

# Knowing God

'The people who know their God shall prove themselves strong and shall stand firm and do exploits for God.' (Daniel 11:32, *Amplified Bible*)

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## Small Group Study Guide



**The Salvation Army** New Zealand, Fiji and Tonga Territory

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# Introduction

*‘The people who know their God shall prove themselves strong and shall stand firm and do exploits for God.’ (Daniel 11:32, Amplified Bible)*

In 2010 The Salvation Army in New Zealand, Fiji and Tonga launched an extension to the Territorial Strategic Mission Plan (TSMP) referred to as TSMP: The Next Chapter. The plan contains four updated goals.

James 1:22 says ‘But don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says’ (NLT). This booklet is part of a series of studies to help you grapple with the goals, their biblical mandate, and how you might apply the Bible’s teaching around the goals in your life.

This booklet expands goal one, to make dynamic disciples of Jesus, by providing practical guidance on how to get to know God better.

It might sound strange, but somehow knowing who God is helps us to know ourselves better. The studies in this series are all aimed at helping us to get to know God better by learning to:

1. Name God
2. See myself as God sees me
3. Grow in holy habits
4. Pray to God
5. Read God’s word
6. Listen to God.

## Style

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While it is possible to use this booklet for individual study, it is designed for use in a small group setting (e.g. 5-10 people), relying heavily on discussion and the sharing of ideas.

The studies are designed to be thought-provoking, with questions to which there will hopefully be a variety of responses. Often there are no ‘right’ answers as many of the answers will be about you deciding how you will apply the Bible’s teaching in your life.

Each session follows the same format – an introductory idea or story followed by a time of discussion and study, concluding with time to reflect, apply what you have learned and pray. They are planned to take between 60 and 75 minutes, depending on the discussion. We encourage your group to spend time together

socially and to pray for each other, so at least one and a half hours should be allowed.

## Preparation

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All you need is a Bible, a pen and an open heart. Make sure your Bible is a modern translation. References in this booklet are typically from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible, but the New Living Translation (NLT), Contemporary English Version (CEV), New International Readers Version (NIrV) and Good News Bible are also recommended.

The leader is encouraged to pre-read the study so that they know what is coming. There are also tips at the end of this book for leading an effective study.

## Guidelines

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It is important that people feel comfortable sharing within the group knowing that everything discussed is done so in confidence.

If your group is new, you should start by agreeing to some guidelines, such as those below.

We wish you the best as you study God's word together.

### GROUP GUIDELINES

We agree to:

1. Keep everything discussed in the group within the group (unless specific permission is given otherwise).
2. Provide equal opportunity for everyone to talk. No one is to dominate the discussion and no one will be forced to share if they are not comfortable doing so.
3. Only talk about ourself and our situation, avoiding conversation about others.
4. Show respect for each other at all times.
5. Leave as friends. We want to allow rigorous debate, but we will not make conversations personal. Should we disagree, we will do so with grace.
6. Pray for each other.

## STUDY 1

# Learning to name God

## Getting started

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One way to learn to know God is to consider the names we call God, or the image that we have of God when we think of him.

So what is God like to you?

- ❑ Is God like Father Christmas who gives you good things when you behave well, who grants your prayers for an easy parking space or a fine day for the school picnic?
- ❑ Is God like Great Uncle George, a family tyrant whom you are taken to visit and threatened with punishment if you don't come to see him regularly and with a smile on your face?
- ❑ Is God like a Doting Grandparent who thinks the sun shines out of you but from whom you need to hide your weaknesses and failures?

To ask 'Who are you, God?' may be the most important question we ever consider.

At a pivotal moment in Jesus' ministry he said to his disciples:

*'Who do the people say I am?'*

*'Some say John the Baptizer,' they said. 'Others say Elijah. Still others say one of the prophets.'*

*He then asked, 'And you – what are you saying about me? Who am I?'*

*Peter gave the answer 'You are the Christ, the Messiah.'*

*(Mark 8:27-29, The Message)*

It was a heart-stopping moment. After all the disciples have seen and heard in their time with Jesus, have they really come to any understanding about who he is?

This question is as important for us as it was for the disciples because the image we have of God determines the relationship we have with God, which determines how we pray to God.

Think of it as a mathematical formula:

**IMAGE = RELATIONSHIP = PRAYER**

In other words if we think of God as a Father Christmas God our relationship is going to be 'best behaviour all year round' and our prayer is going to be 'Please give me this, give me that, I want ...'

Or if we think of God as tyrant Uncle George our relationship is going to be built on fear and our prayer very cautious. If God is like a doting grandparent we are going to do our best to hide any bad stuff from him.

## Explore

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We get our first impressions (or pictures or images) of God from the early authority figures in our lives – our parents, teachers, Sunday School teachers and so on. Sometimes we grow up with a wonderfully whole and holy picture of God largely because the people who made an impact on us in our early years were whole and holy themselves. But sadly, it's not always like that.

Many people grow up with a picture of God as vengeful, miserly or abusive, ever threatening to toss a thunderbolt our way. This 'God-out-to-get-us' can be the kind of God we carry with us right into our adult years, a God in whom there is no delight or mercy or love.

The invitation as we grow is to look again at those images of God that were formed in our childhood and to hold them up to the light of Scripture. We may need to abandon certain images that are no longer helpful and embrace the kind of God that Jesus represented and about whom the Scriptures speak so consistently – a God of unfailing love, unending compassion and unfathomable grace.

God loves us at least as much as the person who loves us most. Think of the best of fathers, the best of mothers, the best of friends, lovers, companions, supporters, encouragers. God's love is at the very least like that, only far far more – see Ephesians 3:14-21.

Think about some of these images of God. What would your relationship be like? How would you pray to the God who is like this?

*Tip: In a group setting, choose a few to discuss now, leaving individuals to look up the rest later, or divide the list between members and have each report back.*

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rock (Psalm 71:3)          | <input type="checkbox"/> Healer (Psalm 147:3) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Father (Luke 15:11-32)     | <input type="checkbox"/> Love (1 John 4:8)    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cornerstone (Psalm 118:22) | <input type="checkbox"/> Light (John 8:12)    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> King (Revelation 19:16)    | <input type="checkbox"/> Lamb (John 1:29)     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shepherd (John 10:14-16)   | <input type="checkbox"/> Shield (Psalm 18:2)  |

- ❑ Rest Giver (Matthew 11:28-30)
- ❑ Potter (Jeremiah 18:1-6)
- ❑ Judge (Genesis 18:25)
- ❑ Vine (John 15:1-8)
- ❑ Burden-bearer (Psalm 68:19)
- ❑ Tree (Hosea 14:8)
- ❑ Water (Isaiah 44:3)
- ❑ Door or Gate (John 10:7)
- ❑ Dove (Matthew 3:16)
- ❑ Advocate (1 John 2:1)

*‘Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.’ (Psalm 9:10)*

## Reflect

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- ❑ Consider the list of images of God. Choose one that is familiar or ‘safe’. What makes it safe? What is your relationship like with the God who is like this? How do you pray to the One who is like this for you?

