

# How to use *explore*

## Issue 105

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 2024. 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](http://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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# Spiritually healthy?

*How are you doing in your Christian life? Really thriving, barely surviving, or somewhere in between? How can you even know how you're doing?*

Welcome to your spiritual healthcheck as you start the new year. Over the next 16 studies, we'll move through some diagnosis questions, then identify some spiritual vitamins that will help improve your Christian health, and finish by thinking about the doctor who helps us answer the questions and enables us to self-administer the vitamins.

But first, before we get to diagnosis, we need to ask: what actually *is* a spiritually healthy Christian?

## Read Romans 8:28-31

- ❓ *Who does God work for the good of (v 28—they are described in two ways)?*
- ❓ *What has God decided (predestined) he will do for those people (beginning of v 29)?*
- ❓ *Why can we be confident that this will happen (v 31)?*

When I was four, I decided to be a firefighter. When I was seven, I wanted to become a footballer. When I was nine, I was aiming to be a librarian. I failed in all three aspirations. When I was 19, God called me to faith in his Son, and I came to love him—and God decided that I would become like his Son, Jesus. And I may have changed my mind since I was four, seven and nine—but God will not change his mind, nor falter in his determination, nor fail in his ability, to turn me into someone who is just like Jesus, the perfect person.

So to be perfectly spiritually healthy is to be just like Christ Jesus. And to be growing more spiritually healthy is to be growing more like Christ Jesus.

Think about what Jesus was like during his time on earth. Kind. Compassionate. Courageous. Brave. Loyal. Wise. Thoughtful.

- ❓ *How do you feel about being like that?*

## Read 1 John 3:1-2

- ❓ *When will we be completely conformed to the image of Christ (v 2)?*

Spiritual health is being just like Christ—and, until Christ returns, you won't be in full spiritual health. Sin-sickness will cling until the day he comes. But God is working for your good—for your Christ-likeness—in all things: the ups and the downs, the thrilling parts and the mundane parts, of normal life. None of us are completely Christ-like—but God is at work to make us more Christ-like. He is not content simply to save us *through* Christ; he has decided to make us *like* Christ.

## Pray

*Adapted from John Newton*

Lord, I know I am not who I one day will be, but I thank you that I am not who I used to be. Please make me more like Christ today than I was yesterday—and please answer that prayer each day until the day I stand before him. *Amen.*

# Diagnosis #1: Love?

*We're going to ask five questions over five studies that help us to diagnose the state of our spiritual health, and begin to improve it. The first is: are you in love with Jesus?*

You might find it very helpful to ask a Christian who knows you well this question, and the next four. Their diagnosis of you may be as accurate, or more accurate, as yours!

## Good and not-so-good

### Read Revelation 2:1-3

- ❓ *In what ways is the Ephesian church doing well, according to Jesus (speaking through his apostle, John)?*
- ❓ *If you had been a visitor to this church, what would you have made of it?*

### Read Revelation 2:4-7

- ❓ *What is the problem (v 4)?*

The NIV84 translates verse 4 more evocatively: “You have forsaken your first love”. For all that the Ephesian church are doing, serving and withstanding, there is one thing they are not doing: they are not loving Jesus.

- ❓ *How serious is this (v 5)?*
- ❓ *What does Jesus promise them if they listen, change and fall in love with him all over again (v 7)?*

How easy it is for churches, and Christians, to grow cold in our love for Jesus. At first, it seems so obvious and natural—we are awed and moved by our Saviour’s love for us, and we respond by loving him. Then come the routines and the rotas, and without noticing, we end up doing the right things, but no longer really doing the one thing that

matters—loving the one who has saved us. And if I am struggling in the Christian life, it is likely to be rooted in a dwindling of my love for Christ.

## Apply

- ❓ *Do you love Jesus? Not in a sentimental, butterfly-flapping kind of way, but in a wowed, awed, moved way?*
- ❓ *Do you love him more than you used to, or less than you used to?*

## How to come back

How can you come back to, or grow in, your love for Jesus? By seeing how he loves you. Our love is kindled as we glimpse his blazing love for us. And this is great news, because we will never touch the depths or grasp the heights of his love! If you feel loveless towards Jesus, don’t focus on your love for him—delight in his love for you.

### Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Our love for Jesus is not like this—but his love for us is always like this. Re-read these verses, replacing “Love” and “it” with “Jesus”. This is how the Lord treats you. This is how he loves you—with all your flaws and failings. Don’t you love him?

## Pray

Read Ephesians 3:16-19 and pray for yourself what Paul prayed for his friends.

# Diagnosis #2: Grateful?

*Here is the second diagnosis question to help you discern your true spiritual health: are you grateful for the cross?*

Notice the question is not, *do you understand the cross?* Or even, *do you tell others about the cross?* but, *are you grateful?*

To be truly grateful for what Jesus did at Calvary, we need to begin to appreciate two truths: the truth about who we are, and the truth about what he did.

## Read 1 Timothy 1:15

- ❓ *What does Paul think of himself?*
- ❓ *What does Paul know about why Jesus came?*

We will not appreciate the cross until we first identify with Paul, thinking, *But in truth I am the worst of all sinners*. Think of your thoughts of anger, lust, selfishness and pride. Think of the things you have done that you are so relieved your nearest and dearest do not know about. These sins are not unfortunate slip-ups, committed by a basically decent person who is generally deserving of praise. They are signs of who you are—a sinner, deserving judgment.

If this makes you feel wretched, then that is a sign that the Spirit is at work in you, since one of his works is to convict us of sin (John 16:8-11). Paradoxically, wretchedness is a sign of health—because it is only the wretched who can marvel at the cross (Romans 7:24-25); it is only the broken and humble who will be justified and exalted (Luke 18:14). If you think God accepts and loves you on the basis of anything you do—

Bible-reading, church serving, evangelising, *anything*—then you will never be able truly to appreciate the wonder of the cross.

## Read Mark 15:1-39 and Isaiah 53:4-9

Reflect on all that Jesus went through on Good Friday, and as you do, repeat to yourself:

“He did that in my place, for my sake. It should have been me rejected. It should have been me punished. It should have been me forsaken. It should have been me mocked. It should have been me dying.

“But it was him. In my place, for my sake.”

John Newton, the slave trader turned pastor who famously wrote the lines, “Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me”, said towards the end of his life, “Although my memory is fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Saviour”. He was physically fading, but spiritually healthy.

## Pray

Re-read Isaiah 53:4-9 and pause regularly to pour out your gratitude, as a great sinner saved by a great Saviour.

## Apply

- ❓ *How will you make sure that you take time each day to admit your sin, reflect on the cross, and grow in gratitude?*

# Diagnosis #3: Excited?

*Here's the next diagnosis question: are you excited about the new creation? If we are not looking forward to our next life, we will never live well in this one.*

## Read Romans 8:18-25

### The future

- ❓ *What does life appear to be like for Paul's first readers (v 18)?*
- ❓ *How does he encourage them (v 18)?*
- ❓ *How does creation feel about the day Jesus returns and God's children are "revealed"—that is, their status is made utterly obvious (v 19)? Why (v 20-22)?*

It is not only believers who are waiting to be made perfect—it is the world too. Creation fell when we did, it decays as we do, and it will be restored when we are.

One reason we fail to be excited about eternity is because we've bought into cultural views of "heaven"—sitting around on a cloud in a white sheet strumming a harp is no one's idea of fulfilment. The Bible shows us something very different—an eternity spent enjoying a perfect creation, in perfect bodies, in perfect relationship with others and with God—a forever of "freedom and glory" as children of God (v 21).

### The feeling

- ❓ *How should we feel about the prospect of coming home to God as his sons (v 23)?*
- ❓ *How else should we wait for that (v 25)?*

We are not to settle for the best this world offers, nor despair at the worst this world in-

flicts. Like a fiancée waiting for her wedding day, we wait with huge excitement; but we do wait. When we fail to remember where we are headed, we grow unexcited about our future home and half-hearted in our present obedience. We feel dissatisfied so we give in to sin, because we have forgotten that real satisfaction lies ahead of us. We feel trapped by life so we seek freedom in immorality, because we have forgotten that real freedom lies ahead of us. We experience suffering so we give in to bitterness, because we have forgotten that real glory lies ahead of us.

