

Welcome to this free sample of *Explore*

During this time of worldwide Coronavirus lockdown, we're delighted to offer you a free month's worth of our premium Daily Bible reading notes that will take you deeper into God's word, and apply it to your daily life.

Take the opportunity to spend a little more time grappling with the scriptures and pondering their meaning as we seek to serve Jesus, love our neighbours and seek His Kingdom in these difficult times.

Join the discussion online

As well as reading the Bible and praying on your own, or with other members of your family, you can join with the worldwide community of those who read the Bible with Explore each day.

Join the Facebook discussion group by going to:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/tgbc.explore>

and requesting admission. It's a place where group members can ask questions, share encouragements and prayer requests. It's a friendly group that would love to support you as you persevere through this uncertain season.

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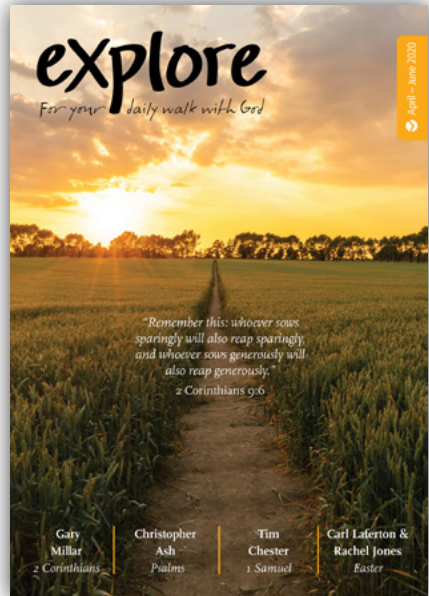
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How to use Explore

In this issue

The 91 daily readings in this issue of *Explore* are designed to help you understand and apply the Bible as you read it each day.

It's serious!

We suggest that you allow 15 minutes each day to work through the Bible passage with the notes. It should be a meal, not a snack! Readings from other parts of the Bible can throw valuable light on the study passage. These cross-references can be skipped if you are already feeling full up, but will expand your grasp of the Bible. *Explore* uses the NIV2011 Bible translation, but you can also use it with the NIV1984 or ESV translations.

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

We're serious!

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

1

Find a time you can read the Bible each day

2

Find a place where you can be quiet and think

3

Ask God to help you understand

4

Carefully read through the Bible passage for today

5

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

6

Pray about what you have read

the goodbook
COMPANY

Opening up the Bible

Welcome to *Explore*

Being a Christian isn't a skill you learn, like carpentry or flower arranging. Nor is it a lifestyle choice, like the kind of clothes you wear, or the people you choose to hang out with. It's about having a real relationship with the living God through his Son, Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that this relationship is like a marriage.

It's important to start with this, because many Christians view the practice of daily Bible-reading as a Christian duty, or a hard discipline that is just one more thing to get done in our busy modern lives.

But the Bible is God speaking to us: opening his mind to us on how he thinks, what he wants for us and what his plans are for the world. And most importantly, it tells us what he has done for us in sending his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. It's the way the Spirit shows Jesus to us, and changes us as we behold his glory.

The Bible is not a manual. It's a love letter. And as with any love letter, we'll want to treasure it, and make time to read and re-read it, so we know we are loved, and discover how we can please the One who loves us. Here are a few suggestions for making your daily time with God more of a joy than a burden:

☛ *Time:* Find a time when you will not be disturbed, and when the cobwebs are cleared from your mind. Many people have found that the morning is the best time as it sets you up for the day. If you're not a "morning person", then last thing

at night or a mid-morning break might suit you. Whatever works for you is right for you.

☛ *Place:* Jesus says that we are not to make a great show of our religion (*see Matthew 6:5-6*), but rather, to pray with the door to our room shut. Some people plan to get to work a few minutes earlier and get their Bible out in an office or some other quiet corner.

☛ *Prayer:* Although *Explore* helps with specific prayer ideas from the passage, try to develop your own lists to pray through. Use the flap inside the back cover to help with this. And allow what you read in the Scriptures to shape what you pray for yourself, the world and others.

☛ *Share:* As the saying goes: *expression deepens impression*. So try to cultivate the habit of sharing with others what you have learned. Why not join our Facebook group to share your encouragements, questions and prayer requests? Search for *Explore: For your daily walk with God*.

And remember, *it's quality, not quantity, that counts*: better to think briefly about a single verse than to skim through pages without absorbing anything, because it's about developing your relationship with the living God. The sign that your daily time with God is real is when you start to love him more and serve him more wholeheartedly.

Tim Thornborough and Carl Laferton
Editors



Full circle

The final chapters of 1 Samuel bring us to a familiar scenario.

- ❓ *What was the cliffhanger when we left David in 1 Samuel 28:1-2?*

Read 1 Samuel 29:1-11

- ❓ *How is the cliffhanger resolved?*

In verse 8 David keeps up the pretence and feigns disappointment. But he must surely have been mightily relieved. He had been in a fix, and now he was given a way out. His words are ambiguous: “Why can’t I go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?” The question is, who does David consider to be his king?

David rises

Read 1 Samuel 30:1-6, 18-25 (If you have time, read 30:1-31)

- ❓ *How does David feel when he gets back to Ziklag (v 4, 6)? Why?*

Where David’s strength fails (v 4), God’s strength takes over (v 6). David turns to the Lord for guidance and is promised success. Over the next verses there is a total turnaround. The men who threatened David before (v 6) now proclaim, “This is David’s plunder” (v 20).

- ❓ *How is David like a king in verses 21-25?*
- ❓ *What kind of king is he?*

Samuel had warned that a king would take, take, take (8:10-18); but David gives, gives, gives. He gives to the men who fought with him, he gives to the ones left behind, and finally he gives to the leaders of Judah.

- ❓ *How does this episode in chapter 30 put David in a position of strength?*

Saul falls

Read 1 Samuel 31:1-13

- ❓ *How do the Philistines win the battle?*
- ❓ *Who kills Saul (v 4)?*
- ❓ *How are Saul’s fears in verse 4 confirmed (v 9-10)?*

The book ends where it began, with the Philistines winning a victory and the death of Israel’s leader along with his sons.

Two kings

There have been two kings in Israel, with two kingdoms, two courts and two armies. One is on a downward trajectory that ends with his fall on the battlefield. The other is on an upward trajectory that will end with his enthronement as king.

In the world today there are also two kingdoms—the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of this world. Only one of these—only Christ’s kingdom—will triumph.

Pray

1 Samuel 31 is a sober ending to the book. Reflecting on this, pray for people you know who do not yet know Christ or put their trust in his kingdom.

David and Jesus

How would you sum up the message of 1 Samuel? There's time for one last look at the story of Israel's first kings.

The final chapters of 1 Samuel focus on the conflict between Saul and David, but it is important to recognise the trajectory of the whole book. It is not from Saul to David but from no monarchy to monarchy. The book starts with a barren woman who speaks of a coming king (1 Samuel 2:10).

We are presented with three options:

1. No rule or self-rule (Judges 21:25)
2. Rule through a human king—a king like those of the nations
3. God's rule through God's king

Is monarchy really a good thing for Israel? The answer appears to be, *Yes, when you have a good king ruling under God's kingship.*

The greatest king

In the book of 2 Samuel, David will become king over Israel, and God will make a covenant with him.

Read 2 Samuel 7:8-16

- ❓ *What does God highlight about David's origins (v 8)?*
- ❓ *How has God acted as David's king?*
- ❓ *What does he promise for the future?*

David's promised greater son is Jesus. Like David, he is an unlikely king, coming from the margins. But he is the one who fully represents God's rule on earth, and his kingdom lasts for ever.

Our options

"Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." (Judges 21:25)

"We want a king over us. Then we shall be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles." (1 Samuel 8:19-20)

- ❓ *Are there times when you long to rule yourself, doing as you see fit?*
- ❓ *Are there times when you seek authority and protection from others?*
- ❓ *What is the third option?*

Apply

- ❓ *If someone said to you, "We should all do whatever is right for us personally", how would you respond?*
- ❓ *What about if someone said, "I want someone to look after me and help me know what to do"?*
- ❓ *How could you use the story of 1 Samuel to respond to those statements?*

Pray

Look back at Hannah's prayer in 2:1-10. Think about how it has been fulfilled in the course of 1 Samuel. Consider what it means for your own life and for the world today. Then use it as your own prayer.



A bird in the storm

You watch a coastal bird in a storm as it flies up to some clifftop cleft in the rocks and hides there, completely safe. That's the image at the start of Psalm 11.

