

Week 11 The Living Word

This week's readings

John 1:1-18

Luke 1

Luke 2:1-40

Luke 3

Matthew 3:13- 4:17

Way in

Give each group member a sheet of paper and get them to write down as many names of Jesus as possible. Encourage each person to share one name that has particular significance for them. Use this in an open time of worship of Jesus for who he is and what he has done for us.

Review

Invite members to share reactions to what they have read.

- Using language from Genesis 1, John began his gospel by rooting the person of Jesus in God's head. From the beginning, Jesus was "God made flesh."
- Elizabeth and Mary were the people God decided to use as the mothers of John and Jesus. They committed themselves to God's purposes without fully understanding how this could happen.
- The greatest miracle of all time, Jesus' birth, occurred in a very ordinary context. The first people to meet him were shepherds.
- John the Baptist, the 'greatest prophet' (Luke 7:24-28), proclaimed judgment and hope, and – most importantly – he introduced and prepared the way for Jesus.
- Jesus was baptized and then went into the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil.

Going deeper

Temptation is something everybody experiences. Spend some time exploring the range of things we may be tempted in and by and the different ways temptations come.

Look at 1 Corinthians 10:12,13. What 'ways out' of temptation are there? Jesus uses the Bible; Paul teaches about the full armor of God (Eph. 6:10-18). Talk about how both can become effective defenses against the attacks of Satan.

Are there ways to help one another not to give in to temptation? Would you feel able to confess giving in to temptation to others in the group, knowing you would still be loved and accepted? Spend some time praying about any temptations you are currently facing. Pray for one another.

Respond

Being sensitive to individual feelings and group relationships, explore together whether you are ready to challenge and be challenged by one another. Would you be able to admit to the group that you are being tempted to certain areas?

Week 12 The Teachings of Jesus

This week's readings

Matthew 5:1-6-4

Matthew 6:5 – 7:29

Matthew 13

Luke 10:25-37

Luke 15

Way in

Select one of Jesus's parables and discuss how a modern context might look.

Review

Invite members to share reactions to what they have read.

- the Sermon on the Mount: the most well-known of all Jesus' sermons. He defined true happiness, talked about the importance of influencing others, and significantly increased the expectations found in the Old Testament for God's people.
- The Lord's Prayer: highlighted two main focal points for prayer – worship and requests.
- the parables of the Sower, the weeds, the mustard seed, and yeast: all were used to highlight issues surrounding the ongoing battle between Christ and the evil one: the kingdom of God and the powers of darkness.
- The parable of the Good Samaritan: Jesus used this to stress that God doesn't look for men and women with all the right answers but for those with compassion, resulting in action.
- The parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and lost, or prodigal, son: Jesus had a heart for the lost, wanting to reclaim and restore them, repairing broken lives.

Going deeper

Our prayers all too often become shopping lists, whereas it is clear that adoration, confession, and thanksgiving should also be core elements. Find psalms that have an emphasis in each of these three areas.

Regarding Matthew 6:6, 8, 18, and 32, notice how the Father is integrally involved in each activity mentioned. How can we develop an "Our Father" lifestyle in which all life becomes prayer?

Respond

Think about the parable of the lost son. Where would you place yourself in the parable? The son who has wandered off? The Father who is keen to welcome back and restore? The older son, self-righteous and unforgiving? Or is another person not mentioned individually in the parable, looking on, slightly detached?

For anyone who has strayed from God, coming back to Church is one of the hardest things imaginable, made harder by the reaction from others. Allow the Holy Spirit to challenge you regarding your attitude toward 'the prodigals,' then pray that your Church will be full of God's restorative love.

Week 13 The Miracles of Jesus

This week's readings

Luke 9:1-36

Matthew 14:22-036

John 9

Mark 5:1-20

John 11

Way in

Ask whether anyone in the group has personally experienced or witnessed healing, either supernaturally received or through God's gift of medicine. Encourage people to share what God did.

Begin the sessions with a prayer time, thinking about this topic.

Review

Invite members to share reactions to what they have read.

