



How to use *explore*

Issue 118

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

It's serious!

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

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

We're serious!

All of us who work on *Explore* share a passion for getting the Bible into people's lives.

We fiercely hold to the Bible as God's word—to honour and follow, not to explain away.

1

Find a time you can read the Bible each day

2

Find a place where you can be quiet and think

3

Ask God to help you understand

4

Carefully read through the Bible passage for today

5

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

6

Pray about what you have read

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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!



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MATTHEW: The real deal?

In our previous time in Matthew's Gospel, we saw that Jesus began his ministry proclaiming the arrival of God's kingdom (4:17, 23).

To his hearers, that meant one thing: God's King was about to defeat God's enemies.

But Jesus isn't mustering an army. Instead of slaughtering God's enemies, Jesus prefers to party with them (9:9-13). So whose side is Jesus on? The Jewish leaders—surely his key allies—have taken against him (12:12-14), and meanwhile the Romans are still in power. There's no sign of divine judgment.

The secret kingdom

Read Matthew 13:1-17

The crowds are huge (v 2)!

- ❓ *Why does Jesus use parables to teach them (v 11)?*
- ❓ *Who do Jesus' parables liberate (v 9)?*
- ❓ *Who do the parables bring judgment on (v 15)?*

While the kingdom will come in glory in the future, it's already come in a secret, hidden, gracious way. The kingdom comes in two stages: first in grace and finally in glory. The parables protect this secret by revealing the truth to some and keeping it concealed from others.

The “secrets of the kingdom” are not deep truths that only an elite can appreciate—revelation of them “has been given” to the disciples (v 11). They're still pretty confused by it all, yet Jesus places them among those with eyes to see (v 16). Indeed, they see

more than the Old Testament prophets saw because they see Jesus (v 17).

The sower

Read Matthew 13:18-23

- ❓ *What does the “seed” represent (v 19)?*
- ❓ *Who is it that causes an immediate rejection of the good news (v 19)?*
- ❓ *What happens to those who haven't counted the cost of the Christian life (v 21)?*
- ❓ *And what stops those described in verse 22 from persevering?*

▼ Apply

To the disciples the parable is an encouragement. We shouldn't be surprised or disheartened when the message of Jesus is rejected—it's normal. It's tempting to assume the problem is with the seed; but the problem is with the soil. And the story doesn't end with barren land; the story ends with a harvest.

- ❓ *How have you experienced this fruitful soil in your own life, or seen it in others?*
- ❓ *What does verse 23 cause you to want to persevere in, or begin (or restart) doing?*
- ❓ *What do the different types of soil prompt you to pray about as you consider people you know?*

Weeds, mustard, yeast, net

Jesus continues to teach with parables—and his focus continues to be on the nature of the kingdom he has come to invite people into.

The weeds and the net

Read Matthew 13:24-30

-  *What is Jesus' purpose in telling this parable (v 24)?*
-  *In the parable, how does the owner instruct his servants (v 29-30)?*

Read Matthew 13:47-50

-  *How does the parable of the net parallel the parable of the weeds?*

The mustard seed and the yeast

Read Matthew 13:31-35

-  *What might the kingdom of God look like here and now, according to verses 31 and 33?*

The kingdom will come in power. The birds perching in its branches is a picture of people from all nations finding refuge under Christ's rule (v 32). The true church usually seems weak and insignificant—yet somehow it has spread across the globe!

Apply

You may feel you have little to offer. Perhaps you're right, but look at what God can do with a little!

-  *What "little" thing could you offer in service to God this week?*

The parable explained

Read Matthew 13:36-43

Again, the parables of the weeds and net teach the secrets of the kingdom:

1. The kingdom is coming now, even though judgment (the division of wheat and weeds and the division of bad and good fish) has been delayed. It's coming in grace as the word is proclaimed.
2. The kingdom will come in power. There will be a harvest at the end of the age (v 40-41).

At the moment, believers and unbelievers live side by side. God doesn't intervene in judgment because he's giving people an opportunity to repent (2 Peter 3:3-9). But we shouldn't misinterpret God's patience as complacent indulgence. There will be a final day of judgment when God's enemies (those who reject Christ) will be judged (Matthew 13:42) and God's people (those who accept Christ) will "shine like the sun" (v 43).

