

How to use *explore*

Issue 117

The 90 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

thegoodbook
COMPANY

BIBLICAL | RELEVANT | ACCESSIBLE

Welcome to *explore*

Being a Christian isn't a skill you learn, nor is it a lifestyle choice. 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 it is easy to 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 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 that the Spirit shows Jesus to us, and changes us as we behold his glory.

Here are a few suggestions for making your time with God more of a joy than a burden:

- ☑ *Time:* Find a time when you will not be disturbed. Many people have found that the morning is the best time as it sets you up for the day. But 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,

do 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.

- ☑ *Feast:* You can use the “Bible in a year” line at the bottom of each page to help guide you through the entire Scriptures throughout 2027. This year, the passages each day are linked, showing how God makes and keeps his promises. We're grateful to Katherine Fedor of treasureinthebible.com for her permission to use this Bible-reading plan. You'll find passages to read six days a week—Sunday is a “day off”, or a day to catch up!

- ☑ *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 enjoy it! As you read God's word and God's Spirit works in your mind and your heart, you are going to see Jesus, and appreciate more of his love for you and his promises to you. That's amazing!



*Carl Laferton is the
Publisher at The Good
Book Company*

NEW YEAR: Resolved

New Year's resolutions can change your life and give you a fresh start. It feels good to make a promise to yourself and about yourself—and even better to follow through on it.

Our resolutions are usually based on the things we think are good: productivity, financial security, close relationships, a well-shaped body. But our culture changes its mind all the time about what those things should look like. Maybe that's one reason we don't tend to follow through: deep down we're not totally certain that this is what we really need, anyway. And we lack the self-discipline.

- ❓ *What reasons have you had for making resolutions in the past?*
- ❓ *Did you succeed in following through on them?*

Unchanging

Read Hebrews 13:8

Hebrews 13 is a chapter full of commands about how to act. They are, if you like, good resolutions for Christians—and we'll work through them over the next couple of weeks. They're not based on what culture tells us is good, but on Jesus, who never changes.

Jesus won't change his mind about what's good for us. And if we make resolutions based on him and his word, he will never stop helping us to follow through on them.

A priest for ever

The fact that Jesus never changes doesn't just alter the resolutions we make, but also changes the result when we fail to keep them.

Hebrews talks a lot about how Jesus is like an Old Testament priest, whose job was to maintain the relationship between God and his people. This included sacrificing animals to atone for the people's sins.

Read Hebrews 7:23-28

- ❓ *What are the differences between Jesus and the Old Testament priests?*
- ❓ *What difference does that make to his people?*

Jesus' sacrifice makes his people right with God for ever. So when we fail, God doesn't hold it against us. He sees us as he sees Christ, who never fails.

Pray

In 1772 an 18-year-old named Jonathan Edwards started writing resolutions in his diary, laying down guidelines to help him follow God wholeheartedly for the rest of his life. He would become one of the most influential preachers in American history, changing the lives of thousands. If we too resolve to base our lives on Jesus, who knows what God may do through us? Edwards' 70 resolutions started with an outline for a prayer, which you could make your own today:

"Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humbly entreat him by his grace to enable me to keep these resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to his will for Christ's sake."

Resolved to love

Hebrews 13 opens with Jesus' greatest commandment: love.

-  *Is the way you treat people any different to how non-Christians you know relate to others? How?*

1 John 3:23 tells us, “And this is [God’s] command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us”. As those who trust in Jesus, the most important resolution we can make is to love others. The opening verses of Hebrews 13 offer three challenges to help us do so.

Love one another

Read Hebrews 13:1-3

Verse 1 refers to “one another”: it’s talking about other Christians. Those who follow Jesus are family.

-  *Can you think of examples of when other Christians have treated you like family?*
-  *What would it look like for you to treat other Christians as brothers and sisters?*

Love strangers

In case we get too absorbed in thinking only about other Christians, verse 2 reminds us not to forget to love strangers too.