## Apply

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- ❑ Now choose an image that is different or surprising. What would your relationship be with the God who is like this? How would you pray to the God who is like this?

## Pray

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- ❑ Offer your prayer to the God you call upon with a familiar name.
- ❑ Offer your prayer to the God who invites you to address him in a new way.

## Going Deeper

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- ❑ *Good Goats – Healing Our Image of God* by Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn. Published by Paulist Press New York 1997

## WHO ARE YOU, GOD?

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Moses-like

I stand before an autumn tree  
and ask, 'Who are you, God?

The old names have been beautiful  
Like leaves that carried the seasons through  
they cradled me with gentle arms when I was young  
they beamed their approval over my growing years  
they gave me shelter in my teens  
when sadness and loss howled their storms around me

Now in an autumned life, I need to let them fall  
It's painful to let them go  
like walking away from life-long friends  
but like autumn leaves they fall to make way for new growth  
In the place where they come to rest  
a rich, fragrant mulch will form  
nurturing my tree and giving vigour to spring's growth

So help me to let them go, Lord, one by one  
and in their place to welcome  
new names I have never called you before  
lifelong familiar, but unexpressed

Extravagant God  
Intimate Friend  
Artist of crazy colour and beauty  
Song-giver  
Companion on my journey

These new names beckon me on  
into a new dance  
a new season  
a new beginning

And in naming you afresh  
I hear you whisper my own new name  
Like Moses, I take off my shoes  
This too is holy ground.

*Barbara Sampson*

## STUDY 2

# Learning to see myself as God sees me

## Getting started

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The world says:

*I am what I have ...*

*I am what I do ...*

*I am what others say about me ...*

But God says something quite different:

*God says, 'I have called you by name from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favour rests. I have moulded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace'. Life of the Beloved by Henri Nouwen*

Being the Beloved of God is the core truth, the deepest truth of our existence. The challenge before us is to let that core truth become enfleshed in everything we do, think and say.

Henri Nouwen uses four words from the biblical account of the Last Supper to explain our belovedness. He says we are:

- ❑ **Taken (chosen):** from before the foundation of the world. We are not an accident but a divine choice.
- ❑ **Blessed:** prayer helps us to listen to the blessings God has given us, to receive the blessings and then to pass those blessings on to others.
- ❑ **Broken:** broken relationships, broken dreams, broken heart, everything that we experience can be part of what God uses to grow us into fullness and wholeness.
- ❑ **Given:** our lives are chosen, blessed, broken in order that we may be given to the world. God has given us the gift of life. What we do with that life is our gift to God.

No one can say, 'I am God's favourite' but each of us can say:

- ❑ I am the one Jesus loves
- ❑ You are the one Jesus loves
- ❑ We are all God's favourite!

## Explore

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### Prodigal Son – Prodigal Father

There is a story in Scripture that gives us both a picture of what God is like and also a picture of what we are like. We call it the story of the Prodigal (wayward) Son but it is also the story of the Prodigal (overwhelmingly generous) Father.

See Luke 15:11-32.

Here are some steps into the story:

1. Read the full account slowly right through more than once.
2. List the characters, both the obvious ones and the less obvious ones – father, younger son, older son, unmentioned mother, friends in foreign country, owner of pigs, servants, musicians.

3. Choose one of these roles and imagine the story from the perspective of that person.

For example, where is the mother? Has she gone off to a far country of her own or is she silently looking out the kitchen window waiting, longing for her son to return? How does she feel as she watches him leave, as she waits, as she sees him return?

4. Notice how loving and welcoming the father is to both sons, both the wayward one and the dutiful one.
5. What is God's invitation in this story as to how we see God and how we see ourselves?

6. Share together.

## TELLING MY STORY

Each one of us is a person with a past, a present and a future.

Use these verses to consider what God has done for you in the past:

*Tip: In a group setting, choose a few to discuss now, leaving individuals to look up the rest later, or divide the list between members and have each report back.*

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> John 1:12          | <input type="checkbox"/> John 3:16-17          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Romans 5:8         | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Corinthians 5:18 | <input type="checkbox"/> Ephesians 1:3-6       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ephesians 2:10     | <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 41:9           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 49:16       | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Peter 1:3-4         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Peter 1:3        | <input type="checkbox"/> Acts 13:32-33         |

God has blessed me with everything I need for this life and for all eternity

Use these verses to consider what God is doing for you in the present:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Psalm 23             | <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah 30:18      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lamentations 3:22-23 | <input type="checkbox"/> Zephaniah 3:17    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Matthew 11:28-30     | <input type="checkbox"/> Mark 3:35         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mark 11:24           | <input type="checkbox"/> Romans 8:38-39    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ephesians 1:7        | <input type="checkbox"/> Ephesians 2:19-20 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 John 1:9           | <input type="checkbox"/> Revelation 3:20   |

God is with me no matter what happens

Use these verses to consider what God will yet do for you in the future:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Jeremiah 29:11        | <input type="checkbox"/> John 4:13-14        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> John 14:1-4           | <input type="checkbox"/> John 15:4           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Romans 8:18           | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Corinthians 3:18  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Corinthians 9:10-11 | <input type="checkbox"/> Ephesians 3:20-21   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Philippians 1:6       | <input type="checkbox"/> Philippians 3:12-14 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Jude 24-25            | <input type="checkbox"/> Revelation 21:3-4   |

God will bring everything he has started within me to glorious completion

## Reflect

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- ❑ Taken (chosen), blessed, broken, given. Apply these words to your life. Form them into a prayer of thanksgiving to God.

## Apply

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- ❑ Prodigal son – prodigal father. Which character in this story is most like you? Speak to God from the stance of this character.

## Pray

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- ❑ Past, present, future. What has God done for you in the past? What is God doing for you in the present? What has God promised to do for you in the future? Using verses from each category, tell or write down your story.

