in the storms, you can rest knowing your anchor is secure.

**Respond**

'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (verse 3). Living hope causes praise to rise. Let it stir in your heart and burst from your lips today!



## Day 2: The Alpha and the Omega – a vision of Jesus Christ

Read: Revelation 1.1–20

Reflect:

Have you ever met your hero? In the documentary series *The Last Dance*, Michael Jordan lived under the pressure of being picture-perfect. When he was caught out and parts of his life didn't match up to expectations, the scrutiny was unbearable.

**Looking back on it all he said:** *'If I had to do it all over again there is no way I'd want to be considered a role model. It's like a game that's stacked against me. There's no way I can win.'*

There's a reason they say, 'Never meet your heroes'. Everyone has a skeleton in their closet, if you search long and hard enough. No person can be the perfect role model we're really looking for.

Revelation teaches us to look to Jesus. He is the true and better leader; the only one who'll never let us down.

### What would Jesus' words have meant to their original hearers?

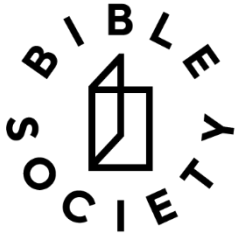
When it comes to reading the Bible, we must place the text in its original context. This is particularly important when reading apocalyptic literature like Revelation.

First, this is a letter. John introduces himself, as was the custom when writing letters in the ancient world, before going on to address the seven churches in the province of Asia (verse 4), all of which were struggling in their different ways.

This is why they needed a vision of Jesus, because when you meet the real Jesus, you find the resources to keep going in him. Jesus is the only leader we can trust because he's 'the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end' (Revelation 21.6, ESV).

Think about it for a second: if you know the ending of the story is a good one, it means you can walk this road called life and not be surprised by its burdens. For the churches in Asia, knowing Jesus as the beginning and the end meant that even if they lost everything, they'd never lose hope.

It's the same with us. Following Jesus doesn't mean we immediately arrive at our final destination. Rather, it means we have a compass that always points us to true north; we know where everything is headed.

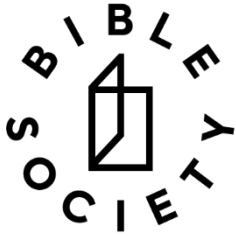


**What does the vision of Jesus in Revelation mean for us today?**

Yes, as a general rule it might be better not to meet your heroes. But with Jesus, it's different. Jesus Christ never lets us down and he's everything we need.

**Respond**

Dwell on the description of King Jesus in today's Bible passage. What difference does it make knowing he reigns today?



### **Day 3: Trials, commendation and challenges – feedback for the Church**

**Read: Revelation 3.1–22**

**Reflect:**

How do you respond to feedback? Do you dread or embrace it?

Some of us hardly hear the words of recognition we receive and become fixated on where things went wrong or the struggles we're facing. Instead of embracing opportunities to grow or persevering in our good work, we might start to feel tired, deflated and hopeless.

On the other hand, some of us get puffed up about the things we think we're doing well and ignore areas we could improve. Perhaps we become complacent, coasting along on the strength of past success. All of these approaches can lead to problems.

In today's passage, John passes on Jesus' specific feedback to three different churches. Notice the way Jesus describes himself to each church in verses 1, 7 and 14. He's the one who 'holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars', the one 'who is holy and true, who holds the key of David', and he's 'the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.'

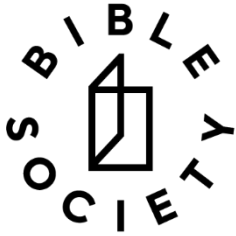
Jesus was reminding these churches, and he's reminding us today, of his holiness, authority and intimate knowledge of our true situation. He's uniquely placed to both challenge and encourage us, if we'll listen. And it's important we do, because he's the one we're relying on for our salvation and he's worthy of our best.

#### **What do Jesus' messages to the different churches teach us?**

Jesus' words to each church bring some much needed perspective and point them in the direction they need to go. He knows that if we're going to change for the better, we sometimes need to be challenged. And if we're going to persevere when the going gets tough, we'll sometimes need encouragement.