- Jesus sent out the 12 disciples to cast out demons and heal the sick. This was followed by the feeding of the 5,000, Peter's statement regarding Jesus' true identity, and the transfiguration.
- Jesus walked on the water, and Peter, with an amazing step of faith, got out of the boat to do the same.
- A man blind from birth was healed by Jesus, leading to a very negative response from the religious leaders.
- Jesus cast out demons from a man living in the region of the Gerasene.
- The death of one of Jesus' friends became the springboard for not just another miracle but a living parable of what lay ahead in his own life.

Going deeper

Read Mark 6:6-13. Talk through the disciples' experience as Jesus delegates responsibility to heal the sick, cast out demons, and preach the kingdom. How do they feel as they go? What happens?

What do you think will prevent people from seeing and accepting that this demonstrates that God's kingdom is being established on earth?

Talk about ways in which God's power should be demonstrated in our individual lives and within the life of the Church. See Ephesians 1:18-20, which speaks of the power of God at work within us.

Respond

Jesus often took time out to be alone with his heavenly Father. Spend some time in quietness, inviting God to minister to individual needs, to clarify people's thoughts, and to give you a passion to see God move in power within and through the Church.

Close by praying that each group member would know the power of God at work within their life and live with the confidence that nothing is impossible for him.

Week 14 The Cross of Christ

This week's readings

Luke 22:1-46

John 18

John 19

John 20:21

Acts 1:1-11

THE BIG STORY

The death of Jesus becomes the final confirmation and seal of the new covenant God has made with mankind. No longer would regular animal sacrifice be required. Jesus, the perfect sacrifice, has been offered.

Way in

This session's focus on the death of Jesus provides a perfect opportunity to share communion. If this is appropriate within your Church's tradition, consider starting or closing this way.

Encourage group members to build a mental image of the whipped Jesus – carrying his cross through the city and being nailed to the cross. What are you seeing, thinking, and feeling?

Read aloud Isaiah 53:6: '...the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.'

Allow these reflections to lead into a time of confession, followed by worship.

Review

Invite the group to give reactions to what they have read.

- Judas agreed to betray Jesus, but despite knowing this, Jesus still chose to celebrate Passover with him and Peter, whom Jesus knew would deny him.

- Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss. Jesus was subsequently arrested. His trial began without a hint of justice or fairness. Peter denied even knowing Jesus; the final decision about Jesus' life rested with the Roman governor, Pilate.
- Jesus was sentenced to death, whipped, crucified, and then died. Jesus' body was taken from the cross and buried.
- On Sunday morning, the tomb was found to be empty. The resurrected Jesus appeared first to Mary, then to the disciples. Jesus shared breakfast with the disciples after a night of fishing, followed by the moving account of Peter's reinstatement.
- The final appearance of Jesus to the disciples included the promise of the Holy Spirit, their commission to be his witness, and then his ascension into heaven.

Going deeper

Have you ever denied Jesus or at least remained silent about your faith? Talk through Peter's circumstances (John 18) and compare situations we might face today.

Read Matthew 10:17-20. How can we prepare for such times, and what might we do when such circumstances occur?

Respond

Place a cross at the center of your group, and encourage everyone to focus on this as you pray together. Remind one another about the grace of God and his offer of forgiveness and another chance. Pray for each other that there would be such an authentic experience of God's presence that you will have no doubt that Jesus is alive.

Week 15 The Church is Born

This week's readings...

Acts 2

Acts 3:1 – 4:37

Acts 6:8 – 8:8

Acts 8:26 -40

Acts 10:1 – 11:18

THE BIG STORY

God's covenant relationship is now extended to include people beyond the Jewish nation. Working for the extension of God's kingdom now becomes the responsibility of every member of God's community.

Way in

As a group, 'experience' the events of Acts 2:1-13 together: split the group into 'disciples' and the 'crowd.' Encourage everyone to close their eyes.

Read Acts 2:1: ask the 'disciples,' "What are you feeling now?" Encourage one or two to respond with simple adjectives.

Read verses 2-4 and then ask the same question.

Read verse 5,6 and ask the 'crowd' what they think and feel.

