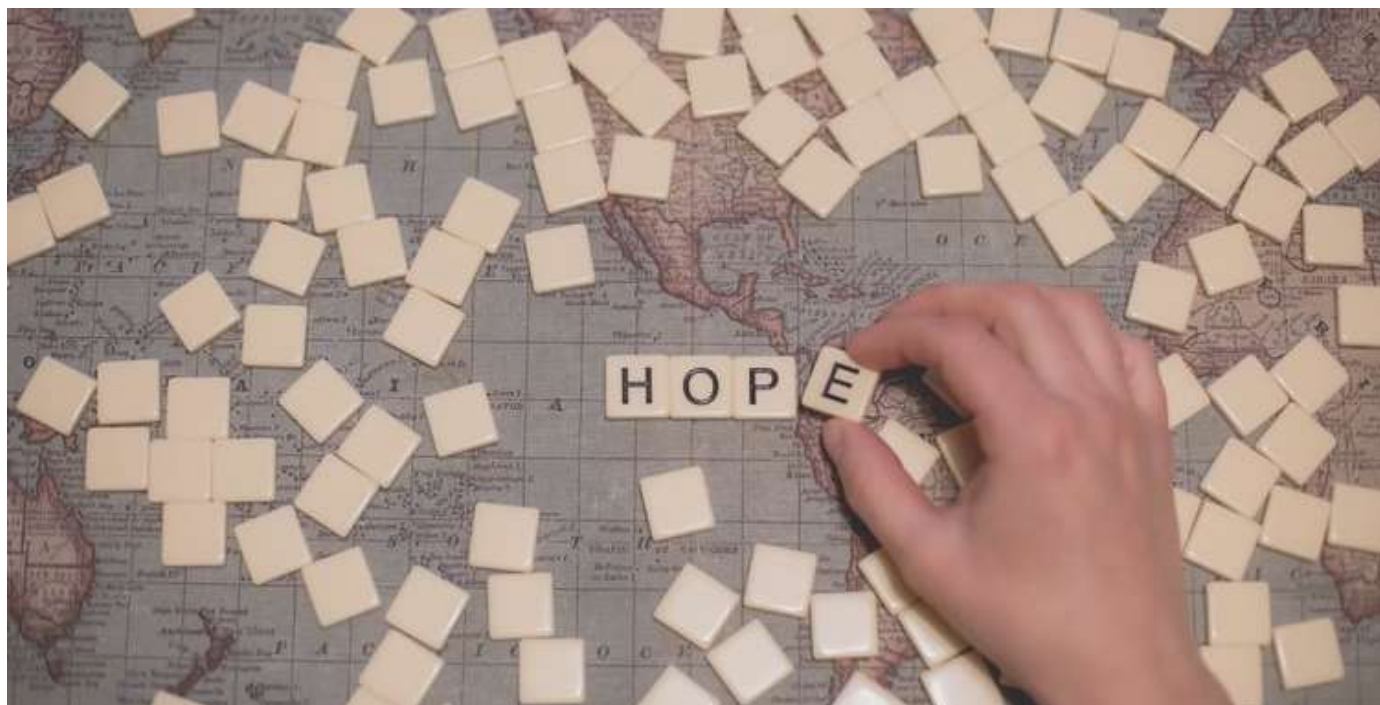


WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP: BIBLE CONFIDENCE AND KNOWING THE STORY



Session 6: Church and Future Hope

What does the New Testament emphasise about the relationship God wants with us? (Being with God)

What does the New Testament emphasise about who we are as human beings? (Becoming like Christ)

What does the New Testament emphasise about our calling as human beings? (Joining in with the Spirit)

Reading it well: How do we apply the Bible well to the questions we wrestle with today?

Practical suggestions: How do we read the Bible well together?

The death and resurrection of the Messiah Jesus



was the centre point of God's plan to restore His people and creation in every way, and the fulfilment of God's promises.

The story of the Bible is one of this salvation, and, as we have seen the meaning of salvation is not about a rescue or an escape from the earth to a place called heaven. Instead, salvation means the world and human beings being made whole.