-  *Why do you think people might need this reminder?*
-  *In what ways is it sometimes harder to love strangers than Christian family?*
-  *What motivation does the writer give us to do so?*

Love sufferers

-  *Why do you think the writer uses the word “remember” in verse 3?*
-  *What emotion should we experience as we remember those in verse 3?*

It’s convenient to put to the back of our minds people who are enduring long-term suffering, such as a prison sentence, a mental illness or persecution. We can’t seem to do anything to help them, so we give up thinking about them. But verse 3 reminds us to love these people too—to care about them as if they were ourselves. That is challenging.

-  *Who are you tempted to forget about, and why?*

Apply

What could you do this week to treat a fellow-Christian like your brother or sister, to show hospitality to a stranger, or to love and empathise with someone who is suffering?

Often we need God’s help not only to express love but also to start loving in the first place. Who do you find hard to love? Pray for them. Ask God to bless them. You may well find that such prayers transform your heart too.

Is there anyone you need to forgive for the way they have failed to love you? Pray for this person too, asking for God’s help in forgiving them and seeing what it will look like to show love to them.



Looking at mountains

We're still on the pilgrim path, as Jerusalem comes into view on the far horizon. And it's a bittersweet moment for these Israelites.

Sweet

Read Psalm 125:1-2

- ❓ *What picture is painted of the scene that these pilgrims are approaching?*
- ❓ *What truths does the landscape remind the pilgrims of? • v 1 • v 2*

Mountains are pretty permanent structures. How wonderful to be able to think, “Through faith, my soul is like that”. The circumstances that batter us, the thoughts that assail us, the temptations that grasp at us... Safe in Christ, your soul is like a mountain. It cannot be shaken, ever.

And mountains are (in most places in the world!) completely immovable, impregnable structures. Again, how wonderful to be able to think, “Through faith, my God is like that to me”. God’s presence surrounds his people—whether we see it or not, whether we feel it or not—as a range of mountains. He surrounds us, for ever.

Pray

Give thanks for the mountainous nature of both your soul and God’s presence.

Bitter (then sweet)

Read Psalm 125:3-5

- ❓ *But what appears to be holding sway over those mountains in “the land allotted to the righteous” (v 3)?*

- ❓ *But what are the pilgrims confident of (v 3a)?*

- ❓ *What do they pray for in the meantime (v 4-5)?*

It’s so easy to adopt “crooked ways”—to end up using the strategies and methods that spring from the worldview of a society that does not see God as God (though perhaps paying lip service to him). Be warned, says this psalm; the ends do not justify the means, and neither do the times we live in provide an excuse “to do evil” (v 3).

We, like these pilgrims, must learn to live with this tension. We are those whose souls are safe in Christ and who are surrounded by the presence of Christ. But we are also those who must navigate difficult days, resisting the lure of the world’s methods or the world’s conduct as we walk towards the coming of the kingdom of Christ.

Apply

- ❓ *Are there ways in which doing evil (compromising on your obedience) or turning to crooked paths (adopting the methods of the world) are beckoning you right now?*

- ❓ *How would meditating on the mountainous truths of verses 1-2 keep you safe from going down those paths?*

- ❓ *What will it look like for you to be “upright in heart” over the next few days?*



Resolved to avoid sin

Jesus lived a perfect life and his high ethical standards haven't changed. That gives us the next challenge in Hebrews 13.

God's standard for righteous living is high, and we continually fall short of it. Sometimes that is because we *don't* do things we *should* do (like going out of our way to love one another), and sometimes it is because we *do* things that we *shouldn't* do.

Read Hebrews 13:4

- ❓ *What should we do according to verse 4?*
- ❓ *What shouldn't we do?*

Sexual ethics

- ❓ *How are adultery and other forms of sexual immorality presented today in films, television and books?*
- ❓ *Does that reflect the opinions of people you know?*

Most people, Christian or not, agree that things like selfish anger, jealousy and violence are bad. It may be difficult not to get angry, but it isn't difficult to believe that anger is a sin. But when it comes to sexual ethics, what people around us think is acceptable is often very different to what God thinks.

- ❓ *How are you tempted towards sexual immorality? What are your strategies for resisting that temptation?*
- ❓ *What could you do to honour marriage—whether yours or others?*
- ❓ *How would you explain to someone why you believe in God's standards for sexual ethics?*

Spirit and law

- ❓ *In Hebrews 13:4, what reason is given for keeping away from sin?*

If we treat God's moral code with contempt, we are actively rejecting God himself, and that has serious consequences.

