

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



1 SAMUEL: Coming king

In the Hebrew Bible, 1 Samuel 1:1 follows Judges 21:25: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit."

So we are expecting to hear about God providing a king. But instead we are given the story of one woman's private grief.

Read 1 Samuel 1:1-8

❓ *What makes Hannah downhearted?*

Whatever the medical causes for Hannah's barrenness, we are told that ultimately it was God who had closed her womb (v 5-6). God is sovereign over suffering. The question is how to respond to this truth.

❓ *What does Peninnah do (v 6)?*

❓ *What does Elkanah do (v 5, 8)?*

❓ *What do you think they should have done and said?*

❓ *What do you think you would do if you were in Hannah's situation?*

True prayer

Read 1 Samuel 1:9-16

For Hannah, her suffering is a reason to pray. God's sovereignty spurs her into action: if God has closed her womb, then maybe God might also open it.

❓ *How does Hannah feel as she prays?*

❓ *How does she express those feelings?*

❓ *How does she show her faith in God?*

Apply

Some claim that true prayer is about quietness and contemplation. But Hannah's prayer is not like that at all. To pray well we

have to have a deep sense of our need.

We also need a deep sense of God's care. Prayer is a cry of faith, arising from the belief that God is our Father, who is able (powerful enough) and willing (loving enough) to answer.

❓ *What stops you from praying? Is it harder to pray when life is difficult or when it's easy?*

❓ *Do you ever think of prayer as a technique you have to learn? How does Hannah's prayer counter that view?*

Read 1 Samuel 1:17-20

Hannah does not yet know how God will answer her prayer. But the point is that she has prayed; and now she is happy to leave it with him.

Hannah's attitude towards God gives us an example to follow. She knows he is sovereign. She wants to do as he sees fit. She illustrates the way the people of Israel should have been relating to God.

Pray

Use Philippians 4:6-7 to help you pray.

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Making good his word

Hannah's story is not told to illustrate ordinary life. It is told because it points to something bigger—something literally extra-ordinary.

Read 1 Samuel 1:21-28

- ❓ *How have Hannah's feelings changed now?*
- ❓ *What is her attitude towards God?*

In verse 23 Elkanah says, “May the LORD make good his word”. This is odd. Hannah is the one who needs to make good her vow. God has not said anything at all!

In fact, the word the Lord has given is his word to his people: the promise to bless them and make them a blessing to the nations. This becomes clearer in the song Hannah sings in chapter 2.

Bigger stories

Read 1 Samuel 2:1-10

- ❓ *How does Hannah reflect on her own situation in this song?*
- ❓ *What reversals can you spot—changes from the way things were before?*
- ❓ *Which verses seem particularly surprising for a new mother to sing?*

Hannah moves beyond her personal experience to the experience of God's people as a whole. Her story is a miniature version of Israel's story—and, indeed, humanity's story.

Hannah is part of that bigger story. Her son, Samuel, will re-establish God's rule over God's people. He will deliver them from their enemies and judge them with justice.

We too need Hannah's story and song as a reminder that the gospel will triumph and God will vindicate his name. In some ways the church in our generation appears to be barren, lacking converts. This should turn us to the Lord in prayer, just like Hannah.

The King

Hannah concludes her song by talking about God's king. She is pointing our attention forward in the story—both within 1 Samuel (to Saul and David) and to God's ultimate King, Jesus.

Read Luke 1:46-55

- ❓ *How does Mary's song echo Hannah's?*
- ❓ *How did Jesus fulfil what Hannah sang about?*

Apply

There are two types of people: those who defy or ignore God and those who humble themselves before him. The message of Hannah's song is that if you are poor or weak or suffering because you have made choices that put God first instead of yourself, it is worth it. The Lord “raises the poor ... and makes them inherit a throne of honour” (1 Samuel 2:8). He exalted Jesus, and this is the first step in turning the world upside down.

- ❓ *God's King has come. How will you allow that to make a difference to you today?*



Good priest, bad priest

Part of God's solution for sin in Israel was the provision of priests and sacrifices. A priest could make a sacrifice on your behalf to make up for what you had done wrong.

The problem was that, far from pointing the way back to God, the priests were leading the way in turning from him.