The books and letters of Acts to Revelation model for us how the early church began to respond to this, knowing that through Jesus God's kingdom was present, but that the final defeat of evil was to come. Paul's letters wrestle with the same tension between the already and not yet aspects of the kingdom of God seen in Jesus' life.

As disciples who are in the same position – living between Jesus' first coming and His second, the New Testament is a resource for us. A testament is a "covenant relationship", and so the New Testament unfolds how a new world had begun and through the Holy Spirit disciples of Christ receive a new identity and a new relationship with God. These books paint a picture for us about how to live lives of discipleship, taking off the 'old self' and putting on the new.

As we end this module, and the 'Way of Discipleship' course, we can briefly trace how the life of discipleship is unpacked through important themes in these New Testament books. What do Acts, the letters and Revelation show about being with God, becoming like Christ and joining in with the Spirit?



What does the New Testament emphasise about the relationship God wants with us? (Being with God)



God's relationship with human beings: Adopting us as His children.

"In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves." (Ephesians 1: 5-6)

Paul paints a picture of Christians who were once part of 'Adam's family', and slaves to sin and a law we can't keep. Through Christ, we are bought out of this slavery. "So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, you are also an heir through God." (Galatians 4:7)

By using the language of adoption, the New Testament emphasises how much we receive as God's heirs. In the film *Ben-Hur* Judah (a Jew) escapes from a sinking ship in which he is a slave. In doing so, he saves the life of a Roman commander, Arrius, whose son has been killed.

Arrius adopts Judah, leading to his being forgiven for his supposed crimes, being given a new name, "young Arrius," and receiving a full inheritance. Arrius declares the adoption by giving his ancestral signet ring to young Arrius, who says he has received "a new life, a new home, a new father".

In the same way, a relationship of adoption as Christians means our debts are cancelled, and receive all that belongs to heirs of God.



The love of God. The starting point for a relationship with God is His love, and in Christ the nature of that self-giving that love has been fully revealed.

John writes, "God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:8-10)

Nothing can separate a disciple from God's love. (Romans 8:38). Paul's greatest prayer is that we "may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3: 18-19)

God's relationship with human beings: Reconciling us and all creation to Himself, bring peace and wholeness

"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." (Colossians 1: 19-20)

Rather than having to wait until the end of time, in Jesus the fulness of God's promise to restore the order and wholeness of creation and people is offered now. We are no longer cut off from God in any way.

God's relationship with human beings: Justifying us.

Justification by faith has rightfully been emphasised as an important part of understanding salvation. It emphasises the complete forgiveness and right relationship we gain with God because of what Jesus did.

It means we find ourselves before God in a place in which it is as if we had never done anything to disobey Him.

A much-loved priest in the Philippines carried around the burden of a secret sin he had committed many years before. He had asked for forgiveness but still had no peace.

In his parish was a woman who loved God and who claimed to be able to speak with Christ and He with her. The sceptical priest wanted to test her and said, "The next time you speak with Jesus, I want you to ask Him what sin I committed while I was in training college." The woman agreed.

A few days later they met and the priest asked her, "Well, did Christ visit you in your dreams?" "Yes, he did," she replied. "And did you ask him what sin I committed in college?" "Yes." "And what did he say?" "He said, 'I don't remember.'"

God's final judgement has already taken place on the cross. Christians can live in the freedom of having been made right before God, and being in right relationship to Him.

"There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." (Romans 3: 22-24)

God's relationship with human beings: God restores us through grace.

We still struggle to accept the unconditional nature of God's love, and the New Testament reflects this in the story of Acts, and in many letters, as early Christians worked out the relationship between God's grace (His favour given to those who don't deserve it) and God's law.

God's grace is not just a New Testament revelation – the Jewish people were never driven by works or effort – Judaism was always a religion of grace. Jewish people believed that they were saved because they had been chosen by God.



Nevertheless, they were marked out by ways of life given to them by God and by signs of His relationship with Him – such as circumcision, or keeping certain food laws.