The church in Sardis needed to know that 'a reputation of being alive' is meaningless if you're actually in a spiritual coma, approaching death. Pleasing God is not about putting on a great outward show or just drifting along. Jesus tells them to, 'Wake up!', remember what you've been taught and the grace you've received, 'hold it fast, and repent' (verses 2–3). It's not too late now but taking urgent action is necessary. None of us know when Jesus will return so it's best to be ready.

The church in Philadelphia needed to know that even though they had 'little strength', their obedience and faithfulness had not gone unnoticed. They may have been looked down on



and dismissed by others but Jesus tells them that one day, those very people will acknowledge their value in his eyes. 'I have loved you,' he says (verse 9) and he promises them protection and future reward – a permanent place in God's presence.

Finally, Jesus had some stern words for the church in Laodicea. They were so laid back about him, they were practically horizontal. They were putting their faith and confidence in their wealth, thinking they didn't really need him. Jesus tells them he won't be satisfied with their lukewarm commitment – in fact he'll spit it out (verse 16)! He wants them to love him with all of their heart, soul, mind and strength.

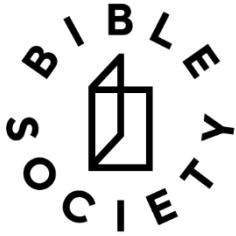
Jesus assured them that this criticism came from a place of love – he wasn't abandoning them. In fact, he told them he was standing outside and knocking at their door, eager to be invited in (verse 20).

### **Respond**

Did any of Jesus' words to the churches resonate with you? Make space to be real with Jesus in this moment, listening to the feedback and encouragement he has for you.

- What opportunities are there for you grow closer to him?
- How can his perspective strengthen your faith and help you to persevere?

Ask Jesus to fill you with his presence and love.



#### **Day 4: The door, the elders and the throne – a vision of heaven**

**Read: Revelation 4.1—5.14**

**Reflect:**

Do you have a favourite film director? The director's role is less obvious than those of the actors on the screen, but it's also the most influential. The actors may play out the scene but it's the director who governs and shapes everything about the film.

The early chapters of Revelation speak of Jesus as king – the most important actor. This would have been deeply reassuring for Christians living under the heel of Rome, experiencing persecution. In a turbulent world of threats and intimidation, when King Jesus speaks over our lives saying, 'Do not be afraid', he means it.

The book of Revelation also portrays God as the director. His hand in events may be more hidden from view, but that doesn't mean he is not actively influencing and shaping our world. In fact, God is the one calling the shots, and we can be at peace because there's no better director.

#### **What does the vision of the throne in heaven teach us?**

Could you get your head around all the mind-blowing description in chapter 4? It's almost as though John didn't have the words to accurately capture the splendour and majesty of God on his throne. The effect is overwhelming.

In amongst it all, he tells us he sees 24 elders sitting on thrones as representatives of God's people – perhaps symbolising the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel from the Old Testament and the New Testament Church led by the 12 apostles. And with them are four 'living creatures' with both familiar and heavenly features, representing a cosmic harmony between heaven and earth. Together they offer up ceaseless praise and worship to God.

The last time we saw this kind of cosmic harmony was in the Garden of Eden, right at the beginning of the Bible's story. Finally, we're coming back to the beginning ...

But there's plenty of evidence in our experiences of work, relationships and tragic events today to remind us that the promised restoration and harmony hasn't fully arrived. But this doesn't mean we're without hope. One day everything will be restored to the way it should be. Even as we wait, God remains in the director's chair. He calls the shots, working out a good plan for our lives.

#### **What does the vision of the Lamb in chapter 5 mean for us today?**



In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Thor's powerful hammer can only be wielded by a 'worthy' person. Thor fears that he could lose his 'worthiness' and thus his ability to wield the hammer.

There's no hammer in chapter 5, but there is a scroll that can only be opened by one who is worthy. John describes one called 'the Lamb' standing among the people of God, in between the throne of God and the four creatures, who is 'worthy' all the time. He does not fear or fluctuate; he is Jesus our king who sacrificed himself to save us.