### Apply

How can you know you are eager about the new creation? Because your life would not make sense if there were no new creation. The "present sufferings" of Paul's readers only made sense if there was to be a "glory that will be revealed" (v 18).

- ❓ *Think about your life. Do you make decisions that only make sense because the new creation is ahead of you?*
- ❓ *Think about your neighbours. Do they see or hear anything different in your lifestyle and conversation that shows that you know where you are heading?*

### Pray

Ask God for greater clarity about eternity and confidence that it is *your* eternity, so that you grow more excited about eternity.

# Diagnosis #4: Committed?

*We're now (you're probably relieved to know!) over halfway through the diagnosis of your spiritual health. Today: are you committed to God's people?*

## Remaining in Christ

### Read John 15:9-11, 14-15

- ❓ *How do we “remain in” Jesus’ love (v 9-10)?*
- ❓ *Whose joy is “complete” if we remain in Jesus’ love (v 11)?*
- ❓ *How does Jesus view those who “do what I command” (v 14-15)?*

So, if you are someone who wants to grow in love for Jesus, who wants to know complete joy, who wants to be considered a friend by Jesus, who enjoys learning all that Jesus learned from his Father—then all you need to do is to “do what I command”, says Jesus. And there’s only one command...

## The one command

### Read John 15:12-13

- ❓ *What is the command (v 12)? How do we know what this involves (v 12-13)?*

### Read Romans 12:9-16

Paul is giving the church in Rome some ways to demonstrate a love for God’s people that is “sincere”—Christ-like. Here is how Christian love looks on any day when we are not called to die for our brothers or sisters.

- ❓ *What would each of these look like if lived out in your church?*
- ❓ *Are there any here that particularly surprise you, or challenge you?*

It is strikingly simple, and deeply challenging: our love for other believers is a Christ-given diagnostic tool for knowing if we truly love him, and are truly enjoying knowing him. It is a love that prompts and is seen in actions—honouring others, sharing with others, being hospitable to others, rejoicing and mourning alongside others.

If you do not sincerely, sacrificially, actively love God’s people, then you are struggling spiritually. If you do, then you are growing spiritually. It is as simple as that.

### Read 1 John 4:9-11

If you struggle to love the other members of your church, do not look inside yourself and seek to summon up feelings of love and the will to act in love. No—look outside yourself and gaze at God’s act of love in sending his Son to die for you. As you look at the cross, you will love Christ; and as you look at the cross, you will see how to love his people. After all, our King says that, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40). You love him by loving his family. He loves it when you love his family.

## Apply

- ❓ *Look back at Romans 12:9-16. How are you going to love Jesus’ people this week?*
- ❓ *How are you going to use the cross to motivate your love?*

# Diagnosis #5: Godly?

Here, before we move on to the “vitamins”, is the fifth and final question to help you assess your own spiritual health: are you pursuing godliness?

## Power

### Read 2 Peter 1:1-3

Peter is writing to people who have “grace and peace”, with “a faith as precious as ours” (v 1-2). He is writing to Christians.

- ❓ *What does God use his power to give us (v 3)?*

“Godly” is an often-used, little-thought-about word. Godly means God-like—to live and think and feel in a situation just as God would. And we know what God would do and think and feel because of our “knowledge of him who called us”. We know God’s glory—literally his weight, his god-ness. We know his goodness—his love and grace.

So can you live a godly, holy life? Can you defeat that sin that keeps coming back? Can you love the Christian who hurt you greatly? Yes—by his power. You can pursue godliness. But why would you want to?

## Promises

### Read 2 Peter 1:4-8

- ❓ *What else has God given us (v 4)?*
- ❓ *What do we know we will do “through them” i.e. what has God promised (v 4)?*

One day, we will participate in the divine nature. We will not just be with God; we will be like God. We will be the people we were designed to be—in God’s image; Genesis-1 people (enjoying being like God) rather than

Genesis-3 people (grasping at being God).