Read Psalm 11:1-3

- ❓ *What is David being urged to do (v 1), and why (v 2-3)?*
- ❓ *In verse 2, what people, preparation, action and target do we hear of?*

“The wicked” means people who set themselves and their whole direction of life against God. Their *preparation* is described in the vivid language of archers getting ready to fire deadly arrows. Their *action* is “to shoot from the shadows”. This is not open warfare; this is an ambush. And their *target* is “the upright in heart”: those whose determination is to act rightly before God.

When Bible poetry speaks of “the foundations” (v 3), it means the moral foundations of society. All around David the king and those who stand with him, the moral order of the world is collapsing. There is, it seems, nothing that he or they can do.

Today, we see the media promote “freedom” and “tolerance” rather than God’s good law. Church-attendance statistics show that believers are getting older and that fewer young people are trusting Christ as Lord. You may even have experienced moral corruption in your own church.

- ❓ *How do these things make you feel?*
- ❓ *How would you like to respond to them?*

God is on his throne

We need the rest of the psalm to see why we

can take refuge in God and persevere with the work of our King and his gospel.

Read Psalm 11:4-7

- ❓ *Why can the king, and the king’s people, safely make God their refuge?*
- ❓ *In contrast, what awaits the wicked?*

We shy away from the strong language in verses 5-6, but God in heaven hates the wicked. They are “those who love violence”, who are actively plotting against God’s king and his people (v 2). God is passionately against them—those who destroy the moral foundations of society will themselves be suddenly and finally destroyed.

- ❓ *How do these truths make you feel?*
- ❓ *How will they help you to live positively and publicly as a Christian this week?*

Jesus sings

Jesus, our King, when he sang this psalm, pledged to entrust himself to the Father and not to abandon his task as King. He determined to walk the whole path of suffering to accomplish it, until he could cry, “It is finished!” (John 19:30)—and then enter into his kingdom with joy. The truly wonderful thing is this: we who appropriate this promise are by nature wicked. Only because our King took upon himself our punishment can we hope to stand before God on the last day. Because our King stands before the Father, so shall we! *Praise him now!*

1 JOHN: Gospel freedom

In John's day there were people who said that Jesus was not both God and man. The same is true today. John's letter wants to get us straight on the basics, so that we can be sure.

What you should feel

Read 1 John 1:1-4

- ❓ *John's opening words seem a little cryptic. What is he saying, do you think?*
- ❓ *Why might he need to emphasise this?*
- ❓ *What should we feel at the end of reading this letter (v 4)?*

Today people are more likely to say that Jesus was really just a man who taught us about God or gave us some insight into God. In John's day, it seems to have been the opposite. The Greek world thought flesh was dirty or corrupt, and so they could not get their heads around the idea that Jesus was God *incarnate*. John tells them in plain language, *We saw him, heard him, touched him*. Jesus, the Word of life, who lived with the Father, appeared in human flesh. Grasping this truth is vital because it is intimately connected to experiencing the truth of the gospel—to enjoying fellowship with God and being joined to his people. It's only when we embrace this truth that our joy will be complete (v 4): full and never-ending.

Apply

False teaching will often come down to this: Jesus was not both fully God and fully man. Ask a Jehovah's Witness or a Mormon, (and sadly, many members and leaders in mainline churches) and you will discover that this life-draining, Bible-denying, joy-sapping heresy is alive and well in our

generation. We must be aware of it and sure of our ground to oppose it and to defend the truth; because only the truth about Christ can bring real life to people.

- ❓ *Which are you most likely to tip over into: forgetting that Jesus is really God or forgetting that he is really man?*

A message that matters

Read 1 John 1:5-7

- ❓ *What lie is John talking about here? Why is this lie an attractive one to believe?*
- ❓ *What is the test for whether our walk with Christ is genuine or not? What do you think this means?*
- ❓ *What benefits do we experience when we walk in the light (v 7)?*

Light and darkness simply do not mix. So don't think you can know God and continue to live your way. How can you expect to be friends with God and rebel against him at the same time?! Notice that this is the message of Jesus himself (v 5); how we live really matters and is the test of whether or not our faith is genuine. Living in the light is striving to be holy as we please God—and as we do so, we can be confident of forgiveness through Jesus and enjoy a genuine connection with his family.

Pray

Thank God for the gospel of light; and pray you would make a genuine response to it.



Freely forgiven

John is addressing two opposite errors: first, that you can know God and still walk in darkness; second, that you do not sin and therefore do not need God's forgiveness.

Both of these views are alive and well today.

- ❓ *Have you heard or seen these two views expressed? What form did they take?*
- ❓ *Which of these two false views are you most prone to believing (and living)?*

Self deceit

Read 1 John 1:8-10

These are glorious verses, often used in church liturgies before a prayer of confession. Let's think carefully about them.

- ❓ *How easy is it, do you think, to deceive ourselves about just how sinful we are?*
- ❓ *Why would we think that way?*
- ❓ *What is the first step in the remedy for this false thinking?*

It might be our pride, a sense of our own guilt, or the result of comparing ourselves with others who we think we are “better” than. Whatever the cause, claiming to be without sin is self-deceit and a denial of the gospel truth about ourselves. *You and I are sinners.* And the first step towards finding forgiveness is to recognise that—to confess our sins, not just in a general sense but in specific detail (v 9).

Wonderful grace

Re-read 1 John 1:8-10

- ❓ *Why does John also say that God is just, do you think?*

- ❓ *What two things does God offer to those who come to him knowing that they are unworthy sinners deserving of judgment?*

God is faithful (v 9) to his promises and to his wayward people. But perhaps supremely, he is faithful to the willing sacrifice of his Son, the Lord Jesus. At the cross, both justice and mercy were satisfied. Not only does God's grace forgive us, but it works in us to “purify us from all sin”—the lifelong process of walking away from sin towards a life of righteous holiness.

Undeniable realities

- ❓ *What conclusion do these verses tell us we should draw if someone denies the reality of sin?*

▼ Apply

People tend to hate the idea of sin! It is seen as old-fashioned, repressive, guilt-inducing, and destructive—especially if we dare say that children are sinners! And yet these claims fly in the face of God's word, our own experience and common sense. God does not lie about this painful truth because he loves us and wants us to know the joy and freedom that forgiveness brings.

- ❓ *What will it mean for you to take these verses seriously in your view of your own life, your prayers to God, and your words to others?*

Free to sin?

John uses the language of opposites to press his point home—light and darkness, truth and lies, love and hate—but his purpose is to help us see the issues at stake.

What grace has done

Read 1 John 2:1-6

- ❓ *Do you think it is possible not to sin and to “live as Jesus did” (v 1, 6)?*
- ❓ *What two wonderful truths about Jesus does John lay out for us in verses 1-2?*
- ❓ *Why do we need both?*

John is aiming these words at two different sorts of people: *the complacent*, who think that because God forgives them, it doesn't matter how they live; and *the fearful*, who think that because they sin, they cannot truly know God. John's concern is to reassure the fearful without making the complacent more complacent; and to challenge the complacent without making the fearful even less assured. The answer for both is to understand the work of Jesus, both on the cross *then* and in heaven *now*.

First, Jesus was an atoning sacrifice *then* on the cross. Literally, Jesus is the “propitiation for our sins”—his death satisfies and turns away God's wrath from us.

Second, Jesus is also an advocate for us *now*. Imagine you're standing before a king, trying to explain your rebellion against him—and then the king's own son steps forward and speaks on your behalf. Or imagine a law court in which you're in the dock, and there's no doubt you're guilty—but then your lawyer plays his trump card: an argument no one can refute. He has already paid

the penalty for your crime in full. Jesus is that advocate for us before the Father now.

Responding to grace

Re-read 1 John 2:1-6

- ❓ *How do we know that our faith is genuine, and that we have truly been forgiven (v 3-6)?*
- ❓ *What does it mean to “love ... God” in these verses (v 5)?*

Apply

When we truly love someone, it is more than a feeling; we will genuinely want to please them, and we will change in order to do so. And we will want to grow like them in the things we admire about them. It is the same for true believers in Christ. It might seem that we can grab his forgiveness and then carry on as normal. But the sign that we have truly understood the gospel message is that it is changing us. It's a hard test to apply to ourselves, and even harder to others. But the important thing is not so much how obviously sinful or holy you are, but rather your direction of travel: towards love and purity, and away from sin and pride. That is true love for God.