So, pursuing right living—including sexual morality—is an integral part of being a follower of Jesus. It is not something we do to be saved; but if we are saved, it is something we do. Resolving to live this way is not enough—we need God's help to do so. God's Spirit is the one who leads us away from sin, and he is the one who is able to pick us back up again when we do fail. He reminds us that we are totally forgiven, and helps us to walk in obedience again.

▼ Apply

- ❓ *As you read Hebrews 13:4, is the Spirit prompting you to repent and change in some way? Will you listen?*

⬆ Pray

Read Galatians 5:19-23

Look through the passage slowly, reflecting on your own life and the lives of those you love. Pray for God's help in turning away from sin and living in step with the Spirit.

Resolved to trust God

By contrasting money with God, the next verses of Hebrews 13 help us to see why God is trustworthy and what difference it makes to really, actually trust him.

Freedom

Read Hebrews 13:5-6

We don't often think of money as something we'd like to be "free" from. It's poverty that most obviously traps people. But here the writer to the Hebrews tells us to be content with whatever we have.

- ❓ *What one thing would you like to buy and own at the moment?*
- ❓ *What do you think you'll feel like once you have that thing?*

Money promises happiness. But loving it brings discontentment—whatever we have, it's never enough; and even if we have "enough", it doesn't satisfy. We tend to know this in theory but ignore it in practice. We know we should be content with what we have. Yet we think contentment will only truly come once we have just got one more thing. That way of living is the opposite of freedom. It's slavery.

Fear

Reread Hebrews 13:5-6

- ❓ *What will God never do?*
- ❓ *What is God like?*
- ❓ *Who is God greater than?*

God is utterly trustworthy. That is why the psalmist quoted in verse 6 says, "I will not be afraid".

Contrast that with money. It is not eternal: there is always the possibility of losing your job, and you cannot take your bank balance beyond the grave. It is not loving: it may be helpful for many things, but it will not be there for you if you fail. It is finite: it will run out.

If we trust money, we will *always* be afraid, because money is not like God. But if we truly trust God, we know that he will never leave us. He promises to help us, and he is more powerful than any human, so we can be free of fear.

▼ Apply

- ❓ *Who do you know who is trapped by fear because of financial concerns, or struggles to be content with what they have?*
- ❓ *Could you help them practically?*
- ❓ *Could you help them to trust God?*
- ❓ *What could you resolve to do to keep your own life free from the love of money?*
- ❓ *How could you keep reminding yourself to trust God in the face of financial fears?*

⬆ Pray

Use Proverbs 3:5-8 as the basis of your prayers today.

Resolved to listen

What makes someone admirable? Is it what they say, how they act or what their character is like?

It's worth thinking carefully about what makes us look up to particular people. It's those people we're likely to imitate, whether we realise it or not.

Remember your leaders

Read Hebrews 13:7

In this verse, it's those "who spoke the word of God to you" that we should be imitating.

 *What are we to imitate in particular?*

The word of God is the message of grace, as we will discover in verse 9. In other words, it is the truth that only Jesus can save us.

 *How might that truth affect people's lives and make them more admirable?*

For some of us, it was our parents who first spoke the word of God to us; for others it was friends; for many it was a pastor or leader in the church, who gave a talk, lent you a book or led a group discussion. And for all of us right now, it is our church leaders who continue to speak the word of truth to us. Verse 7 is telling us that our church leaders' lives should match their message—and that, assuming it does, we should then be careful to imitate the kind of faith that leads to such a life.

Apply

 *Who are the leaders God has placed in your life? How will you imitate their faith and their way of life?*

Bible in a year: Genesis 6 – 9

 *If you are in any leadership role in your church, would you be comfortable for someone in your care to imitate both your faith and your life?*

It's best to assume that you need to change what you say or how you live. Perhaps ask a close friend for their insight.

Always true

The line "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever" comes straight after this verse about leaders. And because Jesus remains the same, his word is never outdated or irrelevant.

That's why one of the most important resolutions we can make this year is to renew our commitment to listening to the word of God. We then need to let it change us (v 7)—through our leaders preaching it to us, and through us reading the Bible for ourselves.