## Going Deeper

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- ❑ *The Return of the Prodigal Son – A Story of Homecoming* by Henri Nouwen. Published by Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd 1994
- ❑ *Life of the Beloved – Spiritual Living in a Secular World* by Henri Nouwen. Published by Hodder & Stoughton 1992

## CELEBRATION

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With a fire in his belly  
and a gleam of freedom in his eyes  
he struck out from home  
settling somewhere out west of Sodom  
where risk and risqué partied together  
and Dad paid the bills.  
But when the fire burned out  
and his stomach heaved with the smell of pig slops  
he headed for home  
the heart of a son disguised as a slave.

With a curl on his lips  
and a long slow cooling in his heart  
his older brother stayed home  
living somewhere out east of obstinacy  
where demons danced with duty  
and Dad never knew.  
But when the music played for his brother  
he headed for home  
the heart of a slave disguised as a son.

Just outside the village  
just outside the house  
they met the heart of God disguised as a father.

When I broke camp  
and headed for home  
from my isolated place  
somewhere up north of lostness  
God met me  
Grace undisguised  
Father and Mother love throwing dignity aside  
in open arms of extravagant welcome  
I wept and the angels made music.

*Barbara Sampson*

## STUDY 3

# Learning to grow in holy habits

## Getting started

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**Question:** How does a follower of Jesus learn to become a disciple, and a dynamic one at that?

**Answer:** By giving attention to spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual disciplines are holy habits that help us to live with freedom and contentment as God's people. While the world pressures us constantly to gather more and more and to live faster and faster, holy habits help us to slow down and create space for God to act in and through us. They invite us to live more reflectively, more grace-fully. Holy habits help us to be more present to God, ourselves and each other.

Much of modern life is lived the way a dragonfly flies over the surface of a pool of water – hovering, skimming, seldom touching down. The practice of holy habits invites us to be like a miner who digs down below the surface. The deeper we dig, the more treasure we find.

'Deeper' is what holy habits are all about. At the start of his book *Celebration of Discipline* author Richard Foster writes:

*'Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant gratification is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.'*

The whole purpose of holy habits is that we might, as Paul puts it, 'not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind' (*Romans 12:2*).

Some holy habits have an inward focus. They are hidden from view, lived out and practised in our own private inner world. Holy habits in this category are meditation, prayer, fasting, abstinence and study.

Some have an outward focus. In this category are the holy habits of simplicity, solitude, silence, submission, slowing, service, reticence and stability.

Some have a corporate focus, which means they are lived out and practised together in the community of God's people. In this category are the holy habits of confession, worship, guidance and celebration.

## Explore

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Let us consider three holy habits from each category.

### 1. HOLY HABITS WITH AN INWARD FOCUS

#### *a) Study*

The discipline of study plays a vital part in the Christian life. Study has a clear goal, a godly purpose and a wide focus.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes of the contrast between conforming to the patterns of the world and being transformed by the renewing of the mind (12:2). The mind is made new as it applies itself to things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy (*Phil 4:8*). This is study's clear goal.

Paul tells young Timothy to study the Scripture so that he might be 'thoroughly equipped for every good work' (2 *Tim 3:17*). We can use a modern translation, some good Bible study notes, E100, whatever it takes to get into the word and to let the word get into us. This is study's godly purpose.

As well as studying Scripture it is helpful to read and reflect on other books, movies, even the daily newspaper. A study of people and body language will yield rich dividends in understanding human nature. Observation of the created world – often referred to as 'God's other book' – will, in the words of Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky, help us to 'perceive the divine mystery in things'. This is study's wide focus.

*Questions:*

1. What are you already doing in this area of study?
  
2. What is God's invitation for you in this holy habit of study?

#### *b) Fasting*

Mention the word 'fasting' and hunger pangs begin to stir. Mention the word 'feasting' and already we feel better. In Scripture fasting and feasting often go together, the first being preparation for the second.

Fasting is not a hunger strike for political purposes, nor a diet for personal (overweight) reasons. A biblical fast always has a spiritual purpose. Author Lynne Baab says when we fast 'we remove something habitual so that we can experience something new'. A man who began fasting discovered the 'wooing' presence of God.

While we may think of fasting as going without food, it can be much wider than this. We can fast from coffee, news, words, shopping, sleep or Facebook. We can fast from judging others, worrying, complaining, suspicion, anger or pessimism. Such fasts, when taken seriously as holy acts, can be significant steps in turning to God with all our heart.

For example we might miss one meal a week and use that time instead to go somewhere quiet and pray. Or when we catch ourselves worrying or complaining we might deliberately turn our worries or complaints into prayer.

A woman realised that she was watching television mindlessly as a way of numbing her feelings and filling up all the gaps in her life. She decided to do more than cut back – she went the whole way and got rid of her TV set.

Once she did that she found that she began to pay attention to her life, her reactions and her feelings in new ways. Instead of running from them, she was able to turn and ask what her emotions and physical responses were telling her. Fasting reconnected her to her centre where she encountered a silence large enough for the still, small voice of God to be heard.

*Questions:*

1. If you were to fast from something habitual in order to experience something new, what would it be?
2. What is God's invitation for you in this holy habit of fasting?

### ***c) Prayer***

As far as we know, Jesus led no prayer seminars, set up no prayer rooms, attended no prayer concerts. Yet there is no doubt he was a man of prayer. He prayed in such a way that others wanted to know how to do it too, wanted the kind of intimacy he had with the One he called 'Abba', Father God. In its essence this is what prayer is – the expression of the relationship with God.

Just as conversation in any healthy relationship has a back-and-forth flow, so prayer has a gentle two-way rhythm. We speak ... God listens. God pauses ... we wait. We focus ... God clarifies. God reveals ... we ask. We thank ... God blesses. God leads ... we follow.

Prayer is really very simple. As a holy habit, all we need to get under way is a time and a place. Even five minutes set aside for prayer and regularly kept each day begins a pattern for prayer. As circumstances change and the thirst for prayer grows, the minutes increase.

If possible a place for prayer away from distractions is good, but, in the wideness of God's mercy, even distractions can become part of our prayer.

Prayer is as simple as breathing ('the Christian's vital breath' SASB 625). Prayer is both petition and praise, both thanksgiving and lament, both confession and worship. Prayer changes things. It changes others. Most of all prayer changes the pray-er.

*Questions:*

1. How is God changing you as you pray? What differences do you note within yourself?
2. What is God's invitation for you in this holy habit of prayer?