- ❓ *Looking at yourself, how do you stack up against this test?*
- ❓ *If you fear you do not come out very well, what does 1:9 and 2:1-2 encourage you to do and to know?*



Free to love

At first, John seems to be a little confused in this passage. Is what he is talking about new or isn't it?

Old yet new

Read 1 John 2:7-11

- ❓ What new “faith test” does John give us in verse 10?
- ❓ How is this both an old and a new commandment, do you think?

In verses 3-5, John has been saying that we must walk our talk. The sign of being a Christian is obedience. Now he imagines someone responding, *Hang on a minute—when I signed up to Christianity, I was told it was all about grace and mercy: that it wasn't what I did that counted but what God had done for me. Now you're springing something new on us.*

So John reminds his readers that obedience has always been the sign of belonging to God's people. It is nothing new. The gospel calls us to faith and to repentance—turning from sin to obey God. It was the message of the Old Testament and the message that Jesus preached (Micah 6:8; Mark 1:14-15).

▼ Apply

- ❓ Is the call to repentance and obedience part of the way you present the gospel to others?
- ❓ What happens when it gets left out?
- ❓ How can we talk about repentance and the obedience of faith without giving someone the impression that we in some way earn salvation?

For the old and young

Read 1 John 2:12-14

In these verses, the style suddenly changes, and the repeated phrase “I am writing to you...” shows us that John is summarising what he has said so far in his letter.

- ❓ What three important points does John want to impress upon us all?
- ❓ Who is “him who is from the beginning” (v 13, 14)?
- ❓ What new perspective does John introduce in the last line of verse 14?

His summary is simply this: we are sinners, God forgives us through Jesus, and because of this, we should strive to live a sin-free life. This is the message as it has *always* been, because it is the message of the Father and Son, who are from the beginning. But this life is also new, because it is the life that shows we are part of the new age that Jesus ushered in. Love towards God and other believers is characteristic of the new age of light, which has overcome the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom of Satan.

^ Pray

Thank God that you can be part of this new era through the cross of Christ.

And ask God to help you walk in the right direction: to live like Christ and to overcome the evil one.



Free to be different

Christians belong to the dawning new age of the rule of King Jesus. But for the time being, we still have to live in the real world of rebellion and hatred.

It's a tension with which we all struggle.

For God so loved...

Read 1 John 2:15

- ❓ *What are we being called to do in this verse?*
- ❓ *How does this square with what is said about "the world" in John 3:16, do you think?*

The word "world" in the Bible can be used in very different ways. (The seventeenth-century theologian John Owen listed no fewer than 16 different nuances of it!) It can simply refer to everything that God has made—the planet we live on and the people who live on it. John 3:16 tells us that God loved the rebellious people he made so much he sent his own Son to die. But in this letter, "the world" is shorthand for the way of thinking and living that dominates a world that is hostile to God—and all social and cultural pressures on believers to conform to those sinful patterns of behaviour. God hates this sinful way of life—and he expects us to hate it too—even when we see it in ourselves.

Rejecting the world

Read 1 John 2:16-29

- ❓ *What three characteristics of worldly thinking and living does John point out for us in verse 16?*

- ❓ *Struggling against the world is hard, so why bother (v 17, 27)?*
- ❓ *What else will make it difficult for us to live in this world (v 18-19)?*
- ❓ *What does John encourage us to do as we face this hostility (v 28)?*
- ❓ *What have we been given to help us with this (v 20, 21)?*

The pressure of sin is everywhere. From within ourselves (the lust of the flesh, v 16), from outside (the lust of the eyes) and from the arrogant pride in ourselves that defaults to boasting about ourselves with no dependence on God or gratitude towards him. But these are all part of a world that is dead and passing away (v 17). Those who truly belong to Christ have received the truth about him, have been anointed by the Holy Spirit and have the sure hope of eternity to look forward to. John encourages us to "continue in him" as we reject false teachers and the pull of worldly sinfulness. We walk away from these things towards the goodness and light of God's new creation.

- ❓ *How do we recognise antichrists (v 22)?*
- ❓ *Why can it sometimes be difficult to spot them (v 21)?*
- ❓ *What do you think it means in practice to "continue in him" (v 28)?*

Pray

Turn your answers to the questions above into prayers.



Free to obey

"He's got his mother's eyes... I'm afraid she's going to have her father's nose... She looks just like her Great-aunt Mabel..."

We all know the routine. Everyone coos over the newborn, trying to work out who they resemble, when all the time they look like... well... like a baby! John says we have become God's children. The question is: do we show the family likeness?

What we are and will be

Read 1 John 3:1-3

- ❓ *List out the things that show how God has lavished his love on us.*
- ❓ *What can we look forward to?*
- ❓ *What should knowing this cause us to do now?*

TIME OUT

The language is so familiar to us that it's easy not to be amazed by it. John, however, half expects his readers not to believe it, so he adds, "And that is what we are!" Take time to reflect on the lavish love of God. You might find it helpful to meditate on these verses: **1 John 4:9-10; John 13:1-17; Romans 8:31-39.**

Even John acknowledges that precisely what will happen to us in the new creation is a bit of a mystery (1 John 3:2). We don't know what we will be like when Christ returns and we are transformed. But John *does* know that we will be like Jesus and we will see Jesus as he really is—the glorious Lord over all creation.

In the meantime, out of gratitude for the love God has lavished upon us, our goal should be to bridge the gap. With the certain hope of one day being pure like Christ, we try to purify ourselves now. John knows we can't be sinless yet (see 1:8). But he expects us to try as hard as we can to become as pure as we can.

What sin really is

Read 1 John 3:4-6

- ❓ *How does verse 4 make sin so much bigger than simply law-breaking?*
- ❓ *Why will true Christians not keep on habitually sinning in the same way again and again (v 5-6)?*

Sin is not just rule-breaking; it is a rejection of the rule-giver: God. It's not simply that I know a law but fail to keep it. Sin's essence—"lawlessness"—is that we make ourselves the arbiters of the law, deciding whether or not we will keep it. You can be a lawless lawkeeper! And that's why we need the new hearts that God gives us when we trust in Christ and as he pours out his Spirit on us. We've been born of God. We have God's genes, and so we *cannot* go on sinning. But we need a constant reminder of this in the face of the pressure of the world and our own sinful nature.

Pray

Think of a couple of specific ways you want to grow more like Jesus. Then speak to God about them—today, and every day.

Prayers and answers

By nature we long for our own success, safety or comfort. The challenge from Psalm 20 is to root our deepest desires in the victory of our King instead.

- ❓ *Think back to your prayers over the past two days. What were they about?*

In Psalm 20, the people pray for their king.

The people pray

Read Psalm 20:1-9

- ❓ *What do the people pray on behalf of their king?*
 ❓ *What title for God is used four times in this psalm?*

The psalm is opened up if we look for the word “answer”. In verse 1 the people pray that the LORD will “answer” the king. All of verses 1-5 are a prayer that the king’s prayers will be answered. The covenant God (the LORD) is the One who protected Jacob when he was in distress (see Genesis 35:3—“God, who answered me in the day of my distress”). The God of Jacob is the LORD who will answer his king when he, too, is in deep distress (Psalm 20:1).

Read Psalm 20:4 again

- ❓ *What do these desires and plans need to be, if God is going to answer this prayer?*

The prayer in verse 4 is that God will give the king the desires of his heart and make all his plans succeed. The king’s heart and affections are to be so aligned with the purposes of God that they will all be granted, because they are precisely in tune with the will of God.

We can pray this too, because we know the only king who has ever fulfilled this description: Jesus. Our King is not a cardboard cutout; he has desires in his heart; he makes plans and wants them to succeed. When we pray this psalm, we ask God in heaven to give Jesus, our King, what he deeply desires.

The Lord answers

Re-read Psalm 20:6-9

- ❓ *What do we learn about the LORD, the covenant God, from these verses?*
 ❓ *How do verses 6-9 prove that God can answer the prayers in verses 1-5?*

A leader of the people leads them in confident assurance that what they have asked for in verses 1-5 will indeed be granted. The prayers of their king will be answered. The speaker is sure, and assures us, that “the LORD gives victory to his anointed” (v 6).

Apply

I can want success for myself as much as I like, but I cannot be sure of getting it. But when I want Jesus to succeed, my longings will be granted.

- ❓ *How will this psalm reshape your desires so that you begin genuinely to care more about the victories of King Jesus than about your own success or failure?*



Free to follow

You cannot continue to sin? But hang on, we want to say, hasn't John already established that each of us does sin? And isn't that our daily experience?