Read 1 Samuel 2:11 – 3:1

- ❓ *In 2:13-14, how are the priests exploiting their position?*
- ❓ *In verses 15-16, what do they do that is even worse?*

The fat of the animal was the Lord's portion (see Leviticus 3:3-4, 9-10, 14-16). Eli's sons were stealing from God.

- ❓ *What are the signs of corruption in 1 Samuel 2:22-25?*

Judgment

- ❓ *In verses 27-28, what does the man say God has done for Eli and his family?*
- ❓ *How have Eli and his sons responded?*

Eli has confronted his sons about their sexual immorality, but his leadership is ineffectual. In fact, verse 29 says that he has knowingly benefited from their crimes. We may feel sympathetic for a father who cannot change the heart of his sons; but Eli is also a high priest who could have ended their employment in the tabernacle. But he did not.

God promised in Numbers 25:10-13 that the house of Aaron would be a lasting priesthood. But now this branch of that house would be brought to an end. Priests were

supposed to reconcile people with God, but the house of Aaron would never do that effectively.

- ❓ *What is the difference between 1 Samuel 2:11 and 3:1?*

A faithful priest

Interwoven throughout this story are snippets about Samuel, who grows up in the temple.

- ❓ *Find all the verses that mention him. How is he presented?*

So Samuel was qualified to serve in the temple, but not to be a priest. Yet here he is presented in priest-like terms.

Samuel's rise is a sign of the fall of Eli's family. But it also shows that God can raise up a priest from outside the house of Aaron (2:35). Ultimately this is an allusion to Jesus: an eternal priest, "holy, blameless, pure ... [who] sacrificed for sins once for all when he offered himself" (Hebrews 7:26-27).

- ❓ *So what is the answer to Eli's question in 1 Samuel 2:25?*

Pray

Confess your sins to Jesus, having confidence that he is faithful and just and can purify you from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Know that in him you have forgiveness and freedom.

A coming prophet

Are you ever tempted to wonder, “Why can’t God just SPEAK?”

In our lives, our churches and our society, it can seem to us that God is silent or powerless. Chapter 3 opens with a similar picture.

Read 1 Samuel 3:1-10

- ❓ *Where do we see darkness and silence in verses 1-3?*

In verse 4, the silence ends. Samuel hears an audible voice calling him.

- ❓ *The first three times Samuel is called, what does he think? Why (v 7)?*
- ❓ *What is different about the fourth time the Lord calls?*
- ❓ *How does this show a total reversal of the situation in verse 1?*

God’s call in verse 10 echoes his call to Moses from the burning bush: “Moses! Moses!” (Exodus 3:4). Moses replied as Samuel does: “Here I am”. God is calling Samuel just as he called Moses: to be a prophet, bringing God’s word to his people.

A word in crisis

Read 1 Samuel 3:11 – 4:1a

- ❓ *What specific word does God give Samuel (3:11-14)?*
- ❓ *What do we learn about the words God gives Samuel in general (3:19 – 4:1a)?*

Israel was in desperate crisis. There was no ruler, and tabernacle worship was horribly compromised. What did God do? He sent his word. He raised up a prophet.

This is what God always does. In every crisis, it is God’s word that we need. It is God’s word that refreshes the soul, makes us wise, restores joy to our hearts and gives light to our eyes (Psalm 19:7-8).

TIME OUT

Read Hebrews 1:1-3

- ❓ *In what ways does this show Jesus to be similar to what we have just read about Samuel?*
- ❓ *How is Jesus better than prophets like Samuel?*

Jesus is the word of God. God has spoken through his Son. And we see Jesus in all the Scriptures: the Old Testament is the Spirit-inspired promise of his coming in the Old Testament, and the New Testament is the record of his coming.

Apply

If it seems that the word of God is rare today, it is not because God is silent. It is because Christians will not speak and people will not listen.

- ❓ *What tempts you to lose confidence in the power and truth of God’s word?*
- ❓ *Is that thing actually as powerful and trustworthy as God’s word?*
- ❓ *How is God speaking to you through his word today?*



EASTER: Eight words

Last words are often significant. Jesus' last words are eternally so. So this Easter, we're looking at his seven "sayings" from the cross—and one from three days later.