## **2. HOLY HABITS WITH AN OUTWARD FOCUS**

### ***a) Simplicity***

Everything in life seems to be running faster than ever – family demands, church programmes, daily routines. But the more we fill our lives with time-saving devices and strategies, the more rushed we feel.

Many believers long for an authentic simplicity of life, the 'one needful thing' that Mary was commended for as she sat at Jesus' feet (*see Luke 10:38-42*).

Simplicity is more than selling the second car, buying clothing at a second-hand shop or baking your own bread. The Benedictine tradition captures this winsome interior quality in the phrase – *in simplicitate cordis* – meaning 'in simplicity of heart'. It describes a life stripped of all that is unessential and trivial, an inward reality that shows itself in an outward lifestyle.

David made one request: 'One thing I ask of the LORD ... that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life' (*Ps 27:4*). Paul simplified his life to one aim: 'One thing I do ... I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me' (*Phil 3:13,14*). Jesus defined true simplicity as having one treasure, one master, one focus – God's kingdom and his righteousness (*Matt 6:33*).

True simplicity of heart happens when we offer to God everything, both the so-called 'sacred' and 'secular' aspects of life, as one ceaseless act of love and praise.

*Questions:*

1. If, like Paul, you were to simplify your life to one aim, what would it be?
2. What is God's invitation for you in this holy habit of simplicity?

### ***b) Silence***

For some people silence is a treasure; for others it is a torture. Some find a silent retreat a real gift; for others it is something to be avoided at all costs.

Beyond the differences of extrovert-versus-introvert personality, however, it is true that when the outer noises are silenced, the inner voice of God can be heard more clearly. The prophet Elijah stood by the mouth of a cave listening for God's voice. He heard a powerful wind, felt a mighty earthquake, saw a raging fire. But God spoke to him through 'a gentle whisper', translated elsewhere as 'the sound of crushed silence'. The prophet pulled his cloak over his face and went out to speak with God (*1 Kgs 19:12,13*).

As someone said: 'When we open up space for God in silence, we take the teeth out of the busyness that would chew us up.' Brother Lawrence, busy in the monastery kitchen, called this 'the practice of the presence of God'.

Henri Nouwen says: 'Though we want to make all our time, time for God, we will never succeed if we do not reserve a minute, an hour, a morning, a day, a week, a month, or whatever period of time for God and him alone.'

*Questions:*

1. Do you embrace times of silence or try to avoid them?
2. What is God's invitation for you in this holy habit of silence?

### **c) Reticence**

The holy habit of reticence is simply the control of the tongue. It is the habit of thinking before we speak, listening more than we talk (remember – two ears, one mouth) and restraining ourselves from speaking our minds whenever silence would be more appropriate.

The apostle James devotes almost a whole chapter of his letter to the importance of controlling the tongue. It is a small part of the body, he says, but it makes great boasts. It is like a spark that can set a whole forest ablaze with devastating results. James calls it ‘a restless evil, full of deadly poison’ (*NIV*), ‘a wanton killer’ (*The Message*).

With such a dangerous weapon in our mouths, the need for discipline is clear. A young man who had a hard time controlling his speech was told by a wise old man to empty out a bag of chaff on a windy day. Once the chaff had blown and scattered, the youth was told to gather it all up again. ‘But that’s impossible,’ objected the young man. ‘And so it is with careless words,’ replied the old man, ‘once they are spoken.’

The holy habit of reticence helps us to guard our mouth and thus guard our heart (*see Proverbs 4:23*).

#### *Questions:*

1. How are you doing in this area? Do you find it easy to say less and listen more?
2. What is God’s invitation for you in this holy habit of reticence?

## **3. HOLY HABITS WITH A CORPORATE FOCUS**

### **a) Confession**

The psalmist gives a graphic picture of what happens when sin is kept secret: ‘My bones turned to powder, my words became daylong groans. The pressure never let up; all the juices of my life dried up’ (*Psalms 32:3,4, The Message*).

Hidden sin was like a cancer eating away his inner being. But when he confessed, everything changed. The psalmist’s sigh of relief is almost audible. As so many others have done, he discovered that ‘if we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness’ (*1 John 1:9*).

Confession is an act of grace through which God forgives the sins and sorrows of our past. Our greatest confidence in confession lies in the completed redemptive work of Jesus. When Jesus, who had never sinned, died and paid the penalty for our sin, he opened the way for us to receive forgiveness from God.

Confession may not always be easy. In fact it may be the hardest thing we ever do. To confess our sins to another person or to a house group or to a whole congregation means laying out not only our sin, but also our pride, our vulnerability, our very reputation. What will other people do with what we confess? Will they think less of us?

Such questions are trifling, however, compared to the great freedom that confession brings, freedom from pretence and the powerful freedom to change.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: 'A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the other person.'

*Questions:*

1. What is the greatest challenge for you in the area of confession?
2. What is God's invitation for you in this holy habit?

### ***b) Intercession***

Intercession is bringing the needs of someone before God in prayer and holding them there. Sometimes God lays a burden or heaviness on our hearts, perhaps waking us up in the middle of the night with someone on our mind. Sometimes as we read the newspaper or see a situation on TV we feel urged to pray specifically for this person or situation. As we respond to these inner promptings we learn to become intercessors. This is prayer with a face – the face of someone in need whose load we are given to help carry for a time.

The holy habit of intercession does something for others, but it first does something for the one who prays. Something expands and grows within us as we bring the needs of others before God. When we pray in this way we become partners with God in his saving, redeeming work.

Paul told his friends at Philippi that he longed for them ‘with all the affection of Christ Jesus’ (*Phil 1:8*). He prayed that the believers at Ephesus would have ‘power ... to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ’ (*Eph 3:18*). Writing to his friends in Rome he prayed that the God of hope would fill them with joy and peace and that they would overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (*Rom 15:13*).

The holy habit of intercession helps us to change our little ‘bless them, Lord’ prayers for others into something much wider and more expansive.

*Questions:*

1. What challenges you most about this intentional, focussed way of praying for others?
2. What is God’s invitation for you in this holy habit of intercession?

### ***c) Celebration***

‘This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.’ So sang the psalmist (*see Ps 118:24*). Author Lewis Smedes wrote, ‘To miss out on joy is to miss out on the reason for our existence.’

Sorrow and joy often come arm in arm as if they were friends. Certainly they are companions on the journey, one never far behind the other. Before he died Jesus warned his disciples that sorrow, struggle and suffering lay ahead. ‘But there is no need to be overwhelmed by them,’ he said, ‘because I have overcome the world. So you can rejoice, be glad, celebrate’ (*see John 16:33*).