- ❓ *What will we do if we grasp this (v 5-7)?*
- ❓ *What difference would it make to your life, and the lives of those around you, if you had each of these?*

Don’t miss the connection between v 4 and v 5-7. Peter is saying, *Because you will one day be like God (v 4), on this day make an effort to become more like God (v 5-7)*. After all, it is Jesus—God on earth—who showcases all the qualities of v 5-7 perfectly. And as we look at Jesus’ self-control, perseverance, love, etc. we see the person we’d love to be. When we see it like that, we realise that godliness is a joyful privilege more than it is a duty.

## Apply

- ❓ *How hard have you been pursuing godliness? How do Peter’s words here motivate you to pursue it?*

God’s power for you means you have no reason to fail at being godly, and no excuse for failing either.

- ❓ *How does this most challenge you?*
- ❓ *Think back to all five diagnostic questions. How are you encouraged? How are you humbled?*

Remember, you are saved by Christ, not by your Christian life. You may need to change; but if you are trusting in Christ, then v 3-4 are true of you.

# The route to blessing #1

*We're going to spend a few Sundays understanding and meditating on Psalm 1. It tackles the fundamental question: how can I be happy?*

## Read Psalm 1

Focus on verse 1.

- ❓ *What is the first step towards being blessed by God?*
- ❓ *Why is this negative message so unpopular with our world today?*

The message is “repent”. Being blessed by God involves turning away from practices and attitudes that may be normal, enjoyable, and even seem “sensible” to us.

## Beware walking with the “wicked”

- ❓ *What do you think it means to “walk in step with the wicked”?*

It is a mistake to think that “wicked counsel” (NIV84) is limited to those who might encourage us to lie, steal or harm others. In the Bible, wickedness refers to any way of living that leaves God out of the picture. Wicked counsel is both the encouragement of friends to waste money on frivolities, and the “sensible” advice of a kindly gran who tells you to “look after number one”.

- ❓ *Can you think of some subtle (and so more dangerous) ways in which people might live by “wicked” counsel?*

## Care in company

- ❓ *Why is the company we keep so important?*

As any parent knows, the company we keep—the friends we choose to spend time with—is one of the most significant factors in how our character develops. Their attitudes and values can rub off on us without us noticing. And so all too easily we can find ourselves adopting the life, or “way”, of “sinners”—those who deny and defy God’s rule in life.

## Steer clear of mockery

- ❓ *Why can mocking others be so tempting to do or to watch?*

Mockery puts us in the position of feeling we are superior to others. That makes it soul acid that eats away at us, leaving us with a distorted view of ourselves and a sneering cynicism about others.

## Apply

Think about your values—how you think life should be lived. Think about the friends you spend time with, the comedy shows you watch, the books you read.

- ❓ *What effect do they have on you? Could they be leading you away from enjoying life under God’s rule?*
- ❓ *Are there any practical steps you need to take?*
- ❓ *Is there anything you’re trying to avoid confronting? Remember—without repentance, there is no blessed life!*



# Take your vitamins

*Diagnosing problems can help us start to address them—hopefully you’ve experienced this during the last few days. And the Lord has also given us spiritual “health vitamins”.*

It’s to these we now turn...

## Bible: bad for you?

We’re joining an argument between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders.

### Read John 5:39-40

- ❓ *Is the problem of these leaders that they don’t read the Scriptures?*
- ❓ *So what is their problem? What are they missing?*

In Luke 24:32, two disciples describe the feeling of having a Bible study with Jesus: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” Is that regularly, or ever, your experience when you sit down to read the Bible?

The crucial detail here was not that the Scriptures were opened, but that Jesus was there. It is very easy to read the Bible intellectually—for more understanding; or morally—to live better; or mechanically—because studies like this told us it would help our faith. None of those are wrong—but on their own, they are bad for you (as they were for those religious leaders). Supremely, we need to read the Bible relationally—to meet with Jesus. Read the Bible to meet with Jesus: speak with Jesus as you read it, praise Jesus as you understand it, love Jesus more as you see his love for you—and your faith will grow stronger and your Christian life will grow healthier.