The good news of the New Testament is not that we are freed from any kind of law – those who are adopted as God's children will still want to obey Him ("So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good." Romans 7:12)

The good news is that no one is excluded because they haven't obeyed particular laws which act as 'boundary-markers'. Non-Jewish people (Gentiles) are now invited in to God's family simply because of His grace – a grace shown to everyone.

To those who might fear that their behaviour or their tribal identity is the way they earn their relationship with God, the good news is that "...it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-not by works, so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2: 8-9)

As disciples we can only "be with God" through His grace – it is nothing to do with our merit – and we can know that His grace means no one is excluded. This is a constant theme in the story of Acts, as the church began to realise that Gentiles were included in God's plan, and in many of the letters (particularly Romans and Galatians).

The meaning of faith.

The way that we receive this grace and relationship is through faith – and the New Testament explores this in detail. As we have seen in module 1, having faith is not about psychological certainty about a list of beliefs. Rather it is more about placing our entire confidence and trust in Christ (sometimes even when we don't understand).

In Galatians 2:20 Paul expresses the way he entrusts himself to God by saying, “the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.”

This kind of genuine trust will affect everything. James' letter was written to those who thought faith was just about agreeing intellectually to the good news without any intention of living faithfully to it. Because they were saved by grace, they argued, there was no need to live differently.

But James argues from Abraham's example, saying “faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.” (James 2:22)

While we are brought in to relationship with God, not through our efforts but through His forgiveness, the sign that our trust and allegiance have meaning will be that we will naturally want to act in obedience to God.

We are saved by God's grace alone and then we are called to live faithfully into that truth. Faith is an allegiance which leads to a new way of living.

We previously explored the fear that Christians can have about whether we have enough faith - if I am saved by faith in Christ alone the question is, “How much do I need?” This can lead to 'salvation anxiety' - the opposite of the grace God offers.



Steve Chalke asks, “How can we be saved by grace through faith? We are either saved by grace or saved by faith. It can't be both.”

Tom Wright argues that when Paul speaks in Galatians and Romans about faith, it is more helpful to translate it as “the faithfulness of Christ” rather than “faith in Christ”.

He is more concerned to emphasise that Jesus as the Messiah was faithful to God's purposes, and that this is what matters, rather than the faith by which Jew or Gentile believe the good news.

By knowing that we are saved more by the faithfulness of Christ, rather than the amount of our faith in Christ, we can be free to know that being accepted by God is much more about Jesus' faithfulness to God's plan rather than how strong or weak our faith may feel.

However much we might agree or disagree with the translation, the most important thing is that God's faithfulness to us always remains even if and when we find ourselves faithless. As Paul writes to Timothy, “...if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.” (2 Timothy 2:13)



What does the New Testament emphasise about who we are as human beings? (Becoming like Christ)



Humans are renewed creations.

The New Testament shows how God makes it possible to be with Him through making us righteous – those who trust in Christ can now be given a place among God’s covenant people, with a new future.

But it then focusses on how this new identity leads naturally to a life in which we are being changed, as we live into being part of God’s new creation. Just as God’s plan is to restore all things, He wants to restore us.

We look at others, and ourselves, differently:

“So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5: 16-17)

A restored person becomes more like Christ.

In the New Testament, a fully human life is one in which “Christ is formed in you”. (Galatians 4:19)

For disciples our baptism is a time when we died to our own way of living, and from now on live a new life – totally identifying with Christ, and living life as He would live it:

“We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” (Romans 6:4)

Our *natural* response to what God has done is to live differently.

Many of the letters unfold what God has done, and then pivot to challenge or invite Christians to live in response to that.

In the first three chapters of Ephesians Paul outlines God’s plan to unite humanity to Himself and one another, giving thanks for His blessings and goodness. In chapter 4 he calls them to respond,

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4: 1-3)

Above all, this new life is characterised by self-giving love.

Paul writes that those who hear “about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus” will “put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness”. (Ephesians 4: 22-24)

Change comes as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit



The Old Testament pointed to the time when God would pour out His Spirit on everyone (Joel 2:28), and Jesus promised His disciples that when the Spirit came, He would lead them into all truth. (John 16:13)

On the day of Pentecost these promises come to pass as the fire and wind (which had demonstrated God's presence in the Old Testament) come to rest on each disciple.