The discipline of celebration reminds us of the true nature of God’s kingdom. When we pause to celebrate we acknowledge that work, struggle and heartache are not the full story.

Turning our hearts to celebration reminds us that God has broken into our lives and into our world. Beyond the reality of days that are ordinary, routine, mundane and at times filled with questions, there is a larger reality, a greater truth that woos and beckons us. Life will one day be free of death, free of tears, free of pain and loss and parting (*see Rev 21:3-4*).

We do not need to be ‘life-of-the-party’ people to celebrate what God is doing in the world. All that is needed is a God-perspective that looks over the shoulder of the present heartache to the joy that lies beyond. In celebration we catch an echo – God knows how the story ends and the ending is very good!

*Questions:*

1. What is the link between celebration and trust?
2. What is God’s invitation for you in the holy habit of celebration?

## **Reflect**

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- Which of the holy habits has been of most challenge to you?

## **Apply**

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- What is God’s greatest invitation to you in these holy habits?

## **Pray**

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- Ask God for his help as you respond to his invitation.
- Ask others to pray for you too.

## **Going Deeper**

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- Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster. Published by Hodder & Stoughton 1983
- Spiritual Disciples Handbook – Practices that Transform Us* by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun. Published by IVP Books, Illinois 2005

## STUDY 4

# Learning to pray to God

## Getting started

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Apart from teaching his disciples what we call the Lord's Prayer, Jesus' main way of teaching about prayer was by being caught in the act of prayer himself.

*'Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed' (Mark 1:35)*

For Jesus there was a time for prayer and a place for prayer.

He prayed:

- ❑ early in the morning (Luke 4:42)
- ❑ away from others in a quiet place (Luke 4:42)
- ❑ before making big decisions (Luke 6:12 – 16)
- ❑ before he began ministry (Mark 1:35 – 39)
- ❑ when he ministered to people (Mark 7:31 – 37)
- ❑ when he performed miracles (John 11:41 – 42)
- ❑ when he was in anguish (Matthew 27:46; Mark 14:32– 36)
- ❑ when he broke bread (Mark 8:6; Luke 24:30)

Prayer was a life-line for Jesus and it can be for us as well. Prayer is not an activity driven by 'oughts' and 'shoulds'. 'Pray as you can, not as you can't' is a helpful starting point.

Remember that God is the one who calls us, draws us, woos us to pray. As author Joyce Huggett says, 'God is on the inside of every longing we have after him.' He is the One who initiates prayer and prayerfulness within us.

Prayer is like a dance. God takes the lead ... we follow. God moves ... we move. God guides ... we respond. Before we know it, we are praying.

What works well for you? Share together in the group.

*Say the prayer*

*Carry the prayer*

*Become the prayer*

## Explore

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Here are some starters for prayer:

### 1. PRAYER LIST

A list is great for keeping faithful to all those people or situations we have promised to pray for, or for those whom God lays on our hearts.

### 2. PRAY WITH YOUR HAND

Thumb (adoration), first finger (confession), tallest finger (thanksgiving), ring finger (intercession), tiny finger (prayer for self).

### 3. PRAY THE CIRCLES (see Acts 1:8)

Imagine throwing a stone into water and watching circles of ripples spreading out from the place where the stone falls. Pray those circles as they spread out:

1. Yourself
2. Your family
3. Your friends
4. Leaders of your church, community, nation
5. The world

### 4. PRAY THE ALPHABET

Adoration

Blessing

Confession

*right through the alphabet to*

God's eXcellence

Your relationships

God's Zeal

### 5. BODY PRAYER

1. Hands facing down – let go all you are 'holding', all that feels heavy or overwhelming. Then with hands facing up – ask for and receive God's blessing for every task and his help for every heavy load.
2. Hold your arms up like a chalice to receive God's grace. Cross your arms over your chest as you draw this grace into yourself. Now hold your arms out as you offer God's grace to the people around you.

### 6. PRAY A BLESSING

Use the words of Scripture to pray blessing on others:

- ❑ Numbers 6:24-26
- ❑ Ephesians 3:14-21

- ❑ 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24
- ❑ Philippians 4:4-9
- ❑ Psalm 19:14

## **7. PRAY THE PSALMS**

- ❑ Psalm 23 a declaration of who God is
- ❑ Psalm 27 a commitment to seek and serve God
- ❑ Psalm 51 confession and acknowledgement of sin
- ❑ Psalm 103 a prayer of praise
- ❑ Psalm 143 a morning prayer of listening and trust

## **8. PRAY AN ACRONYM – MY RAGS TO GOD’S RICHES:**

**R**esentments **A**nxieties **G**reed **S**mallness

to

**R**ighteousness **I**ntegrity **C**larity **H**oliness **E**nergy **S**erenity

## **9. WORDLESS PRAYER**

Light a candle. Sit in God’s presence. Say nothing. Be attentive. Let God speak to you in the stillness. Begin or conclude your time of prayer with music.

## **10. IMAGINE PRAYING AT A PRAYER STOOL**

As I come to prayer

*I take off my shoes – my ambitions*

*Undo my watch – my timetable*

*Take off my glasses – my views*

*Lay down my pen – my work*

*Put down my keys – my security*

*To be alone with you – the Only True God.*

After being with you

*I put on my shoes – to walk in your ways*

*Strap on my watch – to live in your time*

*Put on my glasses – to look at the world with your eyes*

*Take up my pen – to write down your thoughts*

*Pick up my keys – to open your doors*

## 11. PRAYER OF ST FRANCIS

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace  
where there is hatred, let me sow love  
where there is injury, pardon  
where there is doubt, faith  
where there is despair, hope  
where there is darkness, light  
where there is sadness, joy*

*O divine Master*

*grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console  
to be understood, as to understand  
to be loved, as to love  
for it is in giving that we receive  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned  
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.*

*Amen*

## 12. SIGNING OFF PRAYER

*Lord please put me today  
in your right place  
at your right moment  
for your right purposes*

*Please do for me*

*all that I cannot do for myself  
and help me do for myself what I can do*

*Thank you*

## Reflect

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- In your group share other helpful ideas for prayer.
- Choose one or two new ways to pray in the coming week.

## Apply

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- ❑ Note what feels natural, easy, welcoming.
- ❑ Note what feels difficult, awkward, unhelpful.
- ❑ Agree to share your discoveries next time you meet together.

## Pray

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- ❑ Covenant to pray for each other as you explore new ways of praying.

