

How to use Explore



In this issue

The 92 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 section 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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COMPANY

Opening up the Bible

Welcome

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Being a Christian isn't a skill you learn, like carpentry or flower arranging. Nor is it a lifestyle choice, like the kind of clothes you wear, or the people you choose to hang out with. It's about having a real relationship with the living God through his Son, Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that this relationship is like a marriage.

It's important to start with this, because many Christians view the practice of daily Bible reading as a Christian duty, or a hard discipline that is just one more thing to get done in our busy modern lives.

But the Bible is God speaking to us: opening his mind to us on how he thinks, what he wants for us and what his plans are for the world. And most importantly, it tells us what he has done for us in sending his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. It's the way that the Spirit shows Jesus to us, and changes us as we behold his glory.

The Bible is not a manual. It's a love letter. And as with any love letter, we'll want to treasure it, and make time to read and re-read it, so we know we are loved, and discover how we can please the One who loves us. Here are a few suggestions for making your daily time with God more of a joy than a burden:

☑ *Time:* Find a time when you will not be disturbed, and when the cobwebs are cleared from your mind. Many people have found that the morning is the best time as it sets you up for the day. If you're not a "morning person", then last thing

at night or a mid-morning break may suit you. Whatever works for you is right for you.

☑ *Place:* Jesus says that we are not to make a great show of our religion (see *Matthew 6:5-6*), but rather, to pray with the door to our room shut. Some people plan to get to work a few minutes earlier and get their Bible out in an office or some other quiet corner.

☑ *Prayer:* Although *Explore* helps with specific prayer ideas from the passage, you should try to develop your own lists to pray through. Use the flap inside the back cover to help with this. And allow what you read in the Scriptures to shape what you pray for yourself, the world and others.

☑ *Share:* As the saying goes: *expression deepens impression*. So try to cultivate the habit of sharing with others what you have learned. Why not join our Facebook group to share your encouragements, questions and prayer requests? Search for *Explore: For your daily walk with God*.

And remember, *it's quality, not quantity, that counts*: better to think briefly about a single verse than to skim through pages without absorbing anything, because it's about developing your relationship with the living God. The sign that your daily time with God is real is when you start to love him more and serve him more wholeheartedly.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim'.



HABAKKUK: How long?

If you've ever looked at evil and suffering and wondered "Why doesn't God do something about it?" you're not alone. Habakkuk was asking the same question 2600 years ago.

How long?

Habakkuk was writing at the close of the 7th century BC in Judah, the southern kingdom of God's people.

Read Habakkuk 1:1-4

- ❓ *What caused Habakkuk to ask God "How long?" and "Why?"?*
- ❓ *What picture does he paint of life among God's people in Judah at the time?*

Be amazed!

Read Habakkuk 1:5-11

Habakkuk was frustrated that God wasn't doing anything about the sins of the people. In verse 5 God reveals that he is going to act.

- ❓ *What impact would this revelation of God's work have on Habakkuk and the people (v 5)?*
- ❓ *What was God going to do (v 6)?*
- ❓ *Why was this so unbelievable?*

Verses 6-11 describe the invaders.

- ❓ *What do we learn about the Babylonians —what they were like, and how they treated their enemies?*

TIME OUT

The Babylonian siege of Jerusalem lasted two years.

- ❓ *What do the following verses reveal*

about the suffering in the city during this time? Lamentations 4:4, 8, 10; 5:11-12.

Apply

Even though the Babylonians committed these atrocities, ultimately this was God's work of judgment.

- ❓ *What does it tell us about God's holiness and attitude to sin?*
- ❓ *How does this challenge your view of what God is like?*

In the death of Jesus on the cross, we see God judging the sins of his people again.

- ❓ *What is the same as this Old Testament judgment? What is different?*
- ❓ *Why should we "be utterly amazed" even more at this judgment on sin?*
- ❓ *What is the warning in Acts 13:40-41 if we don't believe in what Jesus has done?*

Jesus took the judgment our sins deserve, but we should be ruthless in putting our sins to death (Colossians 3:5; Romans 8:13).

- ❓ *How should what we've seen in Habakkuk (about God's holiness and hatred of sin) help us respond this way?*

Pray

Give thanks that Jesus has endured the terrible judgment we deserve. Pray that you would be ruthless in putting sin to death.