## Apply

- ❓ *How would you describe your approach to reading the Bible? Mainly intellectual, or moral, or mechanical, or relational?*
- ❓ *How does this affect your faith?*

## Pray

*Lord Jesus, you meet with me in your word. As I read it, by the work of your Spirit, please enable me not only to understand more about you but to know you better and love you more. Please make my Bible-reading relational. Amen.*

## Bible: at work in you

Vitamins work not only as we take them but through the day. So must God’s word.

### Read Psalm 119:9-16

- ❓ *What words does the writer use to describe what he does with God’s word?*

Here is one way to enjoy Christ all day: set alarms for three points in the day. Read the Bible in the morning and contemplate one truth about Jesus. When the alarm goes, remember the truth, and praise him. Your enjoyment of Jesus through his word does not need to end when you close your Bible!

- ❓ *How are you proactively going to meditate upon Christ’s ways each day?*



# Learning to pray

Here's the second vitamin: prayer. If you struggle with prayer—if you need Jesus to “teach” you how to pray—you're in good company: so did Jesus' disciples.

## What we say

### Read Luke 11:1-4

- ❓ *Whose interests are the focus of the first half of this prayer (v 2)?*
- ❓ *Whose interests are the focus of the second half (v 3-4)?*
- ❓ *How might this order shape the way we feel, and our view of our own problems, as we pray?*

Given that Jesus also prayed using other words (e.g. Luke 10:21), and given that he habitually spent hours in prayer (e.g. Mark 1:35), it's unlikely he wanted us to see this as exact wording to say, but rather as a series of headings or topic areas.

### ^ Pray

This week, why not structure your prayers around each clause of Luke 11:2-4, taking one a day?

- Enjoy the truth it contains.
- Pray through the request.
- Ask for eyes to see the answers.

Why not start right now?!

## What we most need

### Read Luke 11:5-13

- ❓ *What does the person in Jesus' parable want, and why (v 5-6)?*
- ❓ *Why does he receive it (v 7-8)?*

- ❓ *What comparison does he make between flawed (“evil”) human fathers and our perfect Father in heaven (v 11-13)?*

What a wonderful promise v 10 is! We should pray with confidence. And what a wonderful invitation v 8 is! We should pray with persistence. What a wonderful truth v 13 is! We should pray with assurance. It's an intriguing end to the lesson—“your Father in heaven [will] give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (v 13). Notice that, in prayer, we need to learn what to ask for as much as we need to learn that God is willing, and able, to answer. In the parable, the requester was making a good request for a good reason. We are to learn to ask confidently and persistently for what we most need—and supremely, what we most need is the Spirit.

This is the wonder of prayer when it matches God's priorities—God answers by giving us new experiences of the peace of the Spirit, the wisdom of the Spirit, the courage of the Spirit, the love of the Spirit, and so on. Prayer strengthens us as we re-centre ourselves on God's priorities, and as we request the work of his Spirit in our lives.

### ^ Pray

Identify a few worries or problems in your life. Instead of asking God to take them away, work out what aspect of the Spirit's work you need to walk through them, and then ask your Father in heaven to give you the Holy Spirit.

# Health food

*On earth, Jesus did much of his ministry over food. And still today, he has given his church a meal that feeds us—that keeps us healthy and keeps us growing.*

## Bad manners

### Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, 27-32

- ❓ *What is Paul criticising the Corinthian Christians for in v 18 and v 21-22?*
- ❓ *Why is this serious (v 27-29)?*

Receiving the Lord's Supper without "discerning the body of Christ" (v 29)—that is, without recognising that you do so as part of a church of saved sinners—means you are not eating the Lord's Supper at all (v 20). And it is so important to God that he was willing to discipline these Christians in order that they would not continue down this path towards spiritual shipwreck and eternal condemnation (v 30-32).