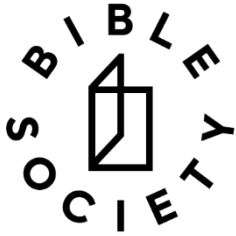
The chapter ends with 'every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them' praising Jesus for what he has done (verse 13). He's worthy of all our praise!

### **Respond**

Andrew Peterson's song 'Is He Worthy?' captures this beauty of this truth:

Is anyone worthy?  
Is anyone whole?  
Is anyone able to break the seal and open the scroll?  
The Lion of Judah who conquered the grave  
He is David's root and the Lamb who died to ransom the slave  
From every people and tribe  
Every nation and tongue  
He has made us a kingdom and priests to God  
To reign with the Son

Why not listen to the song and spend some time in worship now? He is worthy!



## **Day 5: Tribes, the throne and the Lamb – a vision of God’s people**

**Read: Revelation 7.1–17**

**Reflect:**

Have you ever experienced culture shock? After the initial disorientation, experiencing a different culture can be life-changing.

We share this planet with 7.8 billion people, and each has their own unique story. In different countries, territories and among people groups there are countless cultural views and practices, food and lifestyle preferences and languages. And while diversity isn’t always celebrated in our world, where racism, the oppression of ethnic minorities and the eradication of minority languages are flagrant reminders of our brokenness, Revelation 7 paints a radical picture of all God’s people gathered together in worship.

### **What is the vision of God’s people expressed here?**

Firstly, John describes hearing angels discuss putting a ‘seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God’, and the number of these servants is given as 144,000 people ‘from all the tribes of Israel’ (verses 3–4).

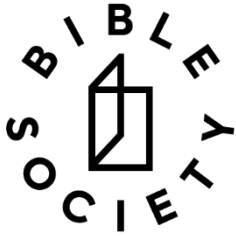
The number 144,000 is probably symbolic and seems to relate to God’s covenant with his people in the Old Testament. It certainly doesn’t seem to be a literal cap on the number of spaces in heaven because just a few verses later John describes seeing ‘a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb’ wearing white robes and worshipping God (verses 9–12). This great and diverse multitude seems to symbolise the fulfilment of the New Testament covenant of salvation in Christ Jesus.

When we read the apocalyptic writings in the Bible, it’s important to remember that some bits are not to be taken literally. It should also encourage us to understand that there’s no cap on God’s love, but that his heart extends to all. God invites everyone to receive his grace and longs for all the nations to make their home in him.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he’s clear that the gospel is for everyone. ‘It is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew and then to the Gentile’ (Romans 1.16).

The believers in Rome couldn’t reconcile their cultural, historical and religious differences. That’s why Paul wrote his richest explanation of the gospel for them. He knew the only thing that could unite such a divided people was the good news about Jesus and his saving work on the cross. The gospel is a great leveller because it teaches us that we’ve all sinned and





fallen short of the glory of God but despite this we're loved and accepted more than we could ever dream or deserve to be.

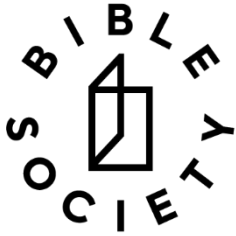
**What makes us part of this vision of God's people?**

Only the blood of the Lamb.

Usually, blood stains. However, the blood of the sacrificial Lamb, Jesus, cleanses us. No stain is too tough and no person too broken for the blood of Jesus to wash clean and make new.

**Respond**

Spend time considering how you can support God's work around the world. Take action today. The gospel is for everyone!



## **Day 6: Judgement, the city and the glory – a vision of the new creation**

**Read: Revelation 20.11—21.27**

**Reflect:**

Have you ever wished things could be different? Or, can you recall a moment when you thought, 'It can't get better than this'? Life is complex. We live in a world that is both beautiful and broken. But Revelation reminds us it won't be always like this.

John describes seeing a final judgement (Revelation 20.11–15). God is seated on a great white throne, which symbolises his purity and wisdom. The imagery is stark, with 'death and Hades' (the realm of the dead) being thrown into the lake of fire, as well as 'anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life'. This is God's defeat over sin and death and the removal of all the brokenness from the world.