He breaks the power

Read 1 John 3:7-10

- ❓ What simple equation does John want us to understand from verses 7-8 and 10?
- ❓ What does it mean that someone is “of the devil”, do you think?
- ❓ Why did Jesus come (v 8)?

In one sense it is inevitable that we will sin. But in another sense it's not. Jesus has destroyed the work of the devil. The power and penalty of sin are broken, even if we still live with its presence. So we don't have any excuse. We can't give up the struggle against sin because we think that it's inevitable that we succumb to it. The tempter still tempts, but he can be resisted. John is saying that in general terms believers will think and do right, and unbelievers will not.

▼ Apply

- ❓ Is there something wrong that you keep on doing?

Don't despair! Every Christian sins, but a true Christian can't go on sinning without being concerned—without struggling to be right. So to struggle with sin is not a sign of unbelief but a sign of true life. Most unbelievers couldn't care less whether they sin or not. Only a true child of God struggles against sin, confesses their sin, and enjoys knowing they are forgiven of their sin.

Talk to the Lord about that now.

Murder in church

Read 1 John 3:11-15

- ❓ Why does John quote the example of Cain and Abel? What does it illustrate?
- ❓ What are we told we should expect if we are living for God?
- ❓ Why is it so vital to love one another?

Cain's hatred came to a climax in murder. Of course, few of us go that far. But before we let ourselves off the hook, John says that anyone who hates his brother is just as bad as a murderer! The difference is in degree, not in nature. This teaching comes straight from the lips of the Lord Jesus (see Matthew 5:21-24). Those who love Christ are our family and our future. Loving our brothers and sisters is a mark that we truly belong to the family and have the same shared future.

And don't be surprised if people hate you because you're a Christian. Cain hated Abel because Abel was righteous. Now that you've been made right with God, people will hate us in the same way. After all, the world hated Jesus (John 15:18-21).

^ Pray

Pray that God would give you a deep, passionate and sincere love for your brothers and sisters in Christ. Ask him to make you willing to suffer rejection for your faith, and to give you the joy that comes from knowing you're following in the steps of your Master.

Free from guilt

According to my dictionary, love is “warm affection, attachment, liking, or fondness, paternal benevolence, affectionate devotion”. Not bad, but not good enough for John.

Real love

Read 1 John 3:16-18

- ❓ *Where does John point our attention so that we can see what real love is?*
- ❓ *So what kind of love should Christians be showing to others?*

Real love is seen in costly, practical action—and so real love is seen supremely at the cross. Intentions and warm feelings towards others are good, but only if they result in practical action—in doing something. Talk is cheap unless it is accompanied by deeds.

Apply

A third of the world does not have access to basic sanitation. Hundreds of millions of Christians are not able to get an education. Many are persecuted because of their faith. What are you doing for your brothers and sisters in need? John isn't interested in words—he's after practical action (v 18).

- ❓ *So what are you going to do about it?*

Real peace

Read 1 John 3:19-24

- ❓ *What should we do if our hearts condemn us before God (v 20)?*
- ❓ *What happens if our hearts do not condemn us before God (v 21)?*
- ❓ *What do you make of verse 22?*

Conscience is that God-given sense that tells us that what we're doing is right or wrong. But sin has messed it up. Some people's consciences are almost dead, while others have hearts that condemn them unnecessarily. In the latter case, we look at our lives and wonder how we have the nerve to call ourselves Christians when we are so sinful. John reminds us that Jesus has delivered us from condemnation through his death in our place.

Our love for others is one reassuring sign of his work in us. But at the end of the day, it is God who reassures us. He is greater than our hearts (v 20). Christ bore our judgment on the cross. The answer to a condemning heart is the gospel—the message of freedom and forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

And when we truly understand that we are accepted by God through Christ, we can stand confidently in his presence and ask boldly. God gives us what we want when we want what God wants (v 22). So ask away for what pleases God—especially that your friends, family and neighbours would believe in the name of his Son (v 23).

Pray

Use verse 23 as a basis for prayer. Pray for all those you normally pray for (including yourself), and some whom you don't pray for. Ask God to grow their faith in his Son and their love for others.



Free to overcome

Spirituality is far more popular than religion these days. And we tend to see what is “spiritual” as by definition good. John does not agree...

Test the spirits

Read 1 John 4:1-3

- ❓ What are the “spirits” that John says we should test (v 1)?
- ❓ What test should we apply?

Whether it's teaching, prophecy, a new spirituality or whatever, the key issue is Jesus. How does this “spirit” answer these kinds of questions: Is he the Son of God? Is he fully human? Is he the only Saviour? Is his work sufficient to save us? Did he die as our substitute? Is he unique? Is he the King? Will he judge the world?

▼ Apply

In John's day, the main issue was whether Jesus came “in the flesh”—was Jesus really fully human (see 1:1-3)? The issue will vary from one generation to another, but always it will be about who Jesus is and what he has done.

- ❓ What do you think the issues are for us?

Oppose the spirits

Read 1 John 4:4-6

- ❓ What great truth in verse 4 helps us in our battle against these various spirits?
- ❓ Who listens to whom, according to verses 5-6? How is this both an explanation and a challenge for us as we seek to share the truth with others?

Whether “the spirits” are demonic forces or alternative spiritualities or worldly viewpoints, we have already overcome them. We don't need to fear them or their arguments because God is greater. Verse 6 might sound arrogant at first glance, but John is talking about the apostolic testimony to Jesus—“what we have seen and heard” (1:3). It is a further refinement of his truth test. There are many different versions of who Jesus is and what he has done, but the only version that counts is the apostolic one, which we have in the New Testament. After all, the apostles were there. They saw Jesus and they heard him for themselves.

It is not arrogant to claim that we know the truth. It is not arrogant to say that other people are wrong. We don't know the truth because we were clever enough to figure it out or good enough to attain it, but because God was gracious enough to reveal it to us.

△ Pray

- ❓ Are you ever frightened to speak out and put a Christian point of view? Do you worry that you'll be laughed at or argued down?

Remember that the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

Pray for opportunities to humbly and gently but confidently tell others about the real Jesus, who can rescue us from our sins for a glorious future.

Free to love others

John has been talking about a truth test—we can test the spirits by what they make of Jesus. Now he talks about a love test.

God is love

Read 1 John 4:7-8

- ❓ *Where does love come from?*
- ❓ *Is John saying that people who aren't Christians cannot love? If not, then what is he saying, do you think?*
- ❓ *What is the difference between saying "God loves" and "God is love"?*

God is *always* loving. Everything he does is characterised by love. He doesn't act in love sometimes and in wrath at other times. So even when he is acting in judgment, it is a loving act. When God judges sin in sinners, he is showing that he loves those that their sin has hurt, and loving the world he has made. He doesn't have a split personality or changeable moods. All his actions have complete integrity with every part of his character. He never compromises his love for the sake of his holiness or his justice for the sake of his love.

By God's common grace, non-Christians can be loving, sacrificial and generous—sometimes more so than some who would call themselves Christians. But they will never love God's people or God himself in the same way that those who truly belong to him do.

The love test

Read 1 John 4:7-12

- ❓ *How would you summarise the love test from these verses?*

No one has ever seen God, John says (v 12).

- ❓ *But in what two places can people see God's love?*
- ❓ *What does this tell us about our priorities as Christians?*

God is love, and love comes from God. So if we claim to be born of God, then we must be characterised by the kind of sacrificial love that we were shown at the cross. God's love has a purpose for us—eternal life. And it didn't wait for someone else to make the first move.

We see God's love at the cross. But we can also experience it in the fellowship of the church family (v 12). That's why the quality of our life together as Christians is so vital if we are to bring the forgiveness and mercy of God to those who are lost without him.

Pray

Pray that people will be able to see God and his love in the relationships that you have with one another in your church.



Free to believe

John tells us that the Spirit gives us confidence in the gospel and in our salvation. But how can we know whether our faith is the real thing?

Truth plus love...

Read 1 John 4:13-21

- ❓ *How do we know that we live in God and that he lives in us (v 13)?*
- ❓ *And how do we know that the Spirit lives in us (v 14-21)?*
- ❓ *What does it mean to “rely” on the love of God, do you think (v 16a)?*

It should come as no surprise to us that these are not separate tests, as though we can get some right and others wrong. They are all part and parcel of the same thing. The sign that we have truly been given the Spirit is that we “testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world” (v 14) and that Jesus is God’s Son (v 15). But acknowledging the truth isn’t enough. The truth must also make a difference in our lives. It’s not that we attract God’s love by being loving. Quite the opposite—we love because he first loved us. Our love is the fruit of his love at work in our lives.

