



# How to use Explore

## In this issue

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 they will expand your grasp of the Bible. *Explore* uses the NIV Bible translation, but you can also use it with the ESV or another translation of your choice.

Sometimes a prayer section will encourage you to stop and pray through the application of God's word—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.

## We're serious!

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

*Opening up the Bible*

# Welcome to Explore

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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 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 might 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, 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. 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.

Tim Thornborough and Carl Laferton  
Editors



# Fear in the new year

*Was your new year happy, or utterly stressful? If the latter, how can you bring this honestly to God in prayer? And how can we talk to the Lord about the year ahead?*

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## Anguish

### Read Psalm 55:1-8

- ❓ *What is the psalmist asking God to do (v 1)?*
- ❓ *How does he describe his feelings (v 2, 4-5)?*
- ❓ *Note the different images. What does this suggest to you about his state?*
- ❓ *What has caused these feelings (v 3)?*
- ❓ *What does he long to do (v 6-8)?*

## Lament

Lament psalms arise out of difficult situations. In them, the psalmist honestly expresses his feelings and problems to God, sometimes in extreme ways. In this psalm we see someone who is on the edge; their mind in overdrive, restless and confused, hypersensitive—what one writer describes as an extreme anxiety attack. The amazing thing that laments like this show us is that we can bring all of our thoughts, feelings and worries to God—*all of them!* It's ok to tell God that I'm not ok.

### TIME OUT

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**Read Psalm 139**, especially v 1, 4, 22-23. Amazingly, knowing all this about us, he still loves us, and *will* still love us if we tell him exactly how we feel. God loves the truth.

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## Betrayal

### Read Psalm 55:9-14

The reason for David's anguish is that someone is verbally attacking him (v 3, 9, 12).

- ❓ *Who is this attacker, and why would this be particularly painful (v 12-14)?*

Even Jesus was betrayed by a close friend (see Matthew 26:47-50). He knows how this feels. The words of this psalm may have particular resonance with anyone who has been abused or betrayed by a partner, friend or family member. It could be a way to express their anguish and to reach out to God.

## Apply

- ❓ *Have you ever felt like this? If not, do you know someone who has?*
- ❓ *How might this psalm encourage you in such a situation?*

## Pray

Honestly express to God how you are feeling right now. Don't hold back. Feel the freedom to pour it out before your Father who knows and loves you.

And pray on behalf of others. As I write this, Ukrainian cities are being destroyed, and African churches burned out. Stand alongside them in anguish before the Lord, who listens and loves.



# An unburdened future

*As well as pouring out our feelings about difficult situations to the Lord, we can also plead with God to act. This is what the psalmist does in the rest of this psalm.*

## Read Psalm 55:15-23

Lament flows from faith: the conviction that God is relevant to every situation. He loves us, and he can make a difference. This is why we plead with him to act. Lament is not the sign of a weak believer. David, Jeremiah, Job and other heroes of faith lamented.

## He asks for *what*?

- ❓ *What does the psalmist ask for (v 15)?*
- ❓ *Would you be comfortable asking God to do this?*
- ❓ *Where and how do you see the psalmist expressing trust in God in these verses?*

This request may shock us. We need to remember that this imprecation (a spoken curse) is part of a lament spoken by someone in the depths of anguish, honestly expressing a desire for vengeance. By expressing this desire, the psalmist is choosing to hand his vengeance over to God, rather than taking revenge himself—for example by answering verbal attack with verbal attack. Note that in verses 19-23 it is God who is asked to act. Strangely enough, this is part of trusting in God, the God who is totally just, and powerful, and ultimately will see justice done.

..... **TIME OUT** .....

## Read Romans 12:14-21

- ❓ *Where is the “handing over” of vengeance in this passage?*
- ❓ *What can this lead to (v 14, 20-21)?*

This imprecation is not an excuse for us to be negative about others when we are feeling fine. However, in horribly difficult times it is a way to hand over our existing feelings to God, helping us to live in God's love.

## Casting burdens

### Read Psalm 55:22 again

- ❓ *What commands and promises are there in this precious verse?*
- ❓ *What is involved in “casting burdens” do you think?*

## Pray

Do you have any deep-seated desires for revenge that you need to hand over to God? Then do it now.