The wicked prosper

Kim Jong-un, the North Korean leader, lives a life of self-indulgent luxury—private jet, £6m yacht, 17 palaces, 100 cars—while his oppressed people struggle for survival.

❓ Why does God allow it?

Habakkuk was struggling with the same issue of why God allows the wicked to prosper. His first question to God in 1:2-4 was about why God didn't do anything about the wicked in Judah. God responded (v 5-11) that he was going to raise up the Babylonians to inflict terrible judgment on Judah. But that just provoked another question.

The character of God

Read Habakkuk 1:12 – 2:1

❓ What aspects of God's character does Habakkuk highlight (1 v 12-13)?

▾ Apply

As Habakkuk puzzled over what was going on, he reminded himself (and God) of what God is like. And that is a good model for us. Remembering God's unchanging character gives us a rock to stand on in the storm.

▴ Pray

Take a moment to thank the Lord for what he is like, using phrases from verses 12-13.

The wicked prosper

Habakkuk didn't actually doubt God's character. What puzzled him was why God was going to act in the way he said, given what he is like.

❓ What was Habakkuk's question (v 13)?

❓ In what ways were the wicked Babylonians prospering (v 14-17)?

❓ A fishing image runs through these verses. How does it emphasise both the success and the wickedness of the Babylonians?

The Babylonians, with their false gods, ruthless aggression, and expanding empire, were having a great time of it. Under King Nebuchadnezzar the capital, Babylon, became the jewel in the crown of the empire. Its hanging gardens were one of the wonders of the ancient world.

TIME OUT

Read Psalm 73

❓ How is it similar to this passage?

It didn't seem right then, and it doesn't seem right today, that the wicked prosper. But we need to do what Habakkuk did.

❓ What did he resolve to do (Habakkuk 2:1)?

❓ How was he like a man on sentry duty?

God's response is the rest of chapter 2.

▴ Pray

Pray that the prosperity of the wicked would not make you despair, give up, or turn against God. Pray that instead you will look to him and keep trusting.



Wait for it...

Why God allows the wicked to prosper is something that puzzled Habakkuk and may well puzzle us today. God's answer requires us to wait and to trust.

...wait for it...

Read Habakkuk 2:2-5

God's answer to Habakkuk's question (1:12-17) was "the revelation" of coming judgment in chapter 2. Habakkuk was to write it on tablets (v 2)—of clay or wood—so that it could be preserved and passed on to others. "Run" (v 2) is a term used of the prophets passing their message on (Jeremiah 23:21).

- ❓ *What three things do these verses in Habakkuk tell us about when the vision would be fulfilled?*
- ❓ *And what three things about how certain it is?*
- ❓ *And what one thing about how we should respond to it?*

Although the utterly vile Babylonians were prospering, God's judgment on them was coming. But Habakkuk needed to be patient and wait for it.

▼ Apply

The time would come for Babylon, and will come for our world today. But it is God's appointed time not ours. We're used to watching films in which everything is re-solved in the space of two hours. But God is "from everlasting" (1:12) and is working on a different timescale.

- ❓ *What is the encouragement to us in 2 Peter 3:8-9 as we wait? And what is the challenge in Hebrews 10:36-39?*

Trust in him

Read Habakkuk 2:2-5 again

Verses 4-5 contrast two groups of people—the wicked and the righteous.

- ❓ *How are the wicked described?*
- ❓ *What is the hallmark of the righteous?*

In contrast to the wicked Babylonians and the wicked in Judah, there was a righteous remnant who trusted in the Lord. And there still is today.

Verse 4 is quoted three times in the New Testament (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38).

- ❓ *What does it mean?*
- ❓ *Why has it become such a key verse?*

TIME OUT

Many of the "righteous by faith" did survive the Babylonian invasion, because they surrendered as the prophets told them to (Jeremiah 21:8-9) and were taken into exile in Babylon. And then some of them returned to Judah 70 years later.

▲ Pray

Give thanks that by faith in Christ we are declared righteous in God's sight, and will escape the coming judgment.

Pray for those people you know who don't yet enjoy that assurance.