Many people pit “spirituality”, “love” and “truth” against one another. Doctrine divides while love unites, some say. Other churches are strong on spirituality but weak on truth, we might say. But such divisions don’t make sense to John. And that’s because his definition of love is the same as his definition of truth. Neither can be real unless they come together, from the indwelling Spirit. This is the only true “spirituality” that counts.

▼ Apply

- ❓ *Do you ever treat love and truth as alternatives? What about your church?*
- ❓ *How would you push back at a brother or sister who makes a comment that pits these qualities against each other?*

... equals confidence

Re-read 1 John 4:16-18

- ❓ *Who might we be fearful of, and why (v 17-18)?*
- ❓ *What link is John drawing between love and this kind of fear (v 18b)?*

Without Christ we would still fear the day of judgment. It would rightly terrify us. But God’s love for us means we can have confidence—confidence that on the day of judgment we will be acquitted. If we are still unsure about the completeness and finality of our forgiveness in Christ, it will compromise our love for God, and our ability to enjoy everything Christ has given to us.

^ Pray

Are you confident that the day of judgment holds no terror for you—because of Christ? If so, give thanks and approach his throne with confidence in your prayers.

If not, read 1 John 1:8-9 again, and ask God’s Spirit to give you reassurance.

Truth, love and obedience

John seems to be repeating himself—going round and round in circles. But that's the whole point. Truth, love and obedience all lead to each other and all belong together.

A virtuous circle

Read 1 John 5:1-5

- ❓ *Try to draw a diagram of how each of the things John mentions leads to the next thing. (Hint: It's a circle!)*

John says that the commands of God are not burdensome (v 3).

- ❓ *What commands is he talking about?*
- ❓ *Why are they not burdensome?*
- ❓ *Why do we feel they can be sometimes?*
- ❓ *Is it God or our faith that has overcome the world (v 4-5)?*

We may struggle with God's command to love others and to speak the gospel to those who are hostile, but neither command is burdensome in the sense of being too big for us or an irrelevant thing to do. God has been victorious over the world and the devil at the cross of Christ. It's a victory we can share in and get a taste of as we put our trust in him. We may feel that our lives are a series of difficult skirmishes and battles that we mostly lose, but the truth is that, in Christ, we are victorious. It's a victory that was won 2,000 years ago at Calvary.

Blood and witnesses

Read 1 John 5:6-12

- ❓ *What might it mean that Jesus came by "water and blood" (v 6)?*
- ❓ *What testimony is there that this is true?*

- ❓ *How does John sum up the stark choice we face, and the promise of the gospel?*

In verse 6 John is most likely talking about the baptism and death of Jesus. We've already seen that some people in John's day were saying Jesus wasn't fully God. They said that Christ, the Son of God, came on the human person Jesus at his baptism and left just before he died. They said the man Jesus was filled with the Spirit of Christ during his ministry, but he wasn't really God. By contrast, John says that Jesus was truly and fully God in baptism and in his death. And what John literally says is that Jesus was the Son "through" water and blood—before, during and after his baptism and death. And so with the Holy Spirit, two establish the truth that Jesus is God.

But there's more. These first three witnesses are all the testimony of God towards Christ. But we believe because of the testimony of men (1:1-3; 4:6): the apostolic witness. For us, that means trusting that the Bible gives us an accurate account of that testimony about Jesus: that it is reliable history.

Apply

This is what we have to share with the world: a story from a book about a man who claimed to be God—with excellent and compelling reasons to be taken seriously.

- ❓ *Are you able to articulate them to a sceptic? How could you get better?*



Shepherd

As we read Psalm 23, we need to think of David, and then Jesus, singing this psalm, before we learn how to pray it ourselves.

- ❓ *What do you think are the main ways that a shepherd takes care of sheep?*

Read Psalm 23:1-6

- ❓ *What does the shepherd in Psalm 23 do for his sheep?*

David, Jesus, us

David: King David sings of how the covenant God brings him, the representative head of Israel, to the place of plentiful provision (v 1-3). This is not the song of any isolated individual. What God does for him, God does (implicitly) for the whole people of God of whom the king is the leader.

Jesus: When the Lord Jesus sang verses 1-3, he would have sung it as the anointed King, the Messiah, the head of the people of God. In this capacity he was confident that God his Father would bring him, and with him all his people, into the place of plenty—the inheritance that is the new heavens and new earth.

Us: What God does for his chosen king, he does for the people of the king. So, as we also are the people of the King—men and women “in Christ”—this blessing and comfort is ours too.

- ❓ *What impact does this have on your own confidence that God will lead you, guide you and provide for you?*
- ❓ *Although the shepherd leads his king to “green pastures” (v 1), where else does this path go (v 4)?*

In the dark valley

Verse 4 makes clear that the pathway to these “green pastures” is the road of suffering, as it was in Psalm 22. It takes the king through the “darkest valley”. Yet even here, as the king goes into this valley (and as our King Jesus went deep into this valley on the cross), he need ultimately “fear no evil”.

▼ Apply

As we follow our King, we too are called to enter the shadow of death, in small ways, through trials and sickness, and in deeper ways, as we face death itself.

- ❓ *What difference does it make to know that our shepherd walks with us through the valley?*

Our shepherd doesn't walk with us just as individuals but with our church family.

- ❓ *Who will you encourage with this truth today?*

The King who inherits these covenant assurances is ultimately Jesus Christ. He is the singer of Psalm 23. What comfort this psalm must have brought to him in his earthly sufferings! And now it is ours, as we are “in Christ”. Our King has become, with God the Father, our good shepherd, leading us, his sheep, where he has gone before.

How to be sure

John has written this letter because he wants his readers to be sure they're Christians. Throughout the letter he's given them—and us—a number of ways to tell that.

Are you sure?

Read 1 John 5:13

- ❓ *Do you believe in Jesus (see v 1)?*
- ❓ *Do you love other Christians (3:14)?*
- ❓ *Do you continue in your struggle to obey God's commands (2:3)?*
- ❓ *Do you know the testimony of the Spirit (3:24; 4:13)?*

These signs are not a checklist. They merge into one another. But together they show whether we're children of God and whether the gospel has begun to transform our lives.

Apply

- ❓ *Review these signs. How do you match up? If you're not sure, make it your top priority to talk with an older or more mature Christian about these things.*

Confident prayers

Read 1 John 5:14-17

- ❓ *How can we be confident in approaching God in prayer?*
- ❓ *Why is it important to know that God will hear our prayers (v 14), do you think?*
- ❓ *What example does John give of praying in confidence?*
- ❓ *What is "the sin that leads to death" (v 16), do you think?*

If you're a child of God, you can talk to your Father. It's as simple as that. A good father will always take the time to listen to his children; and our Father is always there to listen to his children.

Does prayer change things? We instinctively want to say yes. But does that mean we make God change his mind? The relationship between our prayers and God's will is a mystery. Praying according to God's will can sound a bit like "God answers us when he was going to do it anyway". But we have to remember that our prayers are also part of God's will. God works in us as we pray, just as he works to answer our prayers.

But not all of God's will is mysterious. In the Bible, God has revealed all we need to know of it. And this is John's main concern here. We do know God's will. And so we should pray in the light of God's word. We should remind him of his promises. We should ask for what we know pleases him.

The sin that leads to death is most likely to be rejecting Jesus—turning away from him. God's will is that believers should be continually repenting of sin and finding life in Jesus. God's will is that believers should be holy. That is what we should pray for.

Pray

Use this understanding to pray for yourself, your friends and family, and your church family.



What you can know

John ends his letter with three great affirmations of faith: "We know... we know... we know..." Confidence in salvation leads to confident prayer and confidence in the truth.

He will keep us

Read 1 John 5:18

- ❓ *Who will keep us safe?*
- ❓ *Who cannot harm a genuine believer?*

It's one thing to have assurance of salvation now, but will it last? What about tomorrow? What about when I face death? John says we can be sure that God will keep us. Satan cannot touch us; he cannot wrestle us out of God's grip. Neither can our sin, because the power of sin in our lives has been decisively broken.

We belong to God

Read 1 John 5:19

- ❓ *How do the two halves of this verse fit together?*
- ❓ *What happens when we forget that the world is under the control of the evil one?*

It can be tough being a Christian. Sometimes it seems that the rest of the world thinks we're crazy. But being sure of our salvation means that we *know* we belong to God. The rest of the world may think we're mad, not because we are but because they are in the grip of Satan's lies. When we forget the truth about the world or the truth about what Jesus has done, we are in danger of falling in love with the world or feeling hopelessly overwhelmed by the opposition.