Now, move into a time of open prayer, asking that each group member have a new encounter with God. His Spirit is present with you in this study.

Review

Invite group members to share reactions to what they have read.

- The day of Pentecost arrived with a dramatic outpouring of the Spirit, resulting in courage for the believers and mass conversions amongst the crowds.
- God used the disciples in amazing demonstrations of his power; there was a complete sense of unity and mutual care among the believers.
- Stephen was stoned to death, becoming the first Christian martyr. An immediate spread of intense persecution followed this.
- The Holy Spirit led Philip into the desert road to Gaza, where he had the opportunity to explain his faith to an official from Ethiopia.
- Peter had a life-changing vision, through which he came to understand that God now wanted Gentiles as well as Jews to have the opportunity to become members of his holy nation.

Going deeper

Explore the words 'power,' 'mission,' and 'waiting,' thinking about the implications for the Church today. Sadly, the person of the Holy Spirit is often neglected or misunderstood. The New Testament clarifies that entering God's family can only happen if the Holy Spirit is involved. Explore the following passages: John 3: 5,6; John 16:7-15; Acts 2: 17, 18; Ephesians 5:18.

Respond

Talk about how you share your faith with others. Do you seize opportunities or back away from them? Do you rely on your eloquence or on the Holy Spirit to empower you? Allow a quiet time – for God to speak, direct, and challenge.

Week 16

The Travels of Paul

This week's readings

Acts 9:1-31

Acts 13,14

Acts 15

Acts 16-20

Acts 25 – 28

Way in

Allow group members to share how they made a decision to follow Christ. Use these stories to lead into a time of praise to God for calling people into his family and for how he relates to each person.

Review

Invite the group members to share what they have read.

- Saul, the angry antagonist of Jesus' followers, had an encounter with Jesus, was called by God, and became a wholehearted follower of Jesus.
- Paul and Barnabas journeyed together to share the Good News. Showing remarkable courage, their sole intention was to see others become members of God's family.
- There was a conflict within the early Church regarding who 'qualified' to be classed as a true believer. The believers met together to discuss this.
- Paul remained totally focused on God's call. He waited on God for direction; he sometimes seemed to have gone the wrong way, but his life was far from problem-free even when he went the right way.
- Back in Jerusalem, Paul was arrested and put on trial. This was not the end of Paul's ministry. Rather, it enabled him to preach

the Good News to significant political figures and take the gospel afield.

Going deeper

Some churches seem to behave as if you need to be an experienced Christian before you can be used by God. For Paul, his call to serve seems to be one with his conversion. Do you think the New Testament suggests the need for a 'probationary period,' or should we think every believer has a mission, purpose, or call?

How can we help each other determine what that call is and then continue to live with a real sense of vision and purpose? How should we respond when people make mistakes and try to go down the wrong path (Acts 16:7)?

Respond

Help people focus on the idea of the mission by placing a globe or world atlas at the center of your group. Where are you involved in missions? Through actions? Through prayer?

In a time of quietness, ask God to show you what purpose he has for your life. Are you wandering fairly aimlessly? Or do you know the specific mission God has called you to, within life, within the local Church? Support and help one another in thinking this through and praying for God's will to be revealed.

Week 17

Paul to the Churches

This week's readings

Romans 8

Galatians 5:16-6:10

Ephesians 6:10-20

Philippians 4:2-9

Colossians 1:1-23

Way In

Working as a group, create a prayer using some of the phrases Paul used in this prayer for the believers in the letters in this week's readings. Then, split into pairs and pray for each other using this prayer and incorporating your partner's name.

Here are some references you could use: Ephesians 1:15-23; Ephesians 3:14-21; Philippians 1:3-11; Colossians 1:9-12; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 1:11, 12; 2 Thessalonians 2:16,17; 2 Thessalonians 3:5,16.

Review

Invite group members to give reactions to what they have read. Each of this week's readings has taken extracts from some of Paul's letters.