Pray

-  *In what way does the idea that the kingdom has come in grace and will come in power make you more grateful to be a part of it?*

Spend some time thanking God for the blessing of knowing your future is secure in his kingdom.

Rejected at home

The final pair of parables in chapter 13 also teach the secrets of the kingdom, contrasting present loss and future gain. But now the emphasis is on the worth of the kingdom.

Treasure and pearl

Read Matthew 13:44-46

- ❓ *In both of these parables, what is sold to purchase the prize (v 44, 46)?*
- ❓ *With what attitude did the first man do this (v 44)?*

With the kingdom's coming in power delayed, being part of Christ's kingdom can be hard. But it's worth it. These parables are beautiful pictures of the way that those who lose their life for Christ's sake actually find it (10:38-39; 16:24-27) and those who are willing to give up treasure on earth gain treasure in heaven (6:19-20).

▼ Apply

This future hope—that God's kingdom will come in glory—enables us to rejoice even when we're making sacrifices.

- ❓ *Can you think of a time that you had to make a sacrifice but were able to do so with joy for the sake of Christ?*
- ❓ *Is there something you're being called to give up at the moment? What will believing the truths of these parables look like for you?*

New and old

Read Matthew 13:51-53

The disciples claim to have understood

what Jesus is saying (v 51). And it's true that, while they still have a long way to go in their understanding of who Jesus is and why he has come, they have been given the secrets of the kingdom (v 11).

- ❓ *What do you think are the new and old treasures that Jesus describes that a believing teacher of the law can bring out (v 52)?*

Verse 52 perfectly describes what Matthew is doing in his Gospel: showing how the Old Testament has been fulfilled in Jesus.

Annoyed and confused

Read Matthew 13:53-58

These verses begin a new section which runs all the way to 18:35. It focuses on the identity of Jesus. Here, his identity is misunderstood.

- ❓ *What is the reaction to Jesus' teaching in his hometown (v 57)? Why do you think that might be the case?*
- ❓ *In verse 58, why do you think Jesus may have chosen not to do many miracles there? (See verses 14-15.)*

^ Pray

Pray that you would not let the humanity of Jesus (Jesus being one of us) cause you to forget the divinity of Jesus (Jesus being God with us), and that your eyes would be open to the glorious truth of who he is.

Repeat that for me...

This psalm is written as a liturgy of praise, with the people singing (or shouting?!) back the answer after each line.

His love endures

Read Psalm 136

Think carefully about the phrase that is repeated in every verse of this psalm.

- ❓ *Why is it so important for us to understand this truth?*
- ❓ *What happens when we start to doubt it?*

In creation

Reread Psalm 136:4-9, 25

- ❓ *What can creation teach us about the loving faithfulness of God?*

In salvation

Reread Psalm 136:10-26

- ❓ *Sum up what the Creator God did for his people:*
 - v 10, 12-14
 - v 11, 15, 17-20
 - v 14, 16
 - v 21-22
- ❓ *As God's people look back at what he's done for them, what's the fairly obvious application (v 26)?!*
- ❓ *What lesson is contained in these verses for struggling believers?*

▼ Apply

It is not unusual for Christians to go through times when they think that God has deserted them. It's not unusual to go through times when we're not really seeking to live for him in every part of our lives. Yet many of the saving acts that God performed for his people (v 10-22) were done when many in Israel were doubting or hostile.

- ❓ *So, if you're being tempted to doubt or resist God's goodness, how would you use today's psalm to complete the following sentence: "I know God is a God of love because..."?*

Then read **Romans 8:31-39**.

^ Pray

"Thank you" can seem such a pathetically weak phrase to use for what God has done for us. Think back over how you came to faith, and how God has led, guided and protected you so far. And think forward to heaven, and seeing him face to face.

Weak or not, it's time to say a heartfelt "thank you" for these things. You might like to finish each "thank you" with the repeated phrase from this wonderful psalm: "Your love endures for ever".



Identity revealed

Spoiler alert: this section of Matthew's Gospel climaxes with Jesus being acclaimed as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16:16).