Why does it matter so much? Because this meal is a central means by which God strengthens his people. And such strong medicine, when misused, can be fatal.

## Visible words

### Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Notice the "For" at the start of v 23. Here is the reason that Paul is so firm in the first paragraph of this section.

- ❓ *Who wants us to share this meal (v 23-25)?*
- ❓ *What do we remember as we eat bread and drink wine (v 24-25)?*
- ❓ *What do we look forward to (v 26)?*

The 16th-century Reformer John Calvin called the bread and wine "visible words". God preaches to us through the broken bread and the poured-out wine. As we re-remember the death of Christ, he moves us to appreciate more deeply how we have been brought into his family—why it is we are able to eat at his table both now spiritually and one day physically. Our eating and drinking is a public proclamation of who we are: his children, rescued by his Son's death.

### Read 2 Corinthians 3:17-18

We become more like Christ (or, to put it another way, we become healthier Christians) as the Spirit shows us Jesus—as we "see" him. We do this in his word, as we've seen. But we do this in his supper too. As the physical bread and wine enable us spiritually to "see" him on the cross, we are reminded of his love, we are moved to love him, and we are changed to be more like him. And this is why the Lord's Supper is such a wonderful means of strengthening us if we prepare for and receive it rightly—and such a dangerous thing to prepare for flippantly or receive unthinkingly.

## Apply

- ❓ *How is 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 going to help you prepare for your next sharing of the Lord's Supper?*
- ❓ *How is verse 26 going to help you know what to think about and pray about as you receive it?*

# Church health

*In a sense, instead of asking, “How healthy am I, spiritually?” we should ask, “How healthy is my church, spiritually?”*

That’s because there are very few Christians who are thriving while their church is stagnating or struggling. God saved us to be part of his people; he placed us in a body of his people; and we each grow or shrink spiritually as a member of his people.

That is why, in the New Testament letters, the vast majority are addressed to churches—and the overwhelming majority of those letters’ content is aimed at the whole church, not individuals within the church.

## Put off, put on

### Read Colossians 3:5-14

- ❓ *What must the members of this church “put to death” by ridding themselves of (v 5-10)?*
- ❓ *What must God’s chosen people “clothe” themselves with (v 12-14)?*

A Christian who never gave into the sins of v 5-9, and who consistently displayed the virtues of v 12-14, would be an amazing—*an* extremely Christ-like—person! But notice how many of both the sins and the qualities are others-focused. Most are flaws and strengths that are displayed in community. And love, the virtue “which binds [the other virtues] all together” (v 14), is relational.

In other words, if we truly want to be spiritually healthy ourselves, we will be committed to the spiritual health of others. The maturity of other members of your church must matter as much to you as your own.

God has given you your church community to help you grow, as you help them grow. Paul goes on to show how we do this...

## One another

### Read Colossians 3:15-17

- ❓ *What should rule our hearts (v 15)?*

No grudges, no one-upmanship, no divisions. If Christ has made peace with someone, who are we to be in conflict with them?

- ❓ *What should dwell in our hearts (v 16)?*
- ❓ *How does this happen (v 16-17)?*

## Apply

- ❓ *Do you teach and admonish others in your church, based on what you’ve heard together from the Bible?*
- ❓ *Are you someone who is willing to be taught and admonished themselves?*
- ❓ *Why are we often so slow to do these things for each other, do you think?*

## Pray

Choose three or four people in your church. Pray that they would take off specific sins in verses 5-9 which you know they struggle with, and put on the virtues of verses 12-14. And ask for an opportunity to encourage them.

# Christ in creation

*The world is set up to enable us to breathe in air that keeps us physically alive. But it is also set up so that we are able to breathe in truth that keeps us spiritually alive.*

## Read Psalm 19

The ideas of v 7-14—that God’s word refreshes us and is precious to us, and that God is our Rock and Redeemer—are fairly familiar. But the psalm doesn’t start at v 7!