Worship and warning

In Psalm 95 we hear a voice exhorting the people of God to join in enthusiastic songs of worship (v 1-7a)—and also to listen to God’s voice and heed his warning (v 7b-11).

Read Psalm 95:1-7a

- ❓ *What does the psalmist exhort us to do in verses 1-2?*
- ❓ *What does this celebration sound like?*
- ❓ *Why would we want to join this noisy exuberance (v 3-5)?*
- ❓ *How do verses 6-7 contrast with 3-5?*
- ❓ *What phrases show that there is no one greater than God (v 1-7)?*

The voice of this leader of the people of God exhorts us to join a noisy celebration because there is one true God, and only one, who is the unrivalled Creator of all things. In verse 6, alongside the jubilant enthusiasm, there is a deeply humble bowing down. The words “bow down”, “worship” and “kneel” have this in common: the movement is vertical and always downwards! This kind of shared singing moves our hearts and bodies to a willing submission to the God whom we praise.

▼ Apply

The God whom we worship when we sing and bow down corporately in church is the God who made and shaped and controls the whole world. This gives to our corporate worship a sense both of gladness (v 1-2) and deep reverence (v 6).

- ❓ *How can you hold together both an exultant gladness and a deep humility when a) you worship with your church family, and b) you worship alone?*

Read Psalm 95:7b-11

- ❓ *What does God tell his people NOT to do, and why?*
- ❓ *It’s tempting to enjoy verses 1-7a, but ignore verses 7b-11. Why must we not do this?*

In verse 8 the psalmist says, effectively, *Think back to that place that came to be nicknamed “Strife” (Meribah) and what happened there (Exodus 17:1-7). Think back to that later place that we called “Testing” (Massah) and what happened there (Numbers 20:1-13).* In those places the people of God hardened their hearts against God.

These verses are quoted in Hebrews 3 and 4, where it’s clear that the faith we are called to is specifically faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. *This* is how we will enter God’s rest.

The placing of Psalm 95:1-7a and 7b-11 teaches us something of enduring importance. True worship, expressed corporately in joyful song and humble prayer, is marked by an eager attentiveness to the word of God and a careful obedience to that word from the heart. Let us be very careful to hear and to heed all eleven verses of this psalm!

▲ Pray

- ❓ *Which do you find hardest: the call to joyful celebration, or to careful obedience?*

Ask God to help you do both.



The sins God judges

When a sexual abuser is jailed, a dictator toppled, or a war criminal convicted, then people cheer. But when they get away with it, people groan. We want justice. And God assures us that justice is coming.

Habakkuk was perplexed that God would use the wicked Babylonians to judge his people. But God revealed that one day the Babylonians would be called to account. On that day the nations they had conquered would mock them (v 6). Their taunts are structured around five “woes”, describing the sins of the Babylonians and the judgment that would come on them—and those like them.

Read Habakkuk 2:6-20

Plundering

- ❓ *What's the sin and judgment? (v 6-8)?*
- ❓ *To plunder means to take what is not yours, either by violence or dishonesty. What are examples of this today?*

Exploitation

- ❓ *What's the sin and judgment? (v 9-11)?*
- ❓ *How are tobacco, illegal drugs and gambling examples of people building their houses through “unjust gain”?*

Empire building

- ❓ *What's the sin and judgment (v 12-14)?*

What was true of Babylon is true of any empire built on sin. In judgment they will one day fall.

Abuse

- ❓ *What's the sin and judgment (v 15-17)?*

- ❓ *Where might we see a modern example of this?*

Idolatry

- ❓ *What is the sin (v 18-20)?*
- ❓ *Why is idolatry sheer folly?*
- ❓ *What are examples of idolatry in our world today?*

The judgment of God

This prophecy against Babylon was fulfilled in 539 BC when God raised up the Persians under King Cyrus to destroy them. God is sovereignly at work to judge in history, raising up one nation or empire to bring down another. And then in turn judging them. But Babylon reappears in Revelation chapter 18 as a picture of a world in rebellion against God and heading for final judgment. Revelation 18:4 says “Come out of her, my people”.