The New Testament describes and explores how the world now lives in the age of God's Spirit. The presence of God's Holy Spirit in the world, the power that raised Jesus from death and brings the reality of God's future promise into the present, is the source of any meaningful change in our lives.

In the book of Acts, it is the Holy Spirit who directs all that happens, sending, warning and empowering the disciples at all stages.

As we seek to become more like Christ, the only path offered is in cooperation with God's Spirit. Those "who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God" (Romans 8:14) and while Christians seek to live to God's eternal standards, we cannot do it "by the flesh" (our own efforts) but by the Spirit. (Romans 8:1-13)

We have explored throughout the 'Way of Discipleship' how genuine transformation is not a matter of 'trying' but of 'training'. It is the character of the inner person that generates our outward behaviours, and our deeper character is changed by the things we practise regularly, which allow God's Spirit to shape our desires.

As we grow in worship, or prayer or stillness, or other practices, we are keeping in step with the Spirit. (Galatians 5:25) In doing so the Holy Spirit can grow fruit of Jesus' character (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness...) within us.

In these times of focussing on God "contemplating the Lord's glory" we can find the way to "being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18)





The Holy Spirit's work in restoring humanity to each other.

The New Testament demonstrates people becoming more like Christ in unity and love as the Holy Spirit breaks down the barriers created between human beings, while celebrating the gift of difference.

In Genesis human beings had sought to remove and control the differences between people by building the empire of Babel, and ended up scattered (chapter 11). Babel (or Babylon) is a recurring picture of human control throughout the Bible.

But in Acts we see how at Pentecost this is reversed in two amazing ways - God uses all the languages of those who are present to communicate - He affirms their differences - but He gives His Spirit to all of them - making them one community in Christ.

The story of Acts describes this creation of a new family, as the Jewish followers of Jesus began to see and respond to how God was now calling all people. When explaining to his fellow Jewish believers how God is including Gentiles, Peter points to the work of the Holy Spirit as the evidence, "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us." (Acts 15:8)

The second half of the book of Acts focusses on the ministry of Paul in bringing the good news to all, and his letters contain many reflections on how the Spirit is working to break down barriers between people:

"For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." (1 Corinthians 12:13)

Through Christ God has broken down the wall of hostility (Ephesians 2:14) between different people groups..."in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:26-28)

This unity in difference is the ultimate picture of what a humanity restored in Christ looks like, and the vision God has for human beings. In the book of Revelation John sees

"...a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" (Revelation 7:9-10)

The New Testament reaches towards a vision for all disciples today - of being a people who are becoming like Christ, united in Him and worshipping Him forever.



What does the New Testament emphasise about our calling as human beings? (Joining in with the Spirit)



Luke begins the book of Acts by reminding his reader that the first part of his story – the gospel – relates what Jesus 'began to do and teach'.

He is implying that in this second part (Acts) he is describing what Jesus continues to do and teach through His disciples.

By giving His Spirit and giving gifts to His disciples, Jesus empowers and sends them to bring His salvation to the world. What started in Jerusalem now goes out to the whole world – and we have taken up this mission.

When He ascends, Jesus is finally enthroned as King over all creation, and gives His disciples the authority to act in His name.

The New Testament describes how our calling as Jesus' body – His church – is to join in with His work in the world as we look in hope for God's Kingdom to come to earth in its fulness.

The purpose and life of the church

As we have seen in module 3, the church is called to be a "sign of God's reign and a foretaste of His rule" – who we are is as significant as what we do. The New Testament offers many images and descriptions to help us grasp this identity and task.



Who we are.

Paul describes disciples as God's chosen and "holy" people – set apart by Him to continue His purposes in the world. We do this as people who know we are "dearly loved". (Colossians 3:12)

The Bible finishes by celebrating us as God's "bride". (Revelation 21:2) Throughout the Bible God has called people into covenant relationship with Him.