We know the truth

Read 1 John 5:20

- ❓ *What things do we "know"?*
- ❓ *Why is it not arrogant to be confident about the gospel truths about Jesus?*
- ❓ *Why is it unpopular to be confident about these things today?*

And finally...

Read 1 John 5:21

- ❓ *Why do you think John ends his letter in such a strange way?*
- ❓ *What do you think the idols are that he is referring to?*

Idolatry is making your priority something other than God. Idolatry is settling for a god, or a view of God, that is less than the true God, who can only be found in Christ. Letting the views of the world shape your view of God is idolatry. But Christians have been freed from the lies of Satan. We know the truth. Our confidence in salvation leads to confidence in the truth. For John, this isn't just about reassurance. It's also a challenge not to compromise the truth.

Pray

Have you got what John is driving at repeatedly in this letter? Pray that you would grasp it firmly—and never let go.



2 JOHN: Truth and love

Two tiny letters give us a window into the long-term struggle we face as Christians. How do we sustain the gospel life of our fellowship and message for the long term?

Letter to a dear lady

It's likely that the "lady" being written to is a particular local church, and that her "children" are the Christians who make up the church. The anonymity of the letter may be a reflection of the fact that they were a persecuted minority, and that this was a way of keeping the identity of the recipients secret.

Read 2 John 1-6

- ❓ *What privileges does the "lady" enjoy?*
- ❓ *What is John confident about (v 2-3)?*
- ❓ *What has never changed, according to John?*
- ❓ *Why do you think it's important for the "lady" to know this?*

This elect (chosen) lady can be confident that she enjoys the grace, mercy and truth of God because she has received Jesus. Note the confidence here. These things "will be with" those who have embraced Jesus Christ. Christians can also be completely confident that all true Christians accept and love them. These are facts, not things to aspire to or earn.

Note that truth and love *always* belong together, and that the truth lives in us and will be with us for ever. John is concerned that the dear lady understands this because, if she loses her grip on either, she will lose her confidence in both. And both are under assault by false teachers.

Beware deceivers!

Read 2 John 7-13

- ❓ *What do the deceivers deny?*
- ❓ *What will happen if we listen to them?*
- ❓ *Why is it important to "continue" in the commands?*
- ❓ *Why do you think false teachers remain so prevalent, and why do many find their teaching so compelling?*

False teaching does not often look obvious. False teachers will often dial down the volume of the parts of the gospel we find difficult, or else they offer a strength and confidence in areas where we feel weak and helpless. But their appeal is a sweet-smelling trap that will enslave us and ruin our faith. False teaching drags us from God.

Apply

- ❓ *What do we need to keep confident in?*
- ❓ *How should we respond to deceivers?*
- ❓ *How should we warn others?*

John wants us to know that the stakes are extremely high: life or death, truth or lies, Christ and antichrist. When we lose our grip on Jesus, the only Son of the Father, who came in the flesh, we lose our grip on reality and eternity. We should not welcome false teachers, however positive they seem or widely accepted they are, full stop: not their books, their TV broadcasts or their podcasts.



3 JOHN: First and last

The church has been rocked by many scandals involving those who seek power, prestige and status over loving, humble, open-hearted service. It was always so.

Staying healthy

Read 3 John 1-8

- ❓ What does John pray for Gaius?
- ❓ What brings John the greatest joy?
- ❓ What does he encourage Gaius to do?

Physical health is important, but spiritual health is of far greater significance. Group prayer times can often become an “organ recital”, where we pray for an endless list of people’s ailments. But John is brought greatest joy when he hears that Gaius is spiritually healthy. Likewise, John told the dear lady in 2 John not to welcome those who twist the truth. Here in 3 John, we are encouraged to welcome, support and encourage those who are fellow workers for the gospel. (In the ancient world, many gospel workers were itinerant preachers.)

▼ Apply

- ❓ How should the priority of spiritual health shape your prayers together?
- ❓ How do you support gospel work? Do you need to change the way you give hospitality, finances and encouragement to those who are fellow gospel workers?

Healthy leaders

Read 3 John 9-14

- ❓ What behaviour and attitudes does Diotrephes show that mark him out as a bad thing?

- ❓ By contrast, what qualities does Demetrius show that confirm he is the genuine article?

There is no suggestion in these verses that Diotrephes is a false teacher. Instead the problem is that of a powerful personality who wants to be first. He refuses to accept the authority of John (v 9) or to welcome the itinerant teachers (v 10). He undermines the position of others and expels perceived rivals (v 10) so that he can be first. He may not have a problem with truth, but he has a problem with power. The result is almost as destructive as false teaching.

By contrast, the goodness of Demetrius’ character is acknowledged by everyone. “Even by the truth itself” (v 12) means that he taught what was true and his life matched his message. This is the sort of person we must imitate (v 11).

▼ Apply

Someone may be “a great teacher”, have bags of personality, be a decisive and strong visionary, and command a lot of respect. And yet, if they have a bullying or dominating personality, it will be toxic to the health of the church.

- ❓ Can you think of people or situations where this has happened?
- ❓ Whose example are you following?
- ❓ What will you pray for as a result?

SONG OF SONGS: Love

What's your favourite love song? What makes it so special? The lyrics? The tune? Or perhaps because you associate it with the one you love?

Read Song of Songs 1:1-4

- ❓ *Who is speaking?*
- ❓ *What requests do they make?*

The poem opens with “Let him kiss me” (v 2). It’s a call to love. This song celebrates the joy of love and sex within marriage, along with recounting the heartache of unfulfilled longing. But there’s more to it than this...

This poem also speaks of God’s love for his people and the intimacy he seeks with believers. This is true because God designed marriage to be a picture of Christ’s love for the church. But there are other reasons to think that this link is intended by the writer.

1. The woman is likened to the land of Israel, often in ways that don’t seem to work as descriptions of human beauty. Is she like Israel or is Israel like a bride? The poem works on both levels. In Isaiah 62:4, God promises, “Your land will be married”.
2. The poem is full of garden imagery that takes us back to the Garden of Eden. The poem describes the restoration of the intimacy of Eden that was lost when humanity rebelled against God.
3. The woman is likened to a vineyard, just as God likens Israel to a vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7).

The greatest love

This poem claims to be the “Song of Songs” (Song of Songs 1:1). It’s a way of saying it’s the greatest song (just as the “Holy of holies” in the temple was the most holy place). That’s a bold claim. Is it really better than all of Solomon’s thousand other songs (1 Kings 4:32)?

Yes—this is the greatest song because it celebrates the greatest *love*: the love of Christ for the church. Seeing his love in his word is like receiving a kiss from his mouth (Song of Songs 1:2).

As we walk through this wonderful poem, we’ll keep the human lovers we meet there in mind; but it’s the love between Christ and his church that will be our focus in these studies.

Apply

- ❓ *What signs of Christ’s love (“his kisses”) have you experienced recently?*
- ❓ *Why is his love “delightful” (v 2) to you today?*
- ❓ *In what way is his name “pleasing” (v 3) to you today?*

Pray

Turn verses 2-4 into an expression of your longing for Jesus.



How beautiful are you?

Without us realising it, our perceptions of beauty are partly linked to wealth and status.

For instance, white Western people often want a tan because in the West darker skin suggests the leisure to go sunbathing.

In Solomon's day, dark skin was unattractive because it signified a peasant who worked in the sun. The woman singer is what we might call today a "redneck" (v 5-6).

Do not stare at me

Read Song of Songs 1:5-6

❓ *How does this woman regard herself?*

In verse 6 she feels the critical stares of the fashionable city girls—just as today we imagine people rating our social-media posts. She's had to neglect her figurative vineyard (her attractiveness) to work in her family's literal vineyards (v 6). Like so many people today, she feels insecure about her appearance.

How beautiful you are

Read Song of Songs 1:7-17

Although she pictures her beloved as her "king" (v 4, 12), he's actually a young shepherd—so she looks for him among the flocks (v 7-8). There the young lovers spend time together on a bed of green foliage with branches forming a roof over their heads (v 16-17). Whenever we spend time listening to Christ's voice in his word and responding in prayer we're spending time enjoying the love of our Beloved (see also v 4).