What burden are you carrying into 2023 that you can now cast on him?

Give yourself enough time to do this. Neither of these things are easy.

And pray for those you know who are wrestling with the pain of injustice, or bearing crushing burdens, that they would be able to know the reality of God's care for them and trust him with their deepest hurts.



# Who will you fear?

*This is a psalm that holds fear and trust in tension. The psalmist fears humans, but trusts in God. How does this apply to you as 2023 starts?*

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## Fear and trust

### Read Psalm 56:1-13

- ❓ *What exactly is the psalmist afraid of?*
- ❓ *What exactly is the psalmist trusting in?*

The repeated refrain in verses 3-4 and 10-11 contains some key truths. Trust is not just for when things are going well (that's easy), but also for when things are difficult. We can still trust when we are afraid because we trust in the ultimately trustworthy God. But this trust isn't a passive thing—it requires us to call out to God for help (v 1, 7-9.)

## Word and promise

Many people view prayer as an act of weakness or desperation—whispering or shrieking our hopes to the silent heavens.

- ❓ *How is Christian prayer different (v 4)?*

The psalm gives us one clue — see “whose word I praise”. We can trust God because he gives us his word, and he has demonstrated time and time again how he keeps his word and his promises.

### TIME OUT

God gives many immediate promises in the Bible. However, he also gives long-term promises which form the basis of his relationship with his people.

He promised Abraham descendants, land,

a relationship, and blessing for all nations (Genesis 12:1-3). He promised David that one of his descendants would always rule (2 Samuel 7:8-15). Both promises were ultimately fulfilled in Jesus (Galatians 3:8, 14; Acts 13:32-34). If you want to learn more, look for books that explain the big story of the Bible. One example would be Vaughan Roberts' *God's Big Picture*.

## What can mere mortals do to me?

### Read Psalm 56:10-13

- ❓ *What assurance does he come to?*
- ❓ *What commitment does he make (v 13)?*

In one sense, mortals can do quite a lot to us, and the psalmist knows it first-hand (v 1-2, 5-6, 8)! How, then, can he say, “What can mere mortals do to me” (v 4, 11)? The truth here is that humans can do nothing about what ultimately matters—our relationship and destiny with God.

## Pray

Thank God for his promises to all believers, and the security that we have in him, even when we are struggling with painful things.

Resolve before the Lord to walk before God in the light of life this year.

# JUDGES: Light in the dark

*Life for believers in a broken world can often feel very dark—but even in those times God is at work.*

## Getting our bearings

The book of Judges is a treasure trove of gripping stories. Many of its characters are well known—people like Gideon, Samson, Deborah; others like Shamgar, Othniel and Tola are not. Judges describes glorious rescues, dramatic exploits, but also terrible events. Some of the darkest episodes in the Bible are found in this book.

### Read Joshua 24:14-15, 21 and Judges 21:25

- ❓ *What do the people commit to at the end of the book of Joshua?*
- ❓ *What are the people like by the end of Judges?*

The book of Judges tells the story of God's people after the death of Joshua, when they have started to settle in the promised land, and before the arrival of Samuel, roughly 300 years of history. Sadly, the book describes a downward spiral into deeper sin by God's people as they forsake their God. But through it all, God is faithful to his people, even in their sin. Light shines even in the darkest times.

## A promising start

### Read Judges 1:1-8

- ❓ *What do the Israelites plan to do?*
- ❓ *What is good about how they do it?*
- ❓ *What does the writer say is the real reason for their victories (v 4)?*

## Apply

The death of Joshua left a huge hole in the leadership of God's people.

- ❓ *But what do these opening verses teach us about where true leadership and security is to be found for God's people?*
- ❓ *How might this help us when godly leaders die or move on; or when leaders let us down and fail?*

God is faithful to his promises in Judges 1.

- ❓ *Where can you see God's faithfulness to his promises in your life, even in dark times?*
- ❓ *How might that encourage you today?*

## More success! But...

### Read Judges 1:9-21

- ❓ *What successes do God's people achieve in these verses?*
- ❓ *Again, what is the key to their success (v 19)?*
- ❓ *What warning notes are sounded in verses 19 and 21?*

## Pray

Pray that through these studies in Judges, God would encourage you and teach you about his faithfulness and commitment to his people.