As we move towards that moment, we see examples of faith and unbelief. The key questions in this section are: who is Jesus and what is the right response to him?

Kings contrasted

Read Matthew 14:1-12

- ❓ *Why is Herod spooked by Jesus (v 1-2)?*
- ❓ *Herod wears a crown, but in reality his authority is limited. Who are his actions determined by in...*
 - v 5?
 - v 6-8?
 - v 9?

TIME OUT

Read Matthew 2:1-6

Matthew quoted Micah 5:2 but also added a line from 2 Samuel 5:1-3: "You shall shepherd my people Israel". The tribes of Israel said this as they pledged allegiance to David instead of the house of Saul (Israel's previous king). In Matthew 2, Matthew promises a similar transfer of power from the kings of this world to the King of heaven. Now, in chapter 14, Jesus the Son of David stands among us, and we see power begin to slip away from Herod (the latest version of King Saul) and passing to Jesus (the true King David). This transfer is still taking place.

Apply

Human rule continues to prevail on earth, and it's deadly—but it's limited. Meanwhile,

Jesus is calling people to embrace his compassionate, life-giving rule.

- ❓ *How does this reassure you as you look around at the political situation, be it in your country or further afield?*

Pray

Ask God for wisdom in living a life that is marked by the character of your King—by compassion, truth and love—and for the courage to stand against powers that are determined to bring darkness and destruction.

Fate foreshadowed

John's fate bears many similarities with what will ultimately happen to Jesus.

- ❓ *How is Jesus' fate mirrored in what happens to John in...*
 - v 3?
 - v 5?
 - v 12?

John was the new Elijah (11:14), contending with Herod and Herodias just as Elijah contended with Ahab and Jezebel. Elijah's mantle passed to Elisha, who once fed 100 people with just 20 loaves (2 Kings 4:42-44). If John is the new Elijah, Jesus must be the new Elisha. So... will Jesus feed 100 people with 20 loaves?

Satisfying our needs

The crowds have followed Jesus, and he has compassion on them and heals those who were sick (Matthew 14:13-14).

Read Matthew 14:13-21

- ❓ *What are the disciples worrying about (v 15)?*
- ❓ *How does Jesus' demand act as an invitation to faith (v 16)?*

The disciples point to the scarcity of what they have: five loaves and two fish (v 17). What they don't see are the riches of Jesus. But recognising our inability is the first step towards faith.

We can't provide for our needs or safeguard our future; still less can we meet our biggest needs: forgiveness, reconciliation with God and eternal life. So who can meet our needs? The answer in verses 19-20 is simple: King Jesus.

Pray

- ❓ *What needs do you have, that you can bring as requests to Jesus?*
- ❓ *Will you trust in his ability to provide for you in the way he knows best?*

A glimpse backwards

Read Exodus 16:11-18

In the way he tells this story, Matthew alludes to the provision of manna in the wilderness (a link that Jesus himself makes explicit in John 6). Back in Exodus 16, the people were without food in a remote place—just as they are in Matthew 14. Back

then, God miraculously provided bread where there was no bread—just as Jesus does here. Back then, everyone “gathered just as much as they needed” (Exodus 16:18)—just as in Matthew 14:20 “they all ate and were satisfied”. Jesus is the greater Elisha but he is also the new Moses, who meets the needs of the people of God.

And Matthew goes further. He tells us that Jesus “told the people to sit down on the grass” (v 19). Why add “on the grass”? It's an allusion to Psalm 23:1-2: “The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures.” Now Jesus shepherds God's people, directing them to green pastures.

A glimpse ahead

Read Matthew 26:26

- ❓ *How does this verse compare with what Jesus tells the disciples in 14:19?*

The feast of Matthew 14, in which “all ate and were satisfied”, is replicated every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper. We, too, eat and are satisfied (John 6:35, 54-55).

Pray

Pray that the next time you partake in the bread and wine of Communion, the Holy Spirit will remind your heart afresh of the victory, shepherding care and sufficient provision of Jesus.

Walking on the water

As earlier in the Gospel (8:23-27), the disciples find themselves in a storm too big for them to cope with. But this time, they don't have Jesus in the boat...