- Romans 8: Paul began with the basics of the gospel, then moved on to the tension between having our lives controlled by our sinful nature or the Holy Spirit. The chapter concludes by affirming the victory of those in God's family.
- Galatians 5 and 6: Paul contrasted the actions flowing from our sinful nature with the life the Holy Spirit seeks to grow in us.
- Ephesians 6: Paul clarified that there is a battle between God and Satan. To stand firm, we need to be proactive in staying

strong, standing our ground, standing firm, being alert, and praying in the Spirit.

- Philippians 4: Paul discovered we can know God's peace no matter what circumstance we find ourselves in.
- Colossians 1: There was a serious risk that believers at Colosse were being drawn away from the true teachings of their newfound faith. Paul addressed the matter by affirming their enthusiasm when they first received the Good News of Jesus and then restating the central elements of the gospel message.

Going deeper

Romans 8:28 is an important verse, yet easily misrepresented. There are two popular interpretations:

- 1. Despite problems and difficulties in our lives, God can use our situation and bring good out of it.*
 - 2. God plans everything in our lives, so good will come from it.*
- Talk about these two viewpoints. What do you think Paul meant?*

Respond

Think about your life at this time. Are you facing pressures, temptations, compromises of faith or lifestyle? Depending on how well group members know each other, encourage them to share the areas mentioned above in pairs. Encourage your group to think about the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22,23). Are there any with which you particularly struggle? Agree to focus on these every day over the next week.

Week 18

Paul to the Leaders

This week's readings

1 Timothy 3

1 Timothy 6:3-21

2 Timothy 2

2 Timothy 3:10-4:5

1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:11

Way In

Encourage each person to write their name at the bottom of the sheet of paper. Then, everyone should pass their paper to their neighbor, who should write a gift that they feel the person has at the top of the sheet, fold it, and then pass it on to the next person around. Keep doing this until each group member receives their sheet of paper back again.

Review

Invite group members to share reactions to what they have read.

- Paul outlined the high standards that are expected of Church leaders.
- Money is not evil in itself, but it must be kept in its appropriate place.
- Paul was Timothy's mentor, and used parallels with a soldier, athlete, farmer, and workman to highlight the importance of staying focused on the task he was called to fulfill.
- Paul concluded his writings to Timothy with three final thoughts: suffering is inevitable for Christians; all scripture is useful; we must follow God's call wholeheartedly.
- Paul wanted his readers to understand that the return of Jesus would take place, but no one knew when.

Going deeper

God has given us the Bible as a source of information and a means of transformation. What are the practical implications of 2 Timothy 3:16,27 and Hebrews 5:11- 6:3. What could be the impact on church life if the local Church is made up of people who are immature in their faith?

Also, Paul is Timothy's mentor. What are the benefits of mentoring? Are there ways this could be established within your Church, perhaps with new Christians or between old and young people?

Respond

What gifts has God given you? What gifts has God given to others in your group? How does he want them used in the life of the Church?

Is there someone God has placed on your heart whom he wants you to come alongside? Pray quietly that God will confirm this and show you how to move forward with the idea.

Week 19

The Apostles' Teaching

This week's readings

1 Corinthians 13

2 Corinthians 4:1- 6:2

1 Peter 1:1 – 2:12

James 1,2

1 John 3:11 – 4:21

Way In

Paul was a great thinker, Peter a strong fighter, James a doer, and John had a deep concern for love. Ask your group which four characteristics they most closely associate with, then share answers.

Review

Invite the group members to share their reactions to what they have read.

- This week's readings began with Paul's well-known poem of love (1 Cor. 13). It answered the question, 'What is love?' and then outlined how following such a path is the best way to live.
- In 2 Corinthians, Paul highlighted our status as new creations flowering from our reconciliation with God and our subsequent responsibility to share this Good News with those around us.
- Peter's confidence came from his encounter with the risen Christ. He was sure about the promise of new birth, our living hope, and being with Jesus for eternity. Heaven is the believer's true home; in this world, we are like aliens in a foreign land.
- James was a doer and described some of the practicalities of faith. He clarified that persecution should be seen as an opportunity for growth. He spoke about controlling the tongue. His most well-known challenge is that faith without works is dead (James 2:17).