# Where it all went wrong

*What happens when we compromise on obedience to God's commands? Judges 1 shows us the sad consequences...*

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Judges begins with life after Joshua. And it started well. Enemies defeated, land taken, the people united and dependant on God for victory. But it's not long before things begin to go wrong.

throughout all the nations of the world. Our job is not to bring judgment through the sword; we are instead to bring the gospel of Jesus so that the nations will be spared the ultimate judgment of God!

## Danger of compromise

### Read Judges 1:22-36

- ❓ *What is the consistent pattern in these verses as the different tribes try to take the land?*
- ❓ *What different ways does the writer use to describe the relationships between the Israelites and the various peoples of Canaan?*
- ❓ *How would you sum up the situation in the land at the end of chapter 1?*

### Look up Deuteronomy 7:1-6

- ❓ *What were the people to do to the nations in the land?*
- ❓ *What reasons did God give for this?*

These commands might feel wrong to us today. But God's people in the Old Testament were a specific nation in a specific place. God used his people to bring his judgment on the inhabitants of the land. Previously he'd been merciful and allowed these nations to thrive; and some individuals had even trusted in God! But now his just judgment was to be meted out through his people. This is very different for God's people today—we're a people scattered

## Apply

In not doing what God commanded, Israel compromised, and the polluting nations remained among them, causing God's people to be led astray. The rest of the Old Testament, including Judges, tells the story.

- ❓ *How might you be tempted to compromise when faced with difficult commands?*
- ❓ *How do the views of the world around you affect your thinking and actions?*

## God's verdict

### Read Judges 2:1-5

- ❓ *What had God promised the people? What did he want them to do?*
- ❓ *What is God's response to their disobedience?*
- ❓ *How do the people respond? Why aren't tears enough? See 2:11-13!*

## Pray

Ask God to help you to be faithful to him, and repent of your sinful compromises honestly and wholeheartedly.

# The pattern is set

*The choices one generation makes have consequences for the next. Is there any escape from the cycle?*

We saw in chapter 1 that the people of God started well in seeking to settle in the land. They drove out some of their enemies whilst seeking God's guidance. But chapter 1 also showed how the people compromised with the nations. They failed to drive out many of the people, and ended up living side by side with them. Chapter 2 shows the consequences with an overview of the years ahead. Chapter 2 sets the pattern which the rest of the book follows.

## Sin has consequences

### Read Judges 2:6-16

- ❓ *How did the people behave in the lifetime of Joshua (v 6-9)?*
- ❓ *How do the next generation behave (v 10-13)?*
- ❓ *What is at the heart of this behaviour according to the writer in verse 10?*
- ❓ *How does the writer highlight how serious this is in verses 12-13?*
- ❓ *What is God's reaction (v 14-15)?*

### ▼ Apply

These verses highlight how quickly God's people can forsake him through compromising with the world around and forgetting him.

- ❓ *Why is forgetfulness so dangerous for Christians?*
- ❓ *What Bible truths are you in most danger of forgetting at the moment?*

- ❓ *What do you think it means to "know the Lord" in verse 10? How is knowing God and growth in him vital for spiritual health and protection?*

One issue for Israel seems to have been that they were not teaching the next generation about the Lord.

- ❓ *Why is it vital we teach our children and young people at home and in church about the Lord (for help look up Deuteronomy 6:20-25)?*
- ❓ *Judges 2:16 is a ray of hope. What does this verse teach about the Lord, despite human sin?*

## Down, down, down...

### Read Judges 2:17 – 3:6

- ❓ *How do these verses set the pattern for God's people for the years to come?*
- ❓ *How does God use the presence of the nations in the land (2:22 and 3:1, 4)?*
- ❓ *Do you think Israel passed or failed the test (3:5-6)?*

Remember Deuteronomy 7:3-4 for how serious this is!

### ▲ Pray

Pray for God's grace to know him better and to fight sin. Pray for children and young people in your family and church to come to know the Lord and stand for him.