Pray

Think about all the different ways in which you learn the word of God—that might include church leaders, family members and Christian books as well as the Bible itself. Praise God for all these opportunities and ask him to change you through his word.

Resolved to rely on God

Don't get carried away, the writer to the Hebrews tells us: don't get distracted from the gospel of grace.

Have you noticed how moralistic we can be in the way we talk about food? We feel guilty about junk food and virtuous for eating salad! And our food choices have an even greater moral weight when we think about their impact on the planet. Eating well is a way to feel we're living right. That's not a million miles away from the first-century teaching that the way you ate could make you right or keep you right with God. Traditionally, Jews would avoid certain foods and only eat meat that had been sacrificed in the temple. It seems that some Jewish Christians thought they should maintain these practices in order to be made "clean" or holy in the eyes of God.

A better sacrifice

Read Hebrews 13:9-10

- ❓ *How are these practices described?*
- ❓ *What do Christians have instead?*

Those who continued to minister in the tabernacle—or its successor, the temple in Jerusalem—had not understood the fact that it is *only* belief in Jesus that makes us right with God.

Read Hebrews 13:11-12

These verses compare Jesus directly to the sacrifices made in the temple. He was sacrificed in a similar way—his blood was shed and his body suffered outside the city—but his death achieved infinitely more. He made people holy—pure—once and for all.

True teaching

- ❓ *Look back at verse 9. Why do you think the writer uses the phrase "carried away"?*
- ❓ *What's so bad about these "strange teachings"?*
- ❓ *What does grasping Jesus' grace do to our hearts?*

We all have things that make us feel smug about how well we are doing in life—or make us feel insecure when other people have them and we don't. But whether it's clean eating, financial gain, academic success, good looks or a social-media following, we need to remember that these things do not truly strengthen our hearts. They will not last and they cannot forgive. We need to resolve to rely on God's grace alone: on Jesus.

Pray

Imagine you are a Jew in the first century, accustomed to performing rituals again and again in an attempt to be righteous before God. You come to understand the truth that Jesus' sacrifice can make you holy for ever. What do you want to say to God?

Now apply that to the real, 21st-century you. There are so many ways our world (and at times our hearts) puts us under pressure to measure up. But we have grace! Spend time praising God for it.

Resolved to endure

We see discomfort and disgrace as evidence that something has gone wrong. Yet the writer to the Hebrews says they're a sign that something has gone right.

We tend to make decisions based on what is likely to keep us or our loved ones comfortable or feeling happy, but this verse will help us recalibrate our thinking on this.

Disgrace

Read Hebrews 13:13

For the first-century Jewish Christians to whom this letter was written, following Jesus meant turning away from the temple in Jerusalem and the old sacrificial system. It meant going “outside the camp”: stepping away from the place that was traditionally most associated with God. And that meant living very, very differently to those around them, challenging the most strongly established and passionately held cultural norms.

- ❓ *How would the letter's original readers have felt about this command?*
- ❓ *What does verse 13 tell us we should expect?*

Don't miss this: Jesus was killed as a criminal “outside the camp”, while being mocked by his countrymen. When the writer calls these Christians to “go to him outside the camp”, he is calling them to be willing to endure the rejection that Jesus faced.

Christians today continue to experience mockery, anger, rejection and even violence because of what they believe. This should not surprise us. Following Jesus means rejecting other ways of doing things, and that will always make people angry.

▼ Apply

- ❓ *In what situations do Christians bear disgrace today because of their beliefs?*
- ❓ *In what ways do Christians in your culture seek to avoid that disgrace, through quiet compromise?*
- ❓ *What does it look like for you to “go to him outside the camp”? Or are you seeking comfort and ease inside the “camp” of cultural acceptability instead?*

He bore

In John's Gospel Jesus tells his disciples, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (John 15:18). Being hated can be a sign that you are being obedient to Jesus and his counter-cultural message of grace. And being fully accepted in our workplaces, our friendship groups, and our culture more widely may be a warning sign that we are looking for our identity “in the camp”, rather than “in Christ”. In a sense, then, we should be pleased when we find ourselves in disgrace.