- ❓ *What does it mean to “come out of Babylon”?*
- ❓ *What does it not mean?*

Pray

Give thanks that as the “righteous live through faith” we know that Jesus has drunk for us the cup of judgment we deserve. Pray that you will be in the world, but not of the world—turning from worldliness and living righteously.



Ready or not, here I come!

God had revealed to Habakkuk that he would come in judgment—on Judah and, in time, on Babylon. Chapter 3 is the prophet's response.

Believe in God's coming

Read Habakkuk 3:1-2

Habakkuk had heard and read of God coming in judgment in the past.

- ❓ *What was his response to this?*
- ❓ *And what did he pray as he looked to the future?*

We can now look back on God coming in history in judgment on the sins of his people on the cross, bringing salvation.

Pray

Give thanks for the cross, where God in wrath remembered mercy. And give thanks that this coming of Christ assures us he will also return as promised, to deal with evil once and for all, and to save his people.

Tremble at his coming

What follows is a description of God coming in judgment. It's put in the past tense, but is looking to the future.

Read Habakkuk 3:3-7

- ❓ *What details emphasise God's splendour and glory?*
- ❓ *What effect does his coming have on the natural world, and on the enemies of his people?*

Centuries after Habakkuk, when God came in Christ, the surprise was that his glory

and power were largely veiled, although at times revealed to his witnesses. But when he returns it will be in awesome power and glory, as described here.

Read Habakkuk 3:8-16a

- ❓ *What details picture God as a victorious warrior?*
- ❓ *What is the effect on the natural world?*
- ❓ *How does he treat his people differently to the nations?*
- ❓ *What effect does the vision have on Habakkuk (v 8, 16a)?*
- ❓ *How does this vision challenge your view of what God is like?*

TIME OUT

Read Revelation 6:12-16

- ❓ *How does this echo what Habakkuk saw?*

Apply

When God comes in final judgement on this world, it will be utterly terrifying. If we trust in Christ, although we will be saved from this judgment, we should still “worship God acceptably with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28).

Pray for such a right attitude to God; and for love to warn others of what is coming.



Rejoice in the Lord

With Amazon Prime it's next-day delivery. With Netflix it's all 10 seasons up to watch whenever you want. We don't do waiting any more. But faith does. It has to.

Wait with patience

Read Habakkuk 3:16b-19

In judgment the Babylonians would invade the land of Judah. But Habakkuk knew that one day God's judgment would fall on the invaders too.

- ❓ *What did he resolve to do (v 16b)?*
- ❓ *How is his attitude different now to what it was in chapter 1?*

▾ Apply

As we look at evil and suffering in the world, and in our own lives, it's not wrong to question God, as Habakkuk did at first. But the answers God gives should help us move on to the patient waiting of chapter 3.

Expect hard times

Dark days lay ahead for the people of Judah.

- ❓ *How would the Babylonian invasion affect the economy (v 17)?*

These hardships were going to hit all God's people in Judah, including Habakkuk and the rest of the "righteous through faith" remnant.

▾ Apply

We live in a world under God's judgment. A world ravaged by sickness and death, disease and disability, war and conflict, tragedy

and sorrow, work pressures and relationship breakdown. As believers we do not escape these hardships.

Rejoice in the Lord

- ❓ *What was Habakkuk's resolve in the midst of these trials (v 18-19)?*

Verse 19 is a picture of victory (see Psalm 18:33). Even in the hardest of circumstances, we can experience victory as we rejoice in the Lord and find our strength in him.

▾ Apply

- ❓ *What difficulties are you, or is a believer you know, facing at the moment?*
- ❓ *What does it mean to rejoice in the Lord and find strength in him?*

The musical instruction at the end of Habakkuk 3:19 (and also v 1) indicates that chapter 3 was actually a song to sustain God's people through the dark days that lay ahead. The book begins with complaint and ends in joy; begins with frustration and ends in faith; begins with perplexity and ends in praise, despite many troubles.

▾ Pray

For now we sing songs in the night. But we do so knowing that soon the eternal dawn will come, day will break, and the sun will rise, when our Saviour comes. Pray for this perspective.



EPHESIANS: Greatest story

It's been said that there is nothing more sublime in the whole of Scripture than Ephesians. That's a big claim—so, buckle up and enjoy the ride!