# God is the hero!

Think of the most exceptional leader you know of. What are their qualities? What are their limitations?

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## Who's in charge?

Leadership is a big issue in the book of Judges. The book begins with the death of a gifted leader, Joshua (1:1), and ends with the comment that people did what they wanted because they had no obvious leader (21:25).

Judges weren't law-court officials as we know them—they were people raised up by God to lead God's people and rescue them from their enemies. But behind each of them was God himself. We're not meant to see the judges as examples for us. Some of them lived very messy lives and made very bad decisions! Rather, they teach us about God—the real Saviour. The book of Judges shows us our sin and points to our need for a Saviour.

## A model judge

### Read Judges 3:7-11

- ❓ *Looking at the passage as a whole, what pattern can you see in the story that we first noted in chapter 2?*
- ❓ *In Judges 3:7-8, what did the Israelites do and how did God respond?*
- ❓ *What are the next stages of the cycle in verses 9-10?*
- ❓ *What do we learn about Othniel here? Why might it be significant that he is the first judge?*
- ❓ *Remember Judges 1:9-13. How had Othniel resisted the temptations of 3:6?*

- ❓ *What is the result of the rescue (v 11)?*

## The model Saviour

We might at first think Judges 3:7-11 is all about Othniel, but in fact Othniel is simply the Lord's instrument to save his people.

### Read Judges 3:7-11 again

- ❓ *What do you learn about God's reaction to sin?*
- ❓ *How do you see his mercy and grace at work?*

Notice in verse 10 the first mention of the Spirit of God in Judges. We'll see later that God often gives the judges his Spirit to empower them to save his people from their enemies.

## Apply

We learn little about Othniel, but much about God. And Othniel points us to Jesus, our perfect Saviour.

- ❓ *As you consider your own life, what do these verses teach you about the danger of sin in verse 7?*
- ❓ *And what do they teach you about how God delights to rescue sinners like us?*

Praise God for his mercy in Jesus!



# Faithful refuge

*When disaster strikes, where do we find refuge? For the psalmist, it is God—the ultimate source of rest and security.*

## Read Psalm 57:1-11

- ❓ *Where does the psalmist take refuge and why (v 1)?*
- ❓ *How does he describe God (v 2-3, 10)?*
- ❓ *How does he describe his enemies and their acts (v 3, 4, 6)?*
- ❓ *Beyond his plea in verse 1, how will he respond to all of this—(v 7-9)?*

The psalmist has to live among people who act like wild beasts, whose words are as dangerous and hurtful as weapons of war (v 4). Yet, he has a refuge in God—the God who will vindicate him (v 2) and turn the violence of his enemies back upon them (v 6).

## Sticks and Stones?

Look back at the attacks in Psalm 55:3, 9, 12, and in Psalm 56:5. Many of them are verbal (as here). The Bible doesn't agree that "words will never hurt me". Instead, it recognises the anguish that they can cause. Therefore, it also warns us to be careful how we speak.

### TIME OUT

## Read James 3:1-12

- ❓ *How does this passage describe the tongue?*
- ❓ *How does this challenge Christians about the way we speak?*

## Pray

Ask God to help you and all Christians to speak truthfully and with kindness.

## Loving, steadfast, faithful

Why can the psalmist be confident that God will be his refuge? Because of God's character. This psalm uses two words to describe this: "love" and "faithfulness" (v 3, 10). The first includes the ideas of love, steadfastness, loyalty. The second includes the ideas of truth and faithfulness.

This is why the psalmist can be steadfast even under attack (v 7). This is why he will praise his God even at night (v 8) and among the nations (v 9). We remember Paul and Silas singing to God in the Philipian jail, (perhaps this very psalm?) because they knew what the psalmist knew. They knew that the God who is above all creation (v 5, 11) acts within creation (v 3). And we remember how God acted on that occasion—truly their refuge (see Acts 16:22-26)!

## Pray

Thank God that he is our refuge, that he is full of steadfast love and true faithfulness. If you need it, seek him as your refuge now. If you don't, pray for those who do.