## Going Deeper

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- ❑ *Listening to God* by Joyce Huggett. Published by Hodder and Stoughton 1986
- ❑ *Prayer – Finding the Heart’s True Home* by Richard Foster. Published by Hodder and Stoughton 1992
- ❑ *Prayer – Does it Make Any Difference?* by Philip Yancey. Published by Hodder 2006
- ❑ *Multi-Sensory Prayer* by Sue Wallace. Published by Scripture Union 2000

## STUDY 5

# Learning to read God's word

## Getting started

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A woman who had been brought up in a Christian home, had read the Bible many times and heard countless sermons, came to a turning point in her faith journey when she discovered that the Bible could be prayed as well as read. As she learned to meditate on words and phrases from Scripture, she discovered God searching, inviting, challenging and comforting her. 'It was like a spiritual homecoming,' she said.

Madame Guyon (17th century) wrote: 'If you read the Scripture quickly, it will benefit you little. You will be like a bee that merely skims the surface of a flower. In "Praying the Scripture", you become as the bee who penetrates into the depths of the flower ... deeply within to remove its deepest nectar.'

What methods help you to read the Bible at depth, rather than merely skimming the surface?

Share together in the group.

## Explore

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Here are some ways of going deep into Scripture so that we can hear God speaking to us.

### 1. THE IGNATIAN IMAGINATIVE APPROACH

Ignatius of Loyola was a Spaniard born in 1491. He was a worldly man of the court who loved both women and warfare.

Wounded in the Battle of Pamplona in 1521, he read two books during his long recovery. One was about the life of Christ and the other was about the lives of the saints.

As he read about St Francis and St Dominic he felt a lift in his spirit, an excitement about living as a follower of Christ, a sense of consolation. When he thought about the luxurious life of the court he had lived until then he felt a heaviness in his spirit, a sense of desolation. This discernment of consolation and desolation led him to follow the call of God.

Over the next few years Ignatius underwent a profound spiritual transformation and eventually founded the Jesuit order. Wanting all those who joined him to become versed in Scripture he developed a series of meditations on the gospel – from the announcement of the birth of Jesus right through his life to his death, resurrection and ascension. These ‘Ignatian Exercises’ are still used today by people in formation for ministry.

These are the steps into reading the Scriptures in an Ignatian way.

**a) *Take an incident in the life of Jesus***

Read the story carefully. Ignatius calls this ‘reading the history of the mystery’.

**b) *Preparatory prayer***

Come reverently into God’s presence. Ask God to make the Scriptures real to you.

**c) *Set the scene***

Try to get inside the time, place and situation. Place yourself, in your mind’s eye, back in the first century on a dusty road, or beside Lake Galilee, or up a tree looking out for Jesus. Use your senses to ask, ‘If I were actually present in this situation, what would I see, hear, smell, taste, touch, feel?’

**d) *Live the story***

Enter into it as if you have become one of the people present or a close observer. Go through the events of the story thinking carefully about what is happening and why. Notice your own reactions, feelings, thoughts and questions.

**e) *Pray your response***

Now offer as your prayer whatever it was that God spoke to you as you lived the story.

Using these five steps, read one of these stories in the Ignatian way:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Zacchaeus (Luke 19)              | <input type="checkbox"/> Blind beggar (Luke 18)      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Woman at the well (John 4)       | <input type="checkbox"/> Rich young man (Matthew 19) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Jesus anointed (John 12)         | <input type="checkbox"/> Foot-washing (John 13)      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeding of great crowd (Luke 9)  | <input type="checkbox"/> Widow’s offering (Mark 12)  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Healing of paralytic (Matthew 9) | <input type="checkbox"/> Peter’s confession (Mark 8) |

## 2. LECTIO DIVINA (HOLY/DIVINE READING)

This way of meditating on Scripture has its roots in the 6<sup>th</sup> century Benedictine tradition. The Benedictine monks would listen as one of their number read the passage of Scripture for the day. They would have to listen intently as they did not have their own personal copy of the Bible to refer to.

The reader would read the passage slowly several times and the hearers would be listening for a sentence, word, phrase or image that particularly caught their attention. Then they would return to their cells to meditate on that particular word of God for them.

The steps of Lectio Divina can be used in personal devotions or with a group. They can be followed by those who have their own Bible or by those who, like the early Benedictine monks, had to rely on hearing the word read aloud. Here is a simple outline of the steps:

### **a) *Preparation***

Prepare with thoughtful reverence. Pause to become inwardly still. Select your portion of Scripture. Ask for the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit as you read.

### **b) *Lectio (Reading)***

Read the selected passage slowly. Read until a word or phrase or image attracts your attention at a deeper level. This may happen on the first time through or it may take several readings until something stops you.

### **c) *Meditatio (Thinking/Pondering)***

Chew over the phrase like a cow chewing its cud. Tumble it around in your head like clothes in a clothes drier. Rock it gently as if you were holding a baby in your arms. Ponder, consider, reflect on its meaning.

### **d) *Oratio (Praying/Speaking/Responding)***

Let your pondering become your prayer. Thanksgiving, repentance, questioning – whatever your response, open your heart to God's love and let it be your prayer.

### **e) *Contemplatio (Being silent in God's presence)***

When you have made your response, just rest there in the still place of God's loving presence.

- ❑ We read *(Lectio)*
- ❑ Under the eye of God *(Meditatio)*
- ❑ Until the heart is touched *(Oratio)*
- ❑ And leaps to flame *(Contemplatio)*

### 3. ASKING QUESTIONS

A more analytical approach to Scripture is to read a chapter a day. In this way you can get through the whole Bible in 3 years. As you read, ask these questions of the Scripture and listen to the questions it asks of you:

- Can the passage be summarised in one sentence?
- What is the key verse?
- What truth does this passage teach about God/Jesus/the Holy Spirit?
- Is there a lesson to learn?
- Is there an application for life?
- Is there a temptation to avoid?
- Is there a behaviour to practise?
- Is there a challenge to respond to?
- Is there a prayer to be prayed?

### 4. MEMORISING

There is a difference between reading and memorising. Memorising takes us deep into the Scripture and helps to ‘incarnate’ or ‘enflesh’ the word within us. It becomes part of us. When we memorise Scripture we carry God’s active ever-present word of help and correction within us wherever we go. This is what the Psalmist meant when he wrote, ‘I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you’ (*Psalms 119:11*).

Start off by memorising a simple portion of Scripture such as Psalm 23. Then work gently on memorising Psalm 139 or Psalm 143 or Isaiah 40. Let the word of God find a dwelling place within you.