Paul describes how the way in which a husband and wife are united as "one flesh" is a picture of the deep covenant intimacy God wants with His people, (Ephesians 5:21-22) under Christ as the "head of the church". (Ephesians 1:22)

Knowing ourselves to be loved and united in this way, we live as one body, the fulfilment of God's plan for a newly created humanity in which "each member belongs to the others" (Romans 12:5), a "family of believers" (Galatians 6:10), no longer strangers, separated by ethnicity or background, but "fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household". (Ephesians 2:19)



God's plan was always to call a people to be a blessing to the world, set apart for Him, worshipping Him, demonstrating His love, acting in a priestly way to connect God to people, and people to God. The New Testament reveals this calling to Israel is now extended to all people.

The church becomes God's temple and priesthood. No longer is God's presence focussed in a particular building, but in Christ we "are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." (Ephesians 2:22)

"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?" (1 Corinthians 3:16)

We are "like living stones...being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

In Christ we are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." (1 Peter 2:5,9)

As such, we are living representatives of Christ in the world.



We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.
(2 Corinthians 5: 20)

How we live.

The New Testament describes the life of the church as being distinctive in world-changing ways.

As we have seen, the life of this new temple, creation and humanity is uniquely multi-ethnic, breaking down barriers and marked by love.

It is striking how Acts focuses on how the good news comes to those who previously felt excluded. Persecution forces the church away from Jerusalem to Gentile areas.

Philip takes the gospel to Samaria – Israel's enemies, and many of them come to Him.

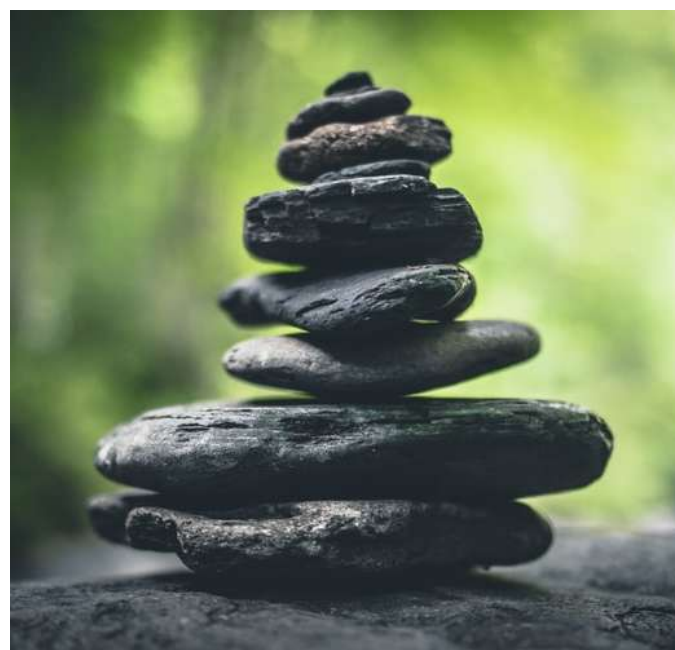
A persecutor of Christians, Saul, becomes the most passionate missionary – taking the gospel on (at least) three mission trips, planting new churches in Gentile areas. Peter has a vision about how non-Jewish people are not seen as impure, and then is led to Cornelius, a Roman soldier, on whom the Spirit comes.

Antioch, previously dividing people up into separate walled areas, becomes the first city in which people cross those barriers to worship Jesus together. It is here, where people's ethnic identities become less significant than their allegiance to Christ, that disciples are first identified by His name – Christians.

The New Testament also describes how these early Christian churches live as salt and light within surrounding cultures. They have a calling to bring life to their wider communities, but challenge many of its values through their life together.

Within a context in which Christians were supposed to obey Caesar as the highest authority, a continuing theme is how to live with integrity under a different Lord – Christ.

By treating men and women, slaves and their owners, rich and poor as equals within God's people, Christians challenged the very structures of societies around them.



What we do.

The New Testament describes in very practical terms what it looked like for God's people to be joining in with the Spirit, as they lived within the salvation of God's kingdom and sought to offer that salvation to others.