Each "word" gives us a glimpse of the reason for the crucifixion, the character of the man who endured it and the blessings that flow to us from it.

Before we focus in on the scene of the cross, it's helpful to enter into the story so far. If you have time, **read Luke 22:39 – 23:1**.

Forgive them

Read Luke 23:32-34

- ❓ *Think about this scene from the perspective of...*
 - *the soldiers: what do they think they're doing?*
 - *the Father: what are the soldiers actually doing? Why is this terrible?*
 - *Jesus: what does he think or feel about them? Why is this incredible?*
- ❓ *Read Isaiah 53:7-8 and 12b, and Psalm 22:18. In what ways are the soldiers unwittingly fulfilling Scripture?*

The efficiency of Luke's description reflects the efficiency of the job itself. It's business as usual for these soldiers as they string up that day's criminals: one, two, three—job done. Yet, as Jesus' clothes are stripped away and his hands impaled and his dignity removed, his chief concern is not his painful humiliation but the souls of the very people inflicting it because, from the view of heaven, these brief verses describe a despicable crime of cosmic proportions.

And yet, remarkably, it was out of love for

these soldiers—and for every sinner blind to their rejection of a holy God—that the Father planned to send the Son, and the Son willingly came. **Read Romans 5:8.**

Apply

There are two truths we must hold in tension. First, we are totally responsible for our sin, and second, we are utterly helpless to do anything about it; so we are completely at the mercy of God. Even as Christians, we fail to see the depths of our sin. Think about it: if we had to identify and confess every specific sin we had committed in order to be forgiven of it, what hope would we have?

But we have this hope: a Saviour who paid for us, and who prays for us—"Father, forgive them"—and a Father who delights to show mercy.

- ❓ *How does this humble you? How does it make you grateful?*

As each study this week will be focused on a single verse, try to memorise each day's "saying". You could write it somewhere you will see it or set a reminder on your phone, so that you can pause and pray about what you've been reflecting on later in the day.

Pray

As you go about your day today, look for opportunities to echo Jesus' prayer for the people around you.

You will be with me

They say that looks can be deceiving. That has never been more true than on Golgotha's hill.

Read Luke 23:35-42

- ❓ *Look at verses 35, 37, 38, 39. What conclusion have people come to about...

 - who Jesus really is (or isn't)?
 - what he should do?*
- ❓ *What conclusion has the second criminal come to (v 40-42)?*
- ❓ *What does he admit about himself?*

The bystanders look at Jesus—bloodied, beaten and gasping for breath—and conclude that he is exactly what he looks like: a sham Messiah; no king at all.

The second criminal looks at Jesus—bloodied, beaten and gasping for breath—and by faith sees the King who will one day ascend his throne and rule with power. So, as the bystanders jeer at Jesus, “Save yourself!” this man turns and pleads with Jesus, *Save me*. And he is rewarded with the most wonderful promise...

Read Luke 23:43

These are familiar words—but it's worth pausing to chew them over.

- ❓ *Reflect on the significance of each of these phrases in turn. Why were they good news in the ear of this criminal?*
 - “Truly I tell you” • “today”
 - “you will be with me” • “in paradise”

Apply

Jesus refused to save himself so that he

could save you. If we too admit our guilt, recognise Jesus' authority and cry out to him for rescue, we receive the same promise: “Truly I tell you [on the day of your death] you will be with me in paradise”.

- ❓ *What about this encounter gives us particular hope when we're feeling...

 - discouraged by our sin and by the way we keep letting God down?
 - the weakness of our bodies or the nearness of death?*

In some ways we can have even greater confidence than that criminal. Jesus no longer looks at us from the cross but from his throne in heaven (Revelation 1). He is risen, ascended and coming back as King—and he will take you to be with him for ever.

Pray

*There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.*

*The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there may I, though vile as he,
Wash all my sins away.*

*When this poor lisping, stammering tongue
Lies silent in the grave,
Then in a nobler, sweeter song,
I'll sing thy power to save.*

(“There is a fountain”, William Cowper)



Woman, behold your son

A crucifixion was a bloody, distressing spectacle. Here the apostle John tells us about some women with strong stomachs and devoted hearts...