- John drew out three essential aspects of true faith: belief in Jesus, receiving the Holy Spirit, and loving others sacrificially.

Going Deeper

Read Galatians 3:26-28. There are three elements of reconciliation made possible by the cross in these verses: between man and God, between people, groups that would humanly speak be at odds, and amongst God's people. What might the implications of these be for your Church?

Talk about the sorts of tensions and divisions within the Church. How can we demonstrate a commitment to living as people of reconciliation? How should differences and relationship breakdowns be handled among believers? Look at Matthew 6:14,15, Matthew 18: 15-17, Colossians 3:15, and 1 Peter 4:8 for some more help with this.

Also, Peter confidently affirms an eternal happy ending (1 Peter 1:4). What are the main aspects of our eternal inheritance? Find these key concepts: prepared by God; eternal; no sin, suffering, or sadness; dwelling in God's presence; worship. How do you feel when you think of heaven? How does it affect the way you worship and the way you live now? Look at 1 Peter 2:11, 12.

Respond

James speaks of the importance of listening to God through his Word and acting on it. Picking up on the issues of living as people of reconciliation, ask God if there is anyone you need to be reconciled with. Allow the Holy Spirit to highlight any relationship that needs sorting, and then pray for the grace and opportunity to do so close by praising God that our reconciliation with him, made possible through the cross, means we can look forward to eternity in his presence

Week 20

Revelation

This week's readings

Revelation 1

Revelation 2:1-3:22

Revelation 4:1 – 7:17

Revelation 19, 20

Revelation 21, 22

THE BIG STORY

God's covenant will be finally completed, and His people will live with him in the new heaven and earth for eternity.

Way In

In this last session, share the things that have particularly stood out, surprised, or enlightened you during your journey reading through the Bible. Spend time thanking God for His Word, for the many insights revealing who he is, and for the way that he has shown us his plan of salvation through its pages.

Review

Invite group members to share their reactions to what they have read.

- John received a new revelation of Jesus. He has come as Savior in the past; in the future, he will come as judge.
- The seven messages to the churches reveal the depth of care Jesus has for his Church. He encourages them but also challenges them.
- John had a vision of heaven, and although the events that he describes are complex, the result will be overwhelming as people of all nations worship Jesus, the Lamb of God
- John saw the world's end like a joyful wedding celebration with Jesus and the Church as groom and bride. Satan's destruction

and the defeat of evil is guaranteed so, too, the fact that believers will be saved.

- John's vision depicted the overwhelming beauty of our eternal dwelling place. Everything will be new, and God will dwell with his people forever.

Going deeper

Walking with God

Revelation 1. Look out for these five aspects of John's experience: he worships, he is obedient to God's Word, he focuses on Jesus, he embraces the Holy Spirit, and he endures suffering. This is a great example of developing our walk with God. Explore how each can be developed and become part of our daily lives.

Letters to the churches

Smyrna and Philadelphia, both poor and weak, receive words of commendation but no criticism. What are some implications for the Church today, where success and power are often seen as important? What might be in a letter to your Church?

Judgment

There are many misconceptions about judgment. Explore this topic with the help of some of the Bible passages below. (All who have accepted Jesus as their Savior and Lord are guaranteed a place in heaven for eternity.).

- When will judgment happen? (Mark 13:32-37; John 5: 28,29; 1 Corinthians 15:51 – 53; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17?)
- Who will be judged? (Mathew 16:27; Matthew 25:31-33; 2 Corinthians 5:10)

- For what will people be judged? (Matthew 7:21-23; Matthew 12:36, 37; Matthew 25:14-30; Matthew 25:31-46; Revelation 20:12.)

Heaven

Share together what you are particularly looking forward to in heaven.

Respond

Consider how you fit into the picture of the Church. Are you hot, cold, or lukewarm? Alive or dead? Hard-working for the kingdom, or have you forsaken your first love? Faithful or compromising? Persevering or easily led astray? Be open to God challenging you, and then respond as appropriate.

Praise Jesus for the victory he has won for us! Worship God for all he has planned for his people in the future.