They did so both through their active witness and a Spirit-empowered life which put the message on display, transformed every part of life, and was energised by hope.

Active witness.

(See 'Joining in with the Spirit' session 3 for the difference between being a witness and an evangelist).

Jesus' final words to His disciples in Acts link the coming of the Spirit with active witness – movement outward is a natural response to the sending Spirit.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

Paul is the most deliberate example of this missionary activity, with three trips through Asia Minor (Turkey) and Greece.

His aim is to start witnessing kingdom communities all over the Roman Empire: “So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.

It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation.” (Romans 15: 19-20)

His planting strategy is simple – to start where people are, to pass on the message, and to establish leadership and the Lord's Supper.

Yet when persecution breaks out against the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8) it leads to a rapid missionary expansion, with ordinary disciples now making the good news known – it is not only the job of the 'official spokespeople' of the church.

The life of the community.

The New Testament expects that most people witness in their locality, through their life together. The church is marked by a passion for mission far away, and nearby.



Acts gives us two pictures of the life of the church, meeting together daily in the temple. In other words, this new community is demonstrating what the Temple, as the place where heaven and earth meet, should be.

Luke describes this young church as having three defining features, which act as a framework for a healthy church. (Acts 2: 42-47)

They were devoted to God, living out the practices that helped them to be with Him, and open to His presence: “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts... They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts...praising God.”

As Jesus' body on earth, they demonstrated the life of God's kingdom in their life together and in their individual lives. “Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.”

The church is the prime example of what the future kingdom will look like – a 'film trailer' for the ultimate masterpiece of God's recreated world.

They experienced people being drawn into God's salvation through the visibility of their life together. They were “enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

Just as the Old Testament imagined the nations being drawn to God by seeing the life of salvation through Israel, so the attractive life of God's kingdom is the magnet which enables people to become disciples.

Every part of life.

Following on from this, while much of the New Testament addresses internal church relationships and issues, the expectation is that the life of the church will be a transforming influence on the world, seeing God's kingdom come.

Paul's vision of Christ's victory is that it will bring "unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." (Ephesians 1:10) Christ rules over and redeems all creation. (Colossians 1:15)

Through the church, God's wisdom is to reach every part of creation: "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms..." (Ephesians 3:10) As such, Christians live in the world as "children of Light". (Ephesians 5:8)

All of human life, including the most everyday activities, is lived for God's glory. "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." (1 Corinthians 10:31)

In Romans Paul summarises this whole-life discipleship: "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.

Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out." (Romans 12:1-2, The Message)

Disciples live this life for the sake of the world.

As those who are to seek to live as citizens as far as is possible, and seek the welfare of their society, they are to "shine like stars" among the darkness of a crooked generation (Philippians 2:15), to "do what is right in the eyes of everybody" (Romans 12:17) so that they can "win their respect" (1 Thessalonians 4:12).

The New Testament does not provide an inflexible blueprint for how Christians seek the Kingdom of God in every society. But its stories and very real examples shape our imagination for our contexts, inviting us to improvise.



In the *Drama of Scripture* the authors describe the story of Gary, a businessman, who wants to demonstrate God's life through his business, being a "Kingdom professional". He "witnesses to God's good intention for business by placing love thy neighbour, stewardship of God's resources, and justice above profit.

He strives towards the ideal of a kingdom company, a business enterprise shaped by the biblical story that will bless the lives of its own employees and their families, its suppliers and its customers."



Energised by hope.

The New Testament calls human beings to live out God's kingdom in anticipation of Jesus' return and the final renewal of all things.

It is this hope that strengthens them in the midst of difficulties and the incompleteness of His healing work. Alongside faith and love, hope is the enduring foundation for any disciple.

The hope is not that Christians will leave earth, but that one day Christ will return to restore all things, revealing our true glory, and enabling us to live into God's image, reigning with Him.

To live in hope today is to live in anticipation of what we will one day experience.

Only a conviction about the future can give meaning and shape to life in the present. As Bishop Leslie Newbigin said, "Meaningful action in history is possible only when there is some vision of a future goal."