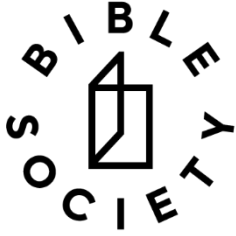
All that will be left is beauty. Those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life will enter into God's new creation and the new Jerusalem.

### **What is our future home going to be like (Revelation 21)?**

Firstly, the promised new creation speaks of God's commitment to saving not just souls but the whole cosmos. He says: 'I am making everything new!' (verse 5). He's going to restore the entire created order to make it the perfect home for the Lamb and his bride – the people he's redeemed through his atoning death.

Whereas sin separated humans from God's presence, the Lamb has made a way to bring them back together: 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.' Our broken relationship with God will be completely restored: 'They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.' Not only that but the resurrection of Jesus guarantees a perfect body for us: 'There will be no more death.' What a hope!

Secondly, in the new creation we see a new Jerusalem. The description in verses 9–21 is packed with symbolism. While there's a physical element to this description of a place, it also seems to be a representation of God's redeemed people, shining 'with the glory of God' and perfectly reflecting his brilliance (verse 11). The mention of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and the imagery relating to them, unite God's people under both the old and new covenants. They have all been gathered together in this picture of final redemption and restoration. One day, there will be no more wars, racism, or violence. All humanity will be one with each other and with God.



Thirdly, John notes in verse 22 that he doesn't see a temple in the city because 'the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.' Did you notice that the dimensions of the new Jerusalem are given as a perfect cube (verse 16)? This means it resembles the Holy of Holies in the Old Testament sanctuary – the place of God's presence. But now the entire city is the Most Holy Place. There will no longer be any need for a separate building for God to live in.

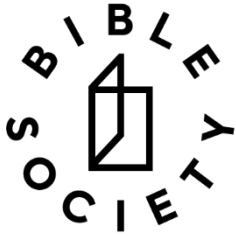
**What difference does this hope make today?**

Do you feel like you're about to give up? Is it all too much? Do you wish it could all be made new? One day it will be.

Until then, cling to this hope: those who believe in Jesus have their names written in the book of life. When Jesus returns, they will enter into the new creation and dwell with him!

**Respond**

Read Revelation 21 again slowly. Let your imagination linger over the details of what awaits.



## **Day 7: The river, the tree and the Lord – a vision of the end**

**Read: Revelation 22.1–21**

**Reflect:**

Have you ever watched a sporting event that had already happened with a friend and you knew that your team had won, but they didn't? Knowing the score completely changes your experience of the game.

Revelation announces the final score before we've heard the final whistle. In the end, God will put all wrongs right, good will triumph over evil and we will enjoy a perfect creation.

### **How would the echoes of Eden have encouraged the churches John wrote to?**

We started in a perfect world with the tree of life, and by the end we're back in a perfect world with the tree of life. It's as if we've gone full circle. How is this possible?

It's only because of the tree of death. As Christ died on the wooden cross, he took the curses of our fallen world so we can be blessed with new creation. He took our hell so we can have heaven. He was shut out so we can come home.

### **What do the words of Jesus, 'I am coming soon' mean for you today?**

The Bible ends with a simple promise from Jesus: 'Behold, I am coming soon!' This reminds us that although we don't know the exact date, we do know that Jesus will return.

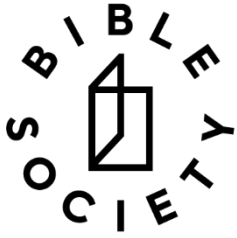
Sometimes it's easier to live as if this were not a reality. But when life's pressures overwhelm us and cloud our perspective, knowing there is something better waiting for us really matters. This isn't our final destination; we're all on the road – hold on and remember you have a compass in Jesus.

At the end of his Chronicles of Narnia, in *The Last Battle*, CS Lewis finishes the story with the followers of Aslan entering into a new earth and heaven:

*For them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world ... had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.*

For those whose hope is in Jesus, the best is yet to come!

**Respond**



Take time to thank God today for inviting you in to be a part of this better story. Keep journeying with him.