❓ *How does the man she loves regard her in these verses?*

Verse 9 may not be the best chat-up line to use today! (The jewellery listed in verses 10-11 suggests that verse 9 is a reference to her adornments rather than her physical features.) But his feelings for her are clear in verse 15: "How beautiful you are, my darling!"

Read Ephesians 5:25-27

- ❓ *What has Christ done for his bride, the church?*
- ❓ *What is he doing for his bride?*
- ❓ *What will be the result of his work?*

Apply

- ❓ *How do you regard yourself?*
- ❓ *What makes you feel insecure about your identity?*

Perhaps you feel the scrutiny of other people. You imagine them judging your appearance or your performance at work or your commitment to the church. What about the scrutiny of God? Nothing can be hidden from him and his standard is perfection (Hebrews 4:13).

And yet this is what Jesus says to you: "How beautiful you are, my darling!" He looks beyond our sin to see his bride. He sees the beauty he is creating in you.

❓ *What do you want to say to him?*



The rock of refuge

What will it take for you to trust the God and Father of Jesus at all times and even in the face of death? Today's study will be a little different as we meditate on Psalm 31.

Jesus' faith

Read Psalm 31:1-8

Meditate on the trust that Jesus himself showed in his God and Father.

Feel the force of the words "Into your hands I commit my spirit" (v 5).

Read Psalm 31:9-22

Meditate on these verses until you feel the agony of the Lord's sufferings.

Ask God to help you grasp something of the wonder of a man who was under the pressures of verses 9-13 saying, "My times are in your hands" (v 15).

Read Psalm 31:23-24

- ❓ *When you have meditated afresh on the faith that Jesus showed in his Father, hear again his exhortation to us, his people. How will you respond?*

Your faith

Re-read Psalm 31:6

- ❓ *What "idols" do you or those you know cling to?*
- ❓ *What would it look like for you to put your trust wholly in God instead—today?*

Re-read the whole of Psalm 31

As you read it through, make the trust of Jesus your own trust as you enter into his words and heart.

Re-read Psalm 31:15

You may like to make the words "My times are in your hands" very specific, and say not just "my times" in general but "this time" in particular: "This day—this day of pressure, this day of anxiety, this day of persecution, this day of bereavement, even this day of my death—is in your hands".

Pray

Ask the Lord to help you to use this psalm for the purposes for which God inspired King David to pray it, and King Jesus to fulfil it—that we may walk in Jesus' footsteps, "love the LORD" (v 23) and "be strong and take heart" (v 24) as we "hope" in the God and Father of Jesus, who is the faithful God of unfailing love.

Be ready to pray this again and again, for the pressures of following Jesus will not relent, and you will find your trust wavering.



Don't settle for less

Imagine you find a magic lamp. You give it a rub and a genie appears, offering you one wish. What would you wish for?

Today, the Song invites us not to settle for anything less than true love.

You're the one for me

Read Song of Songs 2:1-3

"I am a rose of Sharon" (v 1) is not a boast. Our female singer is saying that she's a common flower, like any of the many flowers in the valleys. In my locality it would be like saying, "I'm just another buttercup in a field of buttercups. There are thousands of beautiful women in the world, so what makes me so special?" But she is special to her beloved: "a lily among thorns" (v 2). There may be thousands of beautiful women, but there's only one woman for him.

And she feels the same way about him. There may be thousands of other men ("trees of the forest" (v 3), but she only wants to live under his care ("sit in his shade") and enjoy his love ("his fruit is sweet to my taste").

▼ Apply

- ❓ *Is Jesus the only one for you? Do you look to other "trees" for protection?*
- ❓ *Does other "fruit" seem sweeter than Jesus? What, and why?*

Yes, but not yet

Read Song of Songs 2:4-7

These verses are an expression of desire

("Let him..."). She looks forward with longing to their wedding day (v 4-5) and wedding night (v 6). But she warns that these passions must not be awakened until the right time (v 7; see also 3:5; 8:4). Perhaps she is asking the city girls not to exert any unhelpful peer pressure.

▼ Apply

- ❓ *Whatever your current "relationship status", how are you doing all you can to avoid arousing love with the wrong person or at the wrong time, so that sexual love is kept within marriage?*
- ❓ *In what ways are you most strongly tempted to do the opposite?*

Don't fool about

We were created with desires by God, to lead us to true fulfilment in Christ. But we too easily get diverted en route and settle for lesser joys. So 2:7 is a reminder not to settle for anything less than joy in Christ. As C.S. Lewis famously said, "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us. We are like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are too easily pleased."

Pray for a heart that is satisfied only by Jesus, so that it can be satisfied completely by Jesus.

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Come to Christ

You clearly attach some importance to reading the Bible and praying day by day, since here you are reading these notes. But how important is this moment to Christ?

Christ comes to you

Read Song of Songs 2:8-9, 17

The beloved comes to the woman, bounding like a gazelle because he is energised by his love. Picture Christ bounding towards you, energised by love, whenever he sees you opening your Bible.

Come to Christ

Read Song of Songs 2:10-14

Winter has passed and the world is coming into bloom with the arrival of spring. The implication is that now is the time for love to blossom. The longing will soon be over. The cold nights spent waiting will be replaced by the warmth of love. Twice we hear, “Come with me” (v 10, 13).

Apply



In the busyness of our lives and the noise of a godless world, Jesus comes to us with these words: “Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me ... Show me your face, let me hear your voice” (v 10, 14). It’s an invitation to spend time with him, hearing his love in the words of Scripture and responding with love in the words of our prayers. It’s an invitation to his bride, the church, to hear him as we gather each Sunday. It’s an invitation to step out of the cold and feel the warmth of his love.

Beware of the foxes

Read Song of Songs 2:15

“The little foxes” might sound cute, but they “ruin the vineyards”. Perhaps rats would be a more redolent image today. Remember, too, that in the Song the “vineyard” is an image of sexuality, a place of intimacy (8:12). This verse calls on the wider community to protect young women from “love rats” who would use and abuse them. For Christians, in our relationship with Jesus the foxes represent anything that threatens our enjoyment of Christ by drawing us away from our true love.

Apply

-  What stops you coming to Christ each day?
-  What distracts you when you spend time enjoying Christ in prayer?

Ask God to protect you from these distractions.

He is mine

Read Song of Songs 2:16

Mediate on what it means to say, “Christ belongs to me”. Then think deeply about what it means to say, “I belong to Christ”.

Now turn your thoughts into prayers to him.





Pursue the one you love

What do we do when Christ seems distant?

It's easy to do nothing when we feel spiritually dry. But that only makes matters worse. These verses show us a better way.

Read Song of Songs 3:1-3

"All night long on my bed" (v 1) suggests that these verses may be a kind of dream sequence. Or they may be a flashback to a stylised version of their courtship and betrothal.

I looked for him

Re-read Song of Songs 3:1-3

- ❓ *Pick out all the actions the woman takes in these verses.*

She's not passive. She takes the initiative to find her beloved. But instead of finding him, she's found by the watchmen. So she gets them involved in the search (v 3).

▼ Apply

A time when Christ seems distant is not a time to be passive. We need some "get up and go" (v 2). We need to look for him: in his word as we read it day by day, and among his people as we join with them week by week. We may also need to ask for help.

- ❓ *Is there something you need to do to pursue Christ?*
- ❓ *Is there someone you could ask to help you?*

I held him

Read Song of Songs 3:4

- ❓ *What does the woman do when she finds her beloved?*

She may be bringing him home in order to arrange their wedding. This time, she's going to hold on to him and not let him go.

There's a promise for us in these verses: "I looked for the one my heart loves ... I found the one my heart loves" (v 1, 4). Times of spiritual dryness are part of most Christian lives—we don't live on a constant emotional high. But Christ is not hiding from us. "Seek and you will find," he assures us (Matthew 7:7).

Read Song of Songs 3:5

Perhaps this renewed exhortation is prompted by what the watchmen have been saying, which may have been something like, *Why look for an absent lover when are there other suitable bachelors at hand?* "There are plenty more fish in the sea," we might say today. But there's only one man to whom she will give her love, and she will not give herself to him until they are bound together in the covenant of marriage.

▲ Pray

Lord, may I have eyes only for you, so that all the other things I love are part of my love for you rather than rivals to my love for you. Amen.

Wedding bells

At the beginning of a wedding the bride makes her big entrance. That's what we see here.

Who's her king?