-  *What do the heavens, or skies, do all the time (v 1-2)?*
-  *Since “they use no words” (v 3), in what sense do they do this, do you think?*

Every single aspect of the creation points to its Creator. A snowflake’s intricacy, a lightning bolt’s power, a cell’s complexity, a sunset’s beauty. Each tells us there is a Maker, and each tells us something of the Maker. We see his glory reflected in each part of his work that we see around us.

-  *To what does David compare the sun (v 4-6)?*

In the Old Testament, God describes himself as a bridegroom, with his people as his bride (e.g. Hosea 2:14-23). The Gospels record Jesus using that bridegroom imagery for himself (Mark 2:18-20). And Revelation reveals that when the Lamb, Jesus, returns, it will be to hold a wedding feast for his bride, the church (Revelation 19:7-9), ushering us into a restored world where there will be no need for a sun, “for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp (21:23).

So when David describes the sun as “a bridegroom” (Psalm 19:5) that gives warmth

to all (v 6), he is not just clutching at any old simile. He is saying, *The sun reminds me of you, God—reminds me of your power, your love, your warmth.* And, living after Jesus died to rescue his bride, we can say, *The sun reminds me of you, Jesus—of your power, love and warmth, and of your return, when you will be all the light we need.*

The triune God has painted himself into his creation masterpiece. He made lightning to remind us of the sudden, powerful return of Christ (Luke 17:24). He made snow to show us what he does with our sin (Isaiah 1:18). He made fire to tell us about the power of his purity and the warmth of his Spirit (Exodus 19:18; Acts 2:1-4). He made rocks to enable us to understand his stability (Psalm 19:14). Everywhere in his creation, he is showing us himself.

Remember, spiritual health means becoming more and more like Christ (Romans 8:28-30). We become more and more like Christ as we see more of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). And we see Christ throughout his creation, as we learn to look at it with eyes ready to see it “declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1).

## Apply

As you go about your day, look for Jesus in his creation. Ask him to point you to himself—who he is and what he’s done—in what you see.

# The gift of suffering

*A healthy Christian is not necessarily a healthy person. A hard truth to grasp is that your suffering is a divine gift to keep you trusting and keep you healthy (spiritually).*

## Genuine faith

### Read 1 Peter 1:3-7

- ❓ *Because Jesus rose (v 3), what can his people look forward to (v 4)?*
- ❓ *How do we know we'll get there (v 5)?*
- ❓ *With what emotion should we respond to this (beginning of v 6)?*
- ❓ *But what are Peter's readers going through (v 6)?*
- ❓ *Why have "these ... come" (v 7)?*

Suffering shows what, or who, we really trust in—and what, or who, we find our joy in. Suffering hurts because it involves the removal of a happy circumstance (e.g. a relationship, or a career, or good health, or a secure home). But for the Christian, it does not involve the removal of our joy—because our joy was never primarily found in that thing, but in Christ and our eternal home with him. And so suffering proves the “genuineness of your faith”—not to God (he already knows!) but to you. When we are at our weakest, but we cling on to Christ, we can see that our faith is not fake, but real.

### Apply

- ❓ *Have you ever experienced a time when you were suffering greatly, and saw that your faith was genuine and your joy was not extinguished? How does that encourage you?*

- ❓ *Are you suffering right now? How might God be using this suffering to:*
  - *show you your faith is genuine?*
  - *enable you to locate your joy each day in him, not in circumstances?*
  - *make you more like Jesus?*

## Run to God

Job is the biblical character whose suffering we see in most detail, and whose response we see at most length. By Job 2:8, Job has lost his wealth, his children, his house and his health—and he has no idea why.

### Read Job 2:9-10

- ❓ *What does Job's wife tell him to do? Why is this understandable?*

I have not suffered as Job and his wife did. But I have certainly had the same reaction as Job's wife in my mind.

- ❓ *How does Job respond (v 10)?*

In suffering, we either run away from God in despair and bitterness, or towards God in desperate trust. The first is easier; the second is greater. It assures us of our faith and of our future, and means that we are joyful, not crushed.

### Pray

- ❓ *How do you need to pray for yourself in light of these truths?*
- ❓ *Who else do you need to pray for?*