God with us

Read Matthew 14:22-33

- ❓ *What is the disciples first reaction upon seeing Jesus (v 26)?*
- ❓ *In what ways does Jesus reassure them (v 27)?*

When Jesus calmed the storm in 8:23-27, the disciples asked, “What kind of man is this?”

- ❓ *Now, as Jesus again calms a storm, how do they answer their own question (14:33)?*

TIME OUT

Read Isaiah 43:1-2

Water in the Bible is often a picture of judgment. But just as in Isaiah God says, “Do not fear”, so here Jesus says, “Don’t be afraid” (14:27). In Isaiah God promises, “I will be with you”—and Jesus is Immanuel, coming through the storm to his people. Three times in Isaiah 43 the Lord says, “I am he” (Isaiah 43:10, 13, 25). It’s an echo of God’s covenant name. Now, as Jesus comes to his disciples, he says, “It is I” (literally “I am”). It’s the same wording as “I am he” in the Greek translation of Isaiah 43. Isaiah promised a new Exodus, and Jesus fulfils that promise by redeeming his people from sin and death. Immanuel steps down from the mountain (Matthew 14:23) and comes to meet us in the storms of life (v 25).

Step of faith

- ❓ *How do Peter’s actions illustrate the current state of the disciples (v 28-31)?*

Like Peter, we’re to walk through the storms of life by faith and not by sight, fixing the eyes of our heart on Jesus rather than looking at the threats and seductions of this world. Wonderfully, though our faith may fail as Peter’s does, Jesus remains faithful. He will catch hold of us when we fall (v 31).

▼ Apply

- ❓ *How are you being called to live by faith and not by sight at the moment?*
- ❓ *What will it look like for you to do that?*

Read Matthew 14:34-36

This section ends with a reiteration of the scope of Jesus’ ministry. Even in this Gentile-dominated region, touching his cloak is enough to bring healing—just as it was in Jewish territory (9:20-22).

^ Pray

Lord Jesus, give me faith to follow you and your ways, even in the storms of life. I pray that I would trust in your awesome power—power that can control the elements with a word and heal diseases at a touch. May I witness your power at work today through the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Arguing about cleanliness

The religious leaders ask Jesus why his disciples don't wash their hands before they eat (15:1-2). It's not a question about personal hygiene.

Pharisees challenged

Read Matthew 15:1-11

In the name of “the tradition of the elders”, the Pharisees had extended the ceremonial washing required in the temple to all of life. They wanted to create pockets of purity in a land polluted by Gentile occupation.

 *What does Jesus say to them in response (v 3)?*

The Pharisees' traditions may not directly contradict Scripture, but by adding to Scripture they “nullify” the intention of Scripture. Bible plus = Bible minus.

 *Though the religious leaders may look impressive to the people, what is their reality before God (v 7-8)?*

Apply

If, today, we treat our traditions as law (rather than at best as wisdom), then those traditions undermine the grace of the gospel.

 *Can you think of an area where you or your church affiliation might be in danger of something like this?*

Disciples confused

Read Matthew 5:12-20

The disciples are shocked by Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees because they still assume the Pharisees are the good guys—

the people who “do” righteousness to the max. Not so, says Jesus.

 *What is the Pharisees' destiny (v 13)?*

 *What will happen to those who follow their lead (v 14)?*

Jesus' explanation in verses 17-20 shows how an outside-in approach can't work.

Pray

We can't become righteous people by doing more righteous things. We need inside-out change: we need our hearts to be made new.

Give thanks to your heavenly Father that through Jesus you have been given a new heart and a new Spirit. Pray that you would give up trying to establish or maintain your own righteousness and instead come to Jesus, asking him to renew your heart through his Holy Spirit.

TIME OUT

Read Matthew 3:11

John's statement fulfils Ezekiel 36:25-27 and shows that Jesus is the one who cleanses our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' question to the disciples in Matthew 15:16 is a sobering moment. But better is to come, for in contrast to the stubborn unbelief of the Pharisees and the faltering faith of the disciples, Matthew is about to present a model of persistent faith.

A surprising model of faith

With the disciples reeling from the news that religious leaders can't be trusted (15:14), they then meet someone who they know for sure can't be trusted: a Canaanite woman.

