

explore

Time with God



In this issue

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

It's serious!

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

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

We're serious!

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

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How to use *Explore*

Find a time you can read the Bible each day



Find a place where you can be quiet and think



Ask God to help you understand



Carefully read through the Bible passage for today



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



Pray about what you have read



Spending time with God

How to have a regular 'Quiet Time'

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

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

It is often a struggle to be consistent in finding a daily time to spend with God. Children, the busyness of life, special nights out, holidays, or just sheer exhaustion can all conspire to get in the way. However, there is no substitute for just getting into a good habit. There are many patterns that suit different people, and yours may change over time. Whatever you choose to do, guard your time with God jealously. If you come to it hungry to learn from the Lord, and to feed on the truth, it will be a place of nurture and

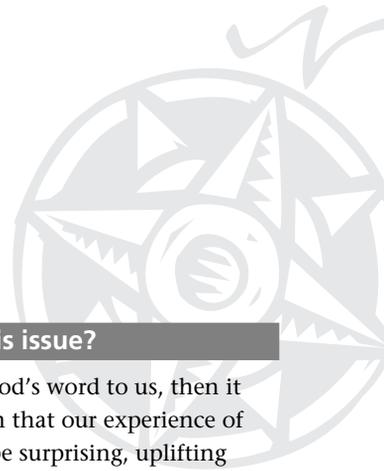
growth, and a source of direction and strength for your daily life.

🕒 **TIME:** Find a time when you will not be disturbed, and when the cobwebs are cleared from your mind. Many people have found that the morning is the best time, as it sets you up for the day.

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

But you may not be a 'morning person' so last thing at night, or, if you're free, a mid-morning break. Whatever suits you.

📍 **PLACE:** Jesus says that we are not to make a great show of our religion (see Matthew 6 v 5-6), but rather pray with the door to our room shut. So, anywhere you can be quiet and private is the key, which makes your bedroom the top choice for many. Some people who commute plan to get to work a few minutes earlier and get their Bible out in an office, or some other quiet corner. Some like to sit in a favourite armchair with a cup of tea at hand. Others find sitting at a table or desk more productive. The rule is that there's no rule—whatever works for you!



🕯️ **PRAYER:** Although *Explore* helps with specific prayer ideas from the passage, you should try to develop your own lists to pray through. Perhaps you could pray each day for one family member, one friend, and a fellow believer? And how about keeping a prayer diary where you record your prayer requests, and also how God has answered them. Often our problem is not so much ‘who to pray for’, as *what to pray for them!* That’s why Bible reading and prayer are inseparable. We are reminded from God’s word what is truly important, and it will shape the nature of our prayers for ourselves, the world and others.

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

What’s in this issue?

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

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

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

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

Remember!

- **It’s quality, not quantity, that counts.** Better a few minutes thinking about a few verses, than to skim through pages without absorbing anything.
- **Falling behind:** It’s inevitable that you will occasionally miss a day. Don’t be paralysed by guilt. Just start again.
- **It’s about developing a love relationship, not a law relationship.** Don’t fall into the trap of thinking that ‘doing your quiet time’ is an end in itself. The sign that your daily time with God is real is when you start to love Him more and serve more wholeheartedly.

THE BIBLE: Look who's talking!

▶ Reading: 2 Peter 1 v 16-21

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

God spoke through men

▶ Read 2 Peter 1 v 20-21

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

❓ *What do these verses say about that?*

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

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

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

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

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

Men spoke from God

▶ Read 2 Peter 1 v 16-19

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

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

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

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

pray thru'

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

Sure thing

2

▶ Reading: 1 Peter 1 v 22 – 2 v 3

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

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

New is true?

▶ Read 1 Peter 1 v 24

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

time out

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

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

Old is dead?

▶ Read v 22, 23

❓ What is Peter's argument in these verses?

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

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

The Bible—boring?

▶ Read 2 v 1-3

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

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

Spiritual minds

▶ Reading: 1 Corinthians 2

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

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

God speaks nonsense!

▶ Read 1 Corinthians 2

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

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

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

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

time out

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

Spiritual minds

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

apply

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

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

Health food

▶ Reading: Matthew 4 v 1-4

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

Essential

▶ Read Matthew 4 v 1-4

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

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

time out

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

- ❓ *What implications are there for the time we will need to spend with God's word?*
- ❓ *If God's words are essential to live by, don't miss a meal! Plan for regular times to read the Scriptures. Make it a priority—which will mean other things have to go lower down...*

time out

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

Nourishing

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

pray thru'

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

Enjoy

▶ Reading: Psalm 19

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

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

What's good about the Bible?

▶ Read Psalm 19

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It satisfies

time out

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

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

pray thru'

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

No messing...

6

▶ **Reading:** Hebrews 4 v 12, 13

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

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

Razor-edged probe

▶ **Read Hebrews 4 v 12, 13**

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

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

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

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

No messing

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

time out

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

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

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

▶ **Read Revelation 22 v 18, 19**

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

Over to you

▶ **Reading:** Mark 4 v 1-20

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

Parable of the sower

▶ **Read Mark 4 v 1-20**

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

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

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

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

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

pray thru

Do you want to be good soil?

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

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

THE KING'S SERMON



▶ Reading: Matthew 5 v 1-5

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

▶ Read Matthew 5 v 1-5

time out

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

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

Blessed...

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

- ? *Do you long for Jesus to be able to describe you like that?*
- ? *So what are the top-of-the-list characteristics for 'blessed' people?*

Poor... mourners... meek

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

people's criticisms meekly.

▶ Read Isaiah 57 v 14, 15

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

More privileges

Look again at what Jesus has promised those blessed people:

▶ Re-read verses 3-5

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

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

▶ Read Isaiah 61 v 1-3

pray thru'

- ! *Praise God if He has made us at all like this! But has He? Are these characteristics really seen in your life?*
- ! *If they are, then one thing is sure—we'll want to become more and more like this, more and more like the King Himself.*

'Blessed people'

▶ Reading: Matthew 5 v 6-9

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

Hungry for righteousness

▶ Read v 6

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

time out

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

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

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

The merciful

▶ Read v 7

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

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

KNOW GOD'S MERCY



BECOME MERCIFUL



OBTAIN GOD'S MERCY AT THE
END OF YOUR LIFE

The pure in heart

▶ Read v 8

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

▶ Now read Hebrews 7 v 26

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

The peacemakers

▶ Read v 9

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

▶ Read Colossians 1 v 20, 21

pray thru

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

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

For my sake...

10

▶ Reading: Matthew 5 v 10-12

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

▶ But read v 10-12!

The persecuted are 'blessed'

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

❓ Why? (v 12: find two reasons)

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

▶ Read Acts 5 v 40, 41

What kind of people?

Not...

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

But...

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

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

we will suffer for His sake.

▶ John 15 v 18-21 puts it straight

pray thru'

Do you suffer for Jesus?

If so...

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

If not...

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

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

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