### Reflect

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- What sounds easy/appealing/challenging about each of these methods of reading and praying the Bible?

### Apply

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- Choose a new way to read and pray the Bible in the coming week.
- Agree to share your discoveries next time you meet together.

## Pray

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- ❑ Ask God to take you deep into his Word so that it becomes ‘incarnate’ in you. Covenant to pray for each other as you explore new ways of reading and praying the Scripture.

## Going Deeper

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- ❑ *Eat This Book – A conversation in the art of spiritual reading* by Eugene Peterson. Published by Eerdmans 2005
- ❑ *Other Voices – Exploring the contemplative in Salvationist spirituality* by Christine Faragher. Published by Salvo Publishing, Australia Southern Territory 2010

## STUDY 6

# Learning to listen to God

## Getting started

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Does God really speak to people?

Is it possible to hear and recognise his voice?

How can I know when it is God speaking to me and not just my own idea?

These and similar questions can puzzle believers.

Share together in the group how you hear God speaking to you.

## Explore

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Here are some ways that God speaks to us today:

### 1. THE MUSIC OF GOD'S LOVE

Joshua Bell, one of world's greatest contemporary violinists, was asked to take part in an experiment. The newspaper Washington Post arranged for him to play in a Washington subway at rush hour.

Accustomed to playing before the crowned heads of Europe, Joshua Bell had played a few weeks earlier to a pack-out audience where people had paid \$100 for a seat. Playing on the world's most expensive 18<sup>th</sup> century Stadivarius violin worth \$3.5million dollars he performed to commuters. For 43 minutes he played six classical pieces, including one considered the world's most difficult piece of music, Bach's Chaconne.

He played surrounded by lotto shops, magazine and newspaper kiosks and shoeshine stands. Washington Post wrote it up – Pearls Before Breakfast. The newspaper reported that in those 43 minutes 1097 people passed by, 27 stopped and tossed some money in his bag – a few coins, a note or two – then hurried on.

Only seven people stopped to listen. One was a three-year-old child who tugged at his mother's hand to make her stop. A business man stopped, checked his watch, listened for three minutes then hurried on. A cleaner kept sweeping but stayed within earshot. Only one person recognised Joshua Bell and listened then put \$20 into his bag. His entire takings were \$32.

What was happening? Simply that people did not hear, did not recognise, did not know they were in the presence of mastery and beauty.

The music of God's voice, God's love, God's calling is all around us, but often we fail to hear. Poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

*All earth is crammed with heaven  
And every common bush afire with God  
But only they who see take off their shoes  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries*

*Question:*

1. In music, in art, in poetry, in nature, in photography, in people or in other ways, how do you hear most clearly the music of God's love?

## **2. THE NAME GOD CALLS YOU**

In some parts of Africa when a baby is born the father will spend time holding the newborn, listening to it breathing and resting. Then the father will whisper a special name into the baby's ear. The child will grow up being called an ordinary name around the village – like Johnny or Moses – but he and his father will know that there is also another name, known only to the two of them. When the child turns 13 or so that special name will be revealed to the whole village with great celebration.

It is said that where this practice happens, the child grows up with a sense of identity, a deep knowing of who he is, because of the name his father has given him.

At the start of Jesus' ministry there was a key moment when God spoke and affirmed Jesus' identity. Read what happened in Mark 1:9-11. Knowing at the very outset of his public ministry that he was God's beloved son, gave Jesus the strength and grace he needed to go forward.

His story is our story as well. We too need to know who we are, to hear God's affirmation spoken over us and to listen to the name God calls us. When we know the name God calls us, then we know who we are.

*Question:*

1. If you knew that God has a special name for you, knows everything about you and loves you unconditionally, what would your life look like? What would be different? What would change within you?

### 3. THE CALLING OF GOD ON YOUR LIFE

There is an old Christian tradition that every person comes into the world with a song to sing, a message to deliver, an act of love to offer. No one can sing my song, deliver my message or offer my act of love, for they are entrusted only to me.

When we take hold of these words they set us free from comparison and competition. I don't need to compare myself with anyone else. I am who I am and you are who you are. I don't need to compete with you to write my story or sing my song or do the task that God has given me to do. They are my story, my song, my task, just as God has given you your story, your song, your task.

There are two incidents in Scripture that can help us to identify how God has gifted us and to recognise the unique calling that he has on our life.

#### *a) An Old Testament story – see Exodus 4:1-17*

Moses is out in the desert near Horeb where God speaks to him out of the burning bush, telling Moses that he is to be the one who will lead the people of God out of their slavery in Egypt. Moses answers with a whole lot of objections, 'Who am I to do that? What if they don't listen? I've got a speech impediment ... Please send someone else ...'

God, perhaps with something of an exasperated sigh in his voice, answers Moses with a question, 'What is that in your hand?' Moses holds a staff, an ordinary, everyday tool of trade for a shepherd. God tells Moses to throw the staff on the ground, which he does, then leaps back in fright as it turns into a serpent. God tells him to grab it by the tail and when Moses does so the serpent turns back into a shepherd's crook. This is not magic. This is God taking the ordinary, everyday symbol of Moses' life and touching it with a miracle. Wherever Moses goes, that staff will remind him of God's presence and power to do the seemingly impossible.

We can hear God asking us this same question, 'What is that in your hand?' In the course of a day our hands hold, touch, wash, carry, tear, arrange, fix a whole host of things. A symbol of our ordinary everyday work might be a computer keyboard, a paintbrush, a dishcloth, a hammer, a scalpel, an ironing board.

Think about what you do best for God, what fires you up and gives you energy. What makes you say at the end of the day – 'I just loved doing that ...'? Or what makes you say as you start a day, 'Oh no, I've got to do that ... today'? Asking such questions help us to get in touch with how God has wired us, the seeds of delight he has planted within us, and why he made us as he did.

Another way to recognise our vocation (our calling) is to hear what other people who know us best say about us. 'Oh, you are such a good listener. I knew I could come to you for wise advice.' Or, 'You are so creative, so good with your hands, so good at fixing things.' Sometimes people reflect back to us what we have inside us but don't always see very clearly ourselves.

All Black Richie McCaw told a group of young sports players:

*'Be yourself – everyone else is taken.'*

### **b) A New Testament story – see John 6:1-13**

Another way of getting to the heart of who we are in our deepest self and what we have to offer is to think of the story of the little boy who gave his lunch to Jesus. What was in his lunchbox? Fish, bread, an ordinary lunch enough for one.