The New Testament wrestles with changing expectations of when this might happen. It unfolds the harsh realities of living in our present in-between state, including in Revelation our sometimes horrific human and spiritual battles.

But Peter promises that God will "lay everything bare" (2 Peter 3:1), and that what is not of His kingdom and love will ultimately be defeated.

For disciples, joining in with God's vision, the New Testament is immersed in this hope which gives confidence: "Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold." (2 Corinthians 3:12)

As such, Paul prays that

“

the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.” (Ephesians 1:18, 19)



Reading it well: How do we apply the Bible well to the questions we wrestle with today?



The New Testament reveals Christians working through issues and controversies together.

While Christ is the fullest revelation of God we have, Paul writes that until the world and human beings are completely restored, we continue to “see through a glass darkly”. (1 Corinthians 13:12) We continue to live in a time of *progressive revelation*.

As such then, and now, there are questions about how to live faithfully which Christians disagree on, and new situations where we wrestle with how to apply God’s revealed truth well.

Our divisions are a reflection of the fact that historically Christians have been unable to agree on some theological matters, and Christians hold different understandings of some ethical questions – for example in our day the nature of human identity and relationships.

When we approach difficult questions, four chief lenses (or 'sources of God’s revelation') have been developed through which we can seek to get as close as we can to a faithful Christian response.

Three (Scripture, Reason, Tradition) were developed by Richard Hooker (1554–1600), a prominent Anglican priest, and a fourth (Experience) was added by John Wesley (1703–1791), who was responding to his sense of God’s Spirit at work in his life and speaking to him.

These four sources of guidance work together, often overlapping to act as legs of a table, helping us discern in a balanced way.

Scripture: What does the Bible say?

For Christians the Bible is always the supreme source of authority, and the testing measure for everything else. Anglicans emphasise that ‘Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation’ (Article 6 of the 39 articles).

We have already explored some principles around interpreting the Bible well – seeking to get as close to the original meaning as possible and being aware of our own perspective, and those of others.

When talking with others about Scripture, part of our journey to be sensitive to the way they might interpret Scripture in different ways from us.

A key principle in interpreting well is reflecting on whether issues are seen as first order (in other words, essential) or second order in Scripture.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul begins the chapter by reminding them “of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved...

For what I received I passed on to you *as of first importance*: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.”

In 434 AD Vincent of Lerins was asked a question: "What should every Christian believe for sure?" He replied: "*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est.*" That which has been believed everywhere, always and by all people. For centuries this has acted as a guide for first order parts of the Bible.

Questions to ask: *Am I giving the Bible the full weight it needs? Am I aware of my own interpretations? What are first order and second order issues?*

Reason: What makes sense?

Hooker believed God had gifted us (as His partners in creation) with the ability to think and feel, and with conscience.

Reason helps us to connect and analyse various ideas, concepts, and arguments. It can help us define and defend how we view Scripture, but also our traditions and even our experiences.

Reason is not the opposite of faith – reason can be exercised with faith, and faith can be defended by reason. As Christians we are transformed by the "renewing of our minds." (Romans 12:2)



While faith might always go beyond reason, it never goes against it, and sound arguments can be made to explore and defend positions.

Nevertheless, we will always be aware that no one person can be completely objective.

Questions to ask: *Do I see my ability to think as a gift as I interpret the Bible and listen to others? Am I humble about my own brokenness as I consider this question?*



Tradition: What have voices before us said?

Each generation of Christians does not come from nowhere, but we have inherited wisdom from those who have gone before as they have sought to apply the Bible.

They have developed principles of interpreting Scripture well and living it out. God has been active in the lives of those who have passed on their living tradition to us.

These voices have an important, but secondary role. The Church of England has historically drawn on the thinking of the early church 'fathers and mothers' yet always sees these teachings as being useful only as much as they are "agreeable to the...scriptures" (Canon A5).

Questions to ask: *What voices and wisdom do I need to pay attention to?*

Experience: How have I and others sensed God's direct action?

God is always at work in all His creation, and in our daily lives, and therefore we expect Him to be revealing Himself in new ways. Wesley believed it was only when we experienced something personally that we could have true confidence in our understanding.