Full family

Read John 19:25-27

- ❓ Who, does John tell us, was watching Jesus die (v 25)? Why, do you think?
- ❓ What does Jesus say to Mary (his mother) and John (“the disciple whom he loved”)? Why, do you think?
- ❓ Why does John choose to include this in his Gospel, do you think? What point might he be making? (See John 20:30-31 for John’s “editorial process”.)

In his moment of greatest agony, Jesus shows concern for his mother. He sees a woman who is about to lose her son, and ensures that she has someone to care for her. He sees a disciple who is about to lose his best friend, and ensures that he has someone to love and be loved by.

▼ Apply

There is something wonderfully human about this. Jesus experienced the full depth of relationships that we do. He knows what it’s like to watch someone you love face loss—that gut-level instinct to do whatever you can to help. And yet, as always, Jesus shows us humanity in full perfection. When we are in physical pain or under emotional stress, we often retreat in self-pity or lash out in resentment. But Jesus continued to look out in compassion.

- ❓ In what sense is this a comfort to you? In what sense is it a challenge?

New family

There is also a bigger point to be made here. After all, we know that Jesus had other brothers and sisters who could have taken care of Mary (Matthew 13:55-56). And if this was primarily about a long-term care package, it could have been put in place before this moment or after Jesus’ resurrection. Besides, Jesus’ words are not so much a request (*Please look after Mary when I’m gone*) as a statement of fact (“Here is your mother”). So this saying from the cross is also a hint at what Jesus’ death will achieve: it will bind his followers together as family.

New families are formed at the foot of the cross (Ephesians 2:14-22). Our Lord’s blood creates ties that are thicker than water.

▼ Apply

Read 1 John 3:16-18

- ❓ Is there someone in your church family whom Jesus would have you take “into [your] home”?
- ❓ What would it look like to genuinely treat them as your new son/mother/brother/sister?

Start by praying for them now. And then call them or message them!

My God, my God...

Pause a moment to consider this: what would it feel like to be abandoned by the person you most love in your hour of greatest need—and to know their displeasure?

That gives us a small sense of the emotional force behind today's word from the cross.

Read Matthew 27:32-50

- ❓ *Look at v 46. What is significant about...*
 - *what Jesus says?*
 - *the way Jesus says it?*
- ❓ *What is the evidence that Jesus has indeed been forsaken by God (v 43, 45—see Amos 8:9 for the significance of darkness)?*

These words are not a whimper but a deep cry of anguish. This is the only time in the synoptic Gospels when Jesus does not address God as his Father. The bystanders mishear Jesus' cry to "Eli" and think he's calling "Elijah" (who Jewish tradition said would appear from heaven to help in times of trouble).

There are scarcely any words that can describe Jesus' agony. So it's significant that he reaches for Israel's songbook, the Psalms, to put words to the experience.

Read Psalm 22:1-21

- ❓ *What similarities do you see between Psalm 22 and the scene in Matthew? Find as many as you can.*

For every hour of his life so far, Jesus has experienced only the love, delight and pleasure of his Father. But for these three dark and lonely hours, Jesus now experiences the full weight of God's anger at sin.

- ❓ *What, then, is the answer to Jesus'*

question in Matthew 27:46—"My God, why...?"

Why? Jesus knows the answer to his own question, of course. He is willingly drinking the cup of God's wrath (Matthew 26:39); he is giving "his life as a ransom for many" (20:28). In that moment, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Apply

Why did God forsake Christ? So that he can welcome you. So that you can enjoy the love, delight and pleasure of the Father every day of your life. Even in those times when you are too distressed to sleep (Psalm 22:2)... even when you are scorned by others (v 6)... even when your body is broken and your heart is faint (v 14)... Even then, you are not forsaken, because Christ became the forsaken man of Psalm 22 for you.

- ❓ *When God feels far away or as if he doesn't love you...*
 - *what hope does Matthew 27 give you to remember?*
 - *what words does Psalm 22 give you to pray?*

Pray

Read through Psalm 22:1-21 again, thanking Jesus for enduring each specific agony for your sake.



I am thirsty

Try to remember a time when you were really, really thirsty. How would describe the sensation, and the thoughts or feelings that accompanied it?