Read Song of Songs 3:6-10

? *How does the bride describe her beloved?*

I think the beloved is almost certainly not Solomon, not least because the Song ends by comparing the way the woman has protected “her vineyard” (her sexuality) to the way Solomon rented his out (by having numerous wives and concubines—1 Kings 11:1-3). The link between Solomon and the Song in Song of Songs 1:1 need not mean the Song is about him or by him. It could have been commissioned by Solomon or associated with the golden age of wisdom over which he presided.

So who is this? It's her shepherd-lover, whom she's already described as her “king” (1:4, 12).

? *If this is not actually Solomon, what effect does the bride achieve by describing her wedding, and her husband-to-be, in this way?*

Perhaps she's still dreaming, and in her dreams she imagines a fairy-tale wedding in which she marries her prince (3:1). Or perhaps this is an exaggerated description of their marriage, highlighting the way she considers him to be the greatest of men. He sends a noble bodyguard and luxurious carriage so she can travel to her wedding in safety and comfort.

Our Shepherd-King

Perhaps it's no accident that the beloved is a king-like shepherd. It reminds us of the Lord whom David describes as “my shepherd” (Psalm 23:1). It reminds us of David himself, the shepherd boy who became Israel's greatest king (2 Samuel 5:1-2). And it points forward to David's greater son, Jesus. Jesus is the King who came to be the good Shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:11).

The column of smoke in Song of Songs 3:6 is perfumed with “incense”—it's literally “frankincense”. Yet incense couldn't be used as personal perfume because it only releases its scent when burnt. It was, however, used in the tabernacle. Indeed, that was the only place where it was to be used (Exodus 30:34-38). In the tabernacle, burning incense reminded the people of God's coming to his people in the clouds of Mount Sinai and leading them by means of the pillar of cloud. Now in Song of Songs 3:6, a pillar of cloud is coming through the wilderness to lead a bride to her wedding. This marriage is a picture of God redeeming his people, making a covenant with us and leading us home.

Apply

? *How does all this imagery excite you about being loved by, and in love with, King Jesus?*



You've stolen my heart

Chapter 3 described the wedding of the two lovers. In chapter 4, we see them on their wedding night.

Read Song of Songs 4:1-11

How beautiful you are

If you didn't read these verses aloud, then do so now (though you might want to be careful who overhears you!).

- ❓ *How does the beloved praise his wife's beauty (v 1-7)?*
- ❓ *How does he feel about her love for him (v 8-10)?*
- ❓ *How does he describe her kisses (v 11)?*

The language is tender yet powerful. It's erotic and sensual without ever being smutty. It includes language we've heard before (compare 4:1 and 1:15, and 4:10 and 1:2-3). But now this is taken to another level because the couple have arrived at the wedding night. The restraint they have previously shown (2:7; 3:5) is no longer needed. Her hair is no longer up as then befitted a modest woman in public; now for him it tumbles down like a flock of goats cascading down a hillside (4:1). Verse 8 perhaps reflects her nervousness, so he invites her to leave her fears and descend into his embrace.

Here is a man delighting in his new bride. "You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride" (v 9). We can only imagine what it felt like to hear these words.

▼ Apply

If you're married, review how you speak to your spouse.

- ❓ *Do you praise his or her beauty and express your delight in their love?*
- ❓ *How could you do so more, or more tenderly? (And not just their physical beauty but their spiritual beauty too.)*

Sheep, towers... honey

It's easy to mock this husband's comparison of his wife's teeth to sheep or of her neck to a tower. Every culture has its own distinctive language for love. Future generations may find it strange that we name our loved ones after the viscous secretion of insects (i.e. honey). But perhaps our mockery is also a sign that we're missing the point. What is being described is a landscape. This is God describing his people, represented by their land.

Re-read Song of Songs 4:8-11, but this time read it as Christ's words to you. As you do so, leave your fears behind and descend into his embrace.

▲ Pray

And now speak to Jesus in response to his words to you.

Consummated love

In these verses we reach the climax of the story and the song.

Him to her

Read Song of Songs 4:12-15

Throughout the Song, the bride's sexuality is likened to a vineyard or garden. Until now, it has been "a garden locked up" and "a sealed fountain" (v 12). In other words, she is a virgin who has not given herself away.

The description in chapter 4 has moved down the woman's body. In verses 14-15 it moves further down and becomes still more intimate. But there is nothing crude in her husband's description of her. Instead, the language becomes even more figurative, as if to hide her modesty. She is an orchard of fruits and spices, creating a profusion of scents that delight his senses (v 14).

Her to him

Read Song of Songs 4:16

For the first time on their wedding night, the bride speaks. She picks up his garden imagery and calls on the winds to waft her scents to entice her lover. "You are a garden", he said in verse 12; now she describes her sexuality as "his garden" and invites him to enter. "Do not awaken..." she said before their wedding (2:7; 3:5). But now she cries out, "Awake": "Let my beloved come into his garden and taste its choice fruits".

Time to leave


The time has come for us quietly to leave the lovers to their love-making. In 5:1 we switch from the present tense to the present perfect tense—we only return to their story after their love-making is complete.

Read Song of Songs 5:1

4:16 – 5:1 is the exact middle point of this song. The woman's invitation to love and the consummation of that love form both the poetic and sexual climax of their story.

Apply

In Eden, humanity enjoyed an intimate relationship with God. Now, through the Song, we are again invited to re-enter the garden and enjoy Jesus, our Bridegroom. Not all of us are married; and of those that are, some of us are not happily married, and some of us are part of happy marriages that, for one reason or another, find sex difficult or impossible. So not all of us enjoy the sexual intimacy described in these verses. But the invitation to spiritual intimacy is extended to *everyone*. And this is not a second-best option because intimacy with Christ is the ultimate love to which human marriage and sex points. The application of these verses is for all of us to hear these words from Jesus: "Eat, friends, and drink; drink your fill of love" (5:1).

 *How will you pray in response to this invitation?*



My help and deliverer

In Psalm 40, David sings about himself and what happens between him and the covenant God. But what happens to the king shapes what will happen to his people.

He turned to me

Read Psalm 40:1-10

- ❓ *What does God do for the king (v 1-3)?*
- ❓ *In verse 3, David is given a “new song”. What do you think he might have sung about God?*
- ❓ *What did David tell the people (v 9-10)?*

The king comes to the front of his choir and sings, “I waited patiently for the LORD” (v 1). God heard that prayer. From “the slimy pit ... mud and mire”—that poetic image of weakness and impending death—God has lifted him up, set his feet “on a rock” (a place of solidity) and given him “a new song”, in which he praises God for rescuing him. We come in at the end of verse 3: “Many will see”—that is, see God rescue his chosen king—“and fear the LORD”. They too—and we too—will “put their trust in him”.

- ❓ *When the old-covenant people saw God rescue their king, how would that have helped them to put their own trust in God?*
- ❓ *When we see how God the Father raised Jesus his Son, our King, from the “slimy pit” of death, how does that encourage us to put our trust in God?*

Our hope depends entirely on the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. As we join him in singing verses 9-10, our hearts lift with joy, knowing that the God and Father of Jesus is indeed the God of unchanging love and faithfulness, in whom we can safely trust.

▼ Apply

Psalm 40:1-3 can become our story in Christ. We, too, can wait patiently in times of trial, confident that the day will come when, in Christ, we will have a new song in our mouths: a song that celebrates the way God has rescued us from the slimy pit of death.

- ❓ *When might you most need to rest in this truth this week?*

Think of me

Read Psalm 40:11-17

- ❓ *What is the contrast between verses 1-10 and 11-17?*
- ❓ *Does this surprise you? Why / why not?*

It seems most likely that v 11-17 are revisiting the troubles from which David has been rescued—the point seems to be that the king’s troubles arise out of his self-offering as the sacrifice for his people’s sins (v 6-8).

Re-read Psalm 40:16

Here, the king prays for his people: that they may have joy and gladness and “always say, ‘The LORD is great!’” This—for us—is the climax of the psalm: that we, as the King’s people, rejoice in the God and Father of Jesus, and celebrate his greatness.

- ❓ *When would saying to yourself, “The LORD is great” make most difference to you this week?*

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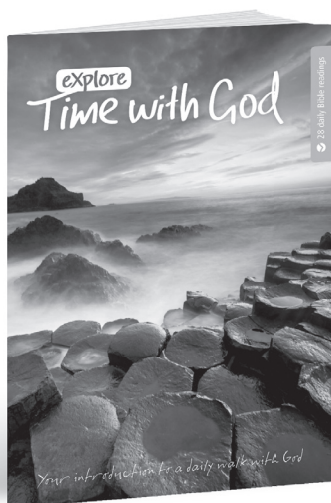
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