Seeing Life in Ephesus

Now part of modern-day Turkey, Ephesus was then a Roman provincial capital—and in Acts 18 – 20 we read of the apostle Paul's time in the city (around 53-55 AD). After an initial visit, he later returned to encourage the new Christians there.

Read Acts 19:1, 23-36

- ❓ *What was Ephesus known for?*
- ❓ *What were the different reactions when people became Christians (also v 17-20)?*
- ❓ *Imagine being part of the first church that emerged in the city. What did you see all around you? What might being a Christian in Ephesus have felt like?*

Seeing life in Christ

The letter we call Ephesians was probably written around 60-62 AD, five to seven years after the visit above.

Read Ephesians 1:1-2

- ❓ *What do you notice about Paul's emphasis as he describes himself?*

As we go on, we'll see that the will of God is going to be very important in this letter.

- ❓ *What is Paul's emphasis as he describes and greets his readers?*

As the footnote for verse 1 says, some of the earliest copies of this letter didn't have any reference to Ephesus. Coupled with the lack of mentions of specific people/problems, it's

likely that this became Paul's discipleship manual for growing healthy churches across the wider region.

Read Ephesians 1:3

- ❓ *What is Paul focusing his readers' gaze on as he begins?*
- ❓ *Is this a present or future reality?*

The “heavenly realms” was another phrase for spiritual reality. Paul is pulling back the curtain and showing us that there is more to life than meets the eye.

Apply

- ❓ *Where are you in life as you begin this journey through Ephesians? What do you “see” all around you? How do you feel about life as a Christian in light of this?*

Life in Ephesus—as in most of the cities of Asia Minor—would have felt challenging for Christians. Paul doesn't play down those challenges, but points through them to show us the spiritual reality: life in Christ as part of God's eternal story.

Pray

Spend some time praying to the “God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v 3), asking that as we journey through Ephesians he would lift your gaze, and warm your heart. Pray you would learn to see beyond the life around us, to God's story and the spiritual realities of life in Christ Jesus.



Here on purpose

After his opening greeting, Paul takes a deep breath and begins a sentence that stretches all the way to 1:14. We're just going to look at the first half of it today...

Before the dawn of time

We saw yesterday that Paul begins by pulling open the curtains and showing us spiritual reality. In the “heavenly realms” we’ve been given “every spiritual blessing in Christ” (v 3). Now we’re going to be given a taste of those blessings.

Read Ephesians 1:3-8

- ❓ *What's the tone of this opening section? If you had to choose a soundtrack for these verses, what would it be?*
- ❓ *Make a list of all the different “spiritual blessings” Paul mentions in our passage.*
- ❓ *Which ones do you understand?*
- ❓ *Which ones are you not sure about?*
- ❓ *Sometimes the language of being “predestined” (v 5) or of God “choosing” (v 4) is treated as being negative or exclusive. How do you think Paul wanted the Ephesians to feel as they read verses 4-5?*
- ❓ *“God won't stop loving you, because there was never a beginning to his love for you”. How does this statement take you deeper into why Paul writes like he does here?*

How's your praise life?

- ❓ *Make a list of all the words that articulate God's character or posture towards us. What strikes you?*
- ❓ *Count how many times “Christ” (or an equivalent, i.e. “in him”, “in whom”) is mentioned in these verses.*

- ❓ *How does this give weight to the way Paul ends verse 3?*
- ❓ *Ultimately, why should God be praised?*

This is a spectacular way to begin a letter. Rather than going straight in with tackling ground-level problems, Paul first lifts our horizons to all that we have in Christ. Even before the world was set in motion, God had a staggering plan to bless us through Jesus!

- ❓ *What difference might this make to a Christian reading this who is feeling weak and insignificant?*

Apply

- ❓ *What impact does Paul's praise have on you as you prepare to begin Ephesians?*
- ❓ *If we spent more time looking at our life in the “heavenly realms”, how might it change how we feel about life?*
- ❓ *What can prevent us from believing these blessings are “really real”?*

Pray

Spend some time joining in with Paul's praise as he begins the letter. Choose a couple of the particular blessings Paul lists, and rejoice in them being true for all who are in Christ.