^ Pray

Pray for anyone you know of who is enduring suffering because of their faith.

Pray for the courage to stand up for what you believe about Jesus and the Bible, even when that means experiencing disgrace.

Resolved to hope

We are called to endure the disgrace of going “outside the camp”, but Jesus promises something which more than makes up for it.

Read Hebrews 13:14

Most of us have, at some point, experienced homesickness: wishing we could be back in our home town, or old house, or surrounded by familiar people. Many of us, too, have enjoyed settling down, only to find things changing around us, and wishing they wouldn't. In other words, we all know the disorientation of having no “enduring city”.

For the original readers, verse 14 was telling every Jewish Christian something that undercut one of their basic assumptions: it was denying the idea that the earthly Jerusalem was eternal. This was the city of David, whose throne God had promised would last for ever (2 Samuel 7:13). It was the place God had appointed as his people's home (7:10). Yet the writer to the Hebrews is claiming that this holy city would not last. Instead he tells his readers to focus on the hope of a *heavenly* city, to which the earthly Jerusalem was just a signpost and a shadow.

TIME OUT

Read Revelation 21:1-4

- ❓ *How does this passage fulfil the promise made in Hebrews 13?*
- ❓ *Whose home will the new city be?*
- ❓ *What else characterises it?*

A better country

Earlier in Hebrews the writer explored this further with a list of Old Testament figures

who trusted that they would one day find a home with God.

Read Hebrews 11:8-16

- ❓ *What does verse 15 suggest Abraham might have been tempted to do?*
- ❓ *What helped him to resist that temptation?*

Even the promised land didn't turn out to be the final “better country” God would provide. Abraham, Sarah and other heroes of the faith were longing for a country where they would no longer be “foreigners and strangers”: where they would be home with God for ever. This is the eternal kingdom God had promised to David: Jesus' kingdom, Jesus' city, the new heavens and the new earth. All believers will one day be a part of this.

Apply

We are to be a looking-forward people, not a settling-for-now people.

- ❓ *What difference should looking to the city to come make to the way you...*
 - look back at places and people you've loved?
 - think about your home and other things you hold dear?
 - approach difficulties and pain now?
 - make decisions for the future?

Streams in the desert

Do you ever read of times of revival in the church, with new Christians flooding in, and think, "That will never happen now—not here"? I know I do. We need this psalm!

What it was like

Read Psalm 126:1-3

- ❓ *What kind of period in the history of Zion (Jerusalem) are the pilgrims recalling (v 1-2)?*
- ❓ *What was it like to be alive in that time (v 1b-2a)?*
- ❓ *What did the people say in that time (v 3)?*

What it is like

There is an abrupt change of tone from verse 4. Praise gives way to prayer, and the joy of restoration gives way to a hint of desperation. Yet hope continues to hold firm...

Read Psalm 126:4-6

The Negev is the desert in the south of Israel, towards the Sinai peninsula in Egypt. It rains infrequently there—but when it does, it rains heavily, and great streams race over the desert floor, flowers bloom in minutes, and the vista is transformed.

- ❓ *So what is verse 4 saying about the spiritual situation the pilgrims find themselves in, and what are they praying will happen?*
- ❓ *How do they feel about the present spiritual situation (v 5-6)?*
- ❓ *But what are they confident can happen (v 5-6)?*

The problem is, there's often a long time between the sowing and the harvest. What is planted takes months to spring forth. Spiritually speaking, what is planted may lie for years in cracked and inhospitable soil. Then the rains come, and everything changes.

This psalm is teaching us not to look back at previous times of revival in the church—or around at present revival elsewhere in the world—and sigh wistfully and impotently, because it could never happen here and now (wherever here and now happen to be for you). It is teaching us to look back and look around and think, "What has happened then and there could happen again in our here and now". That keeps us praying confidently and witnessing faithfully, even though we may be weeping over the barrenness of the soil right now. "Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy"—or perhaps in our lifetime, perhaps as we watch on from glory. Let's not be those who gave up. Let's be those who prayed, and witnessed, and wept, and waited.

Pray

Use verses 4-6 to pray for your community and your nation in a way that's realistic but also confident. And pray for yourself, that you would be a sower today, no matter how hard the ground appears.