Think about what you have in your 'lunchbox'. What gifts and graces already lie within you?

How would you finish these statements? Share your responses with others in the group.

- a) I love doing ...
- b) My greatest delight comes from ...
- c) I am so grateful for ...
- d) One good thing about me is that I ...
- e) Three of my favourite things are ...
- f) I work best with ...

Author Frederick Buechner wrote:

*'Where my deep gladness and the world's deep need intersect,  
there is my vocation.'*

## **4. THE GUIDANCE OF GOD**

The entrance into one of New Zealand's harbours is so rocky and treacherous that a system of lights has been set up on nearby hills. Only when those lights are all lined up does the pilot of a ship know that it is safe to turn into the harbour.

The guidance of God is like those harbour lights. When these four lights come into line, then we can be sure that God is guiding us in a particular matter:

1. Our own inner witness, a sense of God's peace in the matter
2. Confirmation from Scripture
3. What other wise people say about it
4. Our circumstances

The Alpha Course describes five 'CS' 'lights':

1. Common Sense
2. Commanding Scripture
3. Counsel of Saints
4. Compelling Spirit
5. Circumstantial Signs

*Questions:*

1. When have you found these 'lights' useful in determining God's guidance in a particular matter? What did you do? What was the outcome?

## **5. THE EXAMEN – A DAILY PRACTICE**

An old practice called the **examen** teaches us to discern and hear what the Spirit of God is saying and doing in our lives.

The examen is based on two questions that you can ask yourself at the end of the day. Either on your own or with a friend or even with the family gathered together, ask:

1. As I look back over today, where were the life-giving moments when I felt loved, joyful, at peace with God and the world?

*Give thanks to God for those moments.*

2. As I look back over today, what moments drained life out of me, gave me a sense of heaviness, of wrong, of making a mistake or sinning in some way?

*Bring those moments to God in confession.*

As we do this examen regularly a pattern will emerge of the things that give us life and the things that drain life out of us. What is life-giving to us will become life-giving to others. As we give emphasis to the things that give us life then our unique vocation, the calling that God has on our lives, will begin to emerge.

A minister was told, *'If you are too busy to pray, at least do the examen. It will keep you in tune with God and his purposes for your life.'*

## **6. THE RECORD OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS**

Keeping a journal can be a way of keeping a record of God's faithfulness. There can be great blessing in going back and reading something we wrote some time ago, remembering when we were in a tough situation or struggling with a complex issue. We can see how God has brought us through a certain difficulty, made his way clear or provided for our needs.

A journal may be a plain exercise book or an elegant hard-covered book with lines and Scripture verses. A journal is different from a diary. A diary is a daily record of events, what we did, where we went, who we saw and so on. A journal can be used to keep a record of verses that leapt out of Scripture to us, ways in which we sensed God speaking, key points of sermons or helpful messages that we heard. Some people use an unlined journal so they can draw, sketch, press flowers, stick in quotes or pieces of paper clipped from somewhere. The possibilities are endless and there are no hard and fast rules.

Use a journal as you find most helpful. Keep it private and safe. Let it be a way of recording God's promptings in your life and your responses to those promptings.

### **Reflect**

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- In these different ways of tuning into God's voice, what have you found most helpful?
- What other ways of listening to God would group members add to this list?

### **Apply**

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- Over the next few weeks spend time practising each idea.
- Make a plan to share your discoveries with each other.

## Pray

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- ❑ *Lord, I turn my whole being to you. Help me to listen for your voice, to be attentive to your presence and to respond to your love as you help me to live out my calling in the world.*

## Going Deeper

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- ❑ *Sleeping with Bread* by Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn. Published by Paulist Press New York 1995
- ❑ *Leading With a Limp* by Dan Allender Published by Waterbrook Press, Colorado Springs 2006

# Tips on How to Lead an Effective Study

## Approach

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These studies take into account some specific findings about how people learn, including that learners:

- ❑ are now-oriented – so we start with a few open questions to engage them
- ❑ learn best by saying and doing, not listening – so our studies are based around discussion, with only short comments or readings. We encourage the leader to facilitate more than teach
- ❑ bring experience – so we invite (expect?) most of the learning to come from discussions in the group, rather than new content in the study
- ❑ are self-directed – so we include a chance for them to apply their learning, individually.

## The Need to Stimulate Interaction

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One of the primary objectives of small groups is the application of the truth (James 1:22). Remember that people learn best by relating the learning to their own experiences and besides, our experiences also benefit each other.

For this reason, leaders should aim to maximise interaction by utilising effective questioning techniques to draw out experiences and knowledge from the members, supplemented by short inputs of content. All content should then be discussed.

Of course, in preparing, you need to consider how much the members actually know about the topic as this determines how much content you suggest compared to how much you extract from the members.

### HOW DO YOU ENCOURAGE INTERACTION?

1. Set up the room as a circle so that everyone including the leader is facing each other.
2. Gather information by asking open questions which encourage people to expand and cannot be answered with yes or no.
3. Be careful with 'why' as it can sound aggressive and may make people feel defensive. Rather than 'Why did you do that?', try 'What were your reasons for doing that?'

4. Use 'rebound' and 'boomerang' questions to have other group members answer questions before you do (e.g. 'What do others think?'; 'Does anyone have a different idea we should consider?').
5. Use closed questions only to check information or to cut someone off when you need to regain control (e.g. 'So you had a good time then?').
6. Watch for those who would like to participate and ask for their contribution. Read faces and body language.
7. See that everyone is involved in the discussion and has a chance to share.
8. Guide the discussion by switching from one person to another. Interject your viewpoint and experience occasionally.

### **COMMON MISTAKES THAT PREVENT INTERACTION**

1. Set up the room so that the leader is clearly separated from the other group members, and have the group members sitting in rows so that they can't easily see each other.
2. Ask lots of questions that can be answered 'yes' or 'no'.
3. Ask complex questions that no-one knows the answer to.
4. Answer all questions asked of you – and a few you ask of others as well.
5. Be afraid of silence. Don't give people time to think.
6. Pick on people and keep asking them questions. Pressure people to pray, read or speak.
7. Ask rhetorical questions. Anticipate when people want to answer a question then move on quickly.
8. Try to maintain control. Prevent all tangents as soon as you notice the conversation taking off.
9. Make questions sound conversational.
10. Ensure the group knows that you know all the answers.
11. Criticise people and allow people in the group to criticise others as well.
12. Be more interested in getting through the material than in the people who are present.
13. Share your viewpoint first.