Before we turn back to John's crucifixion account, let's trace the theme of "thirst" through his Gospel so far.

The well

Read John 4:4-14

- ❓ *Who is thirsty (v 7)?*
- ❓ *What kind of water does Jesus tell the woman she can have, if she asks (v 10)?*
- ❓ *Where do we get that kind of water, and what does it give us (v 13-14)?*

So Jesus is moving the conversation from physical thirst to spiritual thirst.

- ❓ *What exactly does it mean to be spiritually thirsty, do you think? How is that like physical thirst?*

The river

Read John 7:37-39

- ❓ *Who is "thirsty" here?*
- ❓ *What's the solution to this spiritual thirst (v 38)? Where do we get it, and what does it do for us?*
- ❓ *What had to happen before people could receive this "living water" (end v 39)?*

Run dry

Read John 19:28-29

The Scripture that John has in mind here, as Jesus hangs on the cross, is probably Psalm 22:15.

- ❓ *Who is "thirsty" now?*
- ❓ *What do these words tell us about what the cross is achieving?*

Every human knows what it is to be thirsty; and every human knows what it is to be spiritually thirsty. Ever since Eden, we've rejected the Lord—the fount of "living water", who alone can keep us spiritually alive—and dug our own broken cisterns (Jeremiah 2:13). Like the woman at the well, we look to other people to satisfy us with their love or approval or admiration. But it doesn't work. Our thirst is killing us.

Not so for Jesus: he was a man whose soul sprang with life and vitality, in dependence on his Father and in the power of the Spirit. Yet on the cross he not only endured physical thirst but took on himself our spiritual condition: "I am thirsty". And in so doing, he opened up a spring of living water for anyone who would come to him and drink.

His thirst brought water; his death brought life. This was the moment of his greatest glory (John 7:39; 12:23). Will you come to him and drink?

Apply

- ❓ *Jesus thirsted so that you could drink. How should that change the way you think and feel about the other places you go to for satisfaction?*
- ❓ *What will it look like for you to come to him and drink?*

It is finished

Hitting “send” on a big work project... emptying the ironing basket... completing an application process... Few words are as satisfying as this one: “FINISHED!”

Read John 19:30

- ❓ *“It is finished.” How might those words have sounded to those watching the crucifixion?*
- ❓ *How should they sound to believers on Good Friday 2020, do you think?*

The Greek word is *tetelestai*—finished, completed, done. In New Testament times it was written on business receipts to indicate that they were paid in full. This is no note of surrender but rather a cry of triumph—Christ’s saving work is finished. The sin of his people is paid for, in full, for ever.

TIME OUT

As with so much in this scene, we can hear in these words from the cross an echo of psalm 22. We read the first part of this Psalm two days ago—a song of immense suffering, rejection and despair. But then there’s a shift as the tone changes, and the psalm becomes a song of triumph.

Read Psalm 22:22-31

- ❓ *What does this psalm hint that Jesus will achieve on the cross (v 26, 27, 29)?*

▼ Apply

Sometimes we are haunted by past mistakes that seem too much for mercy. But Jesus says, “It is finished”. There is no debt too big for him to pay.

Sometimes we mess up “big time”—or for the umpteenth time—and imagine that we need to withdraw from the Lord for a while until our guilt has “worn off”. But Jesus says, “It is finished”. You can run to him in repentance immediately and enjoy his forgiveness instantly.

Sometimes we get mired in feelings of resentment or jealousy that we can’t seem to move on from. But Jesus says, “It is finished”. He’s set you free from sin, so you don’t have to bring it into your day today.

Sometimes we live as if we’ve got something to prove—if not to God then at least to his people. But Jesus says, “It is finished”. You can stop striving because there’s nothing left to earn and no other approval that matters.

Sometimes we struggle to forgive other Christians. We keep chewing over the slight or injustice committed against us. But Jesus says, “It is finished”. Their penalty is paid in full, so you can entrust this to him.

- ❓ *Which of those scenarios is resonating with you at the moment? Bring it before the Lord in prayer now.*
- ❓ *When else this week might you need to remind yourself, “It is finished”? Make sure you do!*