We can be suspicious of experience because it is subjective. We think at best it can only reinforce our opinion, rather than inform it. Yet experiences have always really happened, whether physical or psychological. The question is how much is our interpretation of the experience subjective?

In addition, in making decisions, the experience of others can enable us to pay attention to perspectives we would be otherwise unable to understand or consider, particularly those who have been marginalised.

In making good decisions, a final principle is that it is in the context of a Spirit-led community - in which we are open to the Holy Spirit, learn from each other, and read Scripture together, that the peace of God to guide us will most likely be found.

Questions to ask: *Am I open to God speaking to me today in this question? How am I listening to the experiences of those who can help me understand better? Where is God at work in the world?*



Practical suggestions: How do we read the Bible well together?



One of the features of New Testament letters is that they were mostly written, and intended to be read, by groups of people – they are community documents.

Paul often collaborated with people (such as Timothy or Silas) to work on the material, they would then hire a professional scribe to write it, and give specific instructions to those delivering the letter as to how it should be read aloud.

Our practice of reading Scripture aloud in services has a long tradition.

Most letters were obviously read from beginning to end, enabling those hearing to catch the flow of Paul's argument, and would follow a standard pattern – an opening greeting between author and receiver, a prayer of thanks, the main points of the letter, and then the more personal conclusion.

The letters were expected to be able to be understood by everyone, not just by the 'educated', and would be discussed by the community and passed around.

This gives us a sense of how to read the Bible well. If we lack confidence because we don't know where to start, or feel we are not clever enough to understand, we can be reassured by knowing that the Bible is intended to be for everyone – and that the best way of approaching it is always with others.

In addition, being able to lead a Bible study does not need to be the task of experts. Any Christian should be able to do this with others.

In recent years the Discovery Bible Study method has led to significant growth in the church around the world, and offers us a way of reading the Bible with anybody.

It is a method that emphasises discovery, not teaching, and is particularly aimed at empowering people who may not have read the Bible before to be able to start.

Discovering truth is far more powerful than being told it. The process allows the Holy Spirit to be the teacher rather than a person, helping to avoid over-dependence on a gifted individual.

Crucially, it helps us not only to understand what the Bible says but also (as in so many New Testament letters) to respond in our own lives, putting into practice what we feel God is showing us. This is why it helps us grow as disciples.





It works with a simple way of reading together, followed by using the same straightforward questions each time.

Reading it:

Read the Scripture R-R-R-D (Read · Read · Re-tell · Details)

Read - Reader 1 reads passage all the way through

Read - Reader 2 same as above (useful to read from another translation)

Retell - With Bibles closed the re-teller tells the essence of the narrative/theme/parable from memory. The re-teller should feel NO pressure to memorise or capture everything and should not interpret the passage.

Details - The group follow up with any missing/important “details”. Retelling should only take a few minutes.

The leader asks 5 simple Questions:

- What do we learn about God?
- What do we learn about humanity?
- What does this passage say about how God calls us to obey?
- In the light of what we now know about this passage, what is God calling you to do? (I will...)
- Who might you share this story with this week?

Some simple principles:

When interpreting the Scripture, try and keep away from linking to other books/theologians - this allows the new and mature Christian to be on an equal footing. No one should feel not knowledgeable enough to listen to God.

Questions 3 and 4 are the key questions, this is where the rubber hits the road - what is God saying to me and how will I respond?

The “I will...” statements may be nothing terribly profound, but they are often not easy or natural, requiring effort, intentionality, and faith.

These questions help form disciples who are 'self-feeding'. They emphasise reading the Bible to hear from God, not just what the text says. They are reproducible in every setting. This method is accessible and applied. Used over time it will enable most people to have confidence in listening to God through Scripture, and leading others to do so.

There is a bookmark available with the questions on in our extended materials, and suggestions of passages that could be looked at over time, if, for example, you want to disciple someone.

As we finish the 'Way of Discipleship', Discovery Bible Study gives us a way of discipling others which any Christian can use.