A woman from Sidon

Matthew's readers may still have in mind John's defeat at the hands of Herodias, a new Jezebel. Jezebel was a princess from Sidon (1 Kings 16:31)—and here we meet another woman from Sidon. It doesn't bode well.

Read Matthew 15:21-28

❓ *How does this woman approach Jesus (v 22)?*

The only other people to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of David have been two blind men (9:27; see also 20:30-31). The irony is that it's the blind who recognise Jesus and Gentiles who acknowledge him as Israel's King.

❓ *What is Jesus' first reaction to her (15:23)?*

❓ *How does she then react (v 23)?*

Three times she's rebuffed, and three times she persists. *If I'm a dog, then at least give me the crumbs due a dog*, she effectively says in verse 27.

❓ *What does Jesus declare about her in the end (v 28)?*

At first, his attitude seems harsh and uncaring. But in hindsight it's clear that Jesus was pushing her with a view to revealing the depth of her faith. Jesus ignored her so that he might commend her. He rebuffed her so

that she might become a model of persistent faith. Her "great faith" contrasts with the disciples' "little faith" (14:31; 15:28).

The 4,000

Read Matthew 15:29-39

The parallels between this passage and 14:13-21 are striking. Why bother including this story when we've seen it all before? The answer is that that's the point! Jesus has revealed himself as the Lord shepherding his people, the new Moses providing bread in the wilderness. But the disciples don't get it—not yet. So Jesus does it all over again.

❓ *What is the one addition to the story in 15:30-31 that is different to the feeding of the 5,000 in 14:13-21?*

The feeding of the 4,000 probably took place in Gentile territory. This is why people are said to praise "the God of Israel" in 15:31 (Jews would have just praised "God"). In the previous story, the nations get crumbs (15:27); now they get more than they can eat!

Pray

Praise God that through faith in Jesus you and I and people from all nations become part of God's family—including you.

What has most struck you about Jesus from these two episodes? Take some time to praise him now for who he is.

The danger of unbelief

The Pharisees and Sadducees (normally enemies but now united by their hostility to Jesus) ask for a sign, even though Jesus has already performed many miraculous signs.

Misinterpretation

Read Matthew 16:1-4

Jesus has just fed people with bread (15:36-37), like God feeding people with manna in the wilderness in Exodus 16. Now the religious leaders “test” Jesus, like faithless Israel testing God in the wilderness in Exodus 17:1-7.

- ❓ *How does Jesus show they are refusing to recognise the signs (Matthew 16:2-3)?*
- ❓ *Recalling the famous Old Testament story, what do you think Jesus means by the “sign of Jonah” (v 4)? (See 12:40.)*

Jonah was also a prophet who preached to Gentiles—something Jesus has just been doing.

Read Matthew 16:5-12

- ❓ *How do the disciples misinterpret Jesus’ words (v 5-7)?*
- ❓ *What qualities does yeast have that might make it a fitting illustration for Jesus to describe the Pharisees’ teaching?*

In Bible times, yeast didn’t come in a tin. Instead, you retained a batch of the previous day’s dough to leaven that day’s bread. So when Israel celebrated the Passover with unleavened bread, it represented a decisive break with Egypt. In the same way, Jesus is about to enact a new Exodus, and his redeemed people must leave behind the sinful influences of their old life.

Apply

There are many examples of things that may erode our personal faith, e.g. spending time with sceptics, watching ungodly media or failing to filter advertising.

- ❓ *What does the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees look like in your particular context?*

Confession

Read Matthew 16:13-20

- ❓ *Why do you think Peter’s confession in verse 16 is such a central moment in Matthew’s narrative?*
- ❓ *How does Jesus say Peter has come to this knowledge (v 17)?*

None of us are Christians because we were clever enough to work it out. Faith is always a gift from God (John 3:3-6; Ephesians 2:8).

Pray

There are times when we can feel gloomy about the future of the church. But despite all the external hostility the church faces and all the internal disputes that divide her, Christ has promised to build his church, and for 2,000 years he has kept that promise.

Give thanks to God now for the expanding of the global church. Ask that he would work through you and your local church to continue to grow his kingdom here on earth.