# An unlikely saviour

*Sometimes, Bible rescues are achieved through the most surprising of people.*

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## A tragicomic tale

In Judges 3 we meet Eglon and Ehud. Lots of the stories in Judges are dark and sad, but the way this narrative is told is surely meant to make us smile. But at first, the story is deadly serious.

### Read Judges 3:12-31

- ❓ *What familiar cycle is described in verses 12-15?*
- ❓ *Why is it significant to read in verse 12 that God “gave” Eglon power over Israel (remember 3:8)?*
- ❓ *What does this cycle remind us about the state of the human heart and the need for God’s grace and mercy?*
- ❓ *What does it teach us about God’s view of sin and its consequences?*

Ehud is an unlikely saviour. Verse 15 describes him as left-handed. Soldiers traditionally fought right-handed, and this was their strength. To be left-handed was thought to be a disadvantage, even weak. Ehud was also from the tribe of Benjamin, one of the weakest tribes and already a military failure (1:21). But he is God’s choice, and that is what makes the difference.

- ❓ *What elements of the story in verses 16-26 are surprising and unexpected?*
- ❓ *What overall picture do we get of Eglon?*
- ❓ *How does this highlight the tragedy of Eglon ruling over Israel for 18 years?*

- ❓ *How does the end of the story in verses 27-30 highlight God’s judgment and power over his enemies, and God’s grace to his people?*

## A surprising saviour!

Ehud (and indeed Shamgar in verse 31) is a surprising saviour. But like all the judges, we’re not meant to copy him. He’s flawed and weak. These judges keep pointing us forward to a better Saviour—Jesus! But Jesus, too, is an unlikely Saviour.

### Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

- ❓ *Why is the message about Jesus such foolishness to ears of the world?*
- ❓ *Why is the cross the power of God, according to Paul (v 21)?*

## Apply

- ❓ *How does the unlikely way God saves through Ehud and through Jesus highlight God’s power?*
- ❓ *What does the cross do to our pride and the thought that we’re the powerful masters of our lives?*
- ❓ *Why is it that we are sometimes ashamed of the message of the cross, even though it’s God’s way of salvation and wisdom?*

Thank God for the wisdom and power of the cross.

# An unwilling leader






*Why is it that God's people often find it hard to do what he says? Is it fear? Is it the cost? Or perhaps it's just a sense of resignation that we can't change the situation...*

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## Same old, same old

God's people need a hero again. But this time Judges 4 presents a rather reluctant hero. God's people are in the same situation again after the death of Ehud. Once again, we're presented with a familiar cycle we've seen before.




### Read Judges 4:1-16

-  *What familiar features do we see in verses 1-3?*
-  *In what ways is this time different from 3:8 and 3:14?*
-  *What is Deborah's role in 4:4-7?*
-  *How is Barak portrayed in verses 8-10?*
-  *Despite Barak's misgivings, what is the outcome of the battle in verses 11-16 and who is really responsible?*

### Apply

Barak is an ambiguous figure. He looks weak in some ways, but...



### Read 1 Samuel 12:11 and Hebrews 11:32-33

-  *What encouragement might this give us about the way God uses weak and fearful people like us?*
-  *In what specific areas might you be unwilling to obey God's word in your life?*
-  *What are the reasons why you find it hard to obey him?*

## God defeats his enemies

### Read Judges 4:17-24


Sisera flees the battle on foot (v 17).

-  *How does he meet his end? Why is it significant that Jael is the one who delivers the fatal blow (v 9)?*
-  *Why is it significant that Barak is mentioned in verse 22?*

### Apply

It's easy to read a passage like this, and feel that we too let God down and fail him through fear, lack of courage, weak hearts and a whole host of other reasons. But the writer reminds us that God is the real hero (see v 6, 9, 14, 15 and 23). And wonderfully we have a better Saviour who knows how we feel, but didn't sin.

### Read Hebrews 4:14-16

-  *What encouragement does the writer give us in these verses? What does he urge us to do?*

### Pray

Spend some time confessing your own weaknesses to the Lord, and admitting the times you've let him down. Ask for his forgiveness, and rejoice in his love and acceptance of you in Jesus. Ask him for help to live his way today.