

# How to use *Explore*

## Issue 104

The 92 daily readings in this issue of *Explore* are designed to help you understand and apply the Bible as you read it each day.

## It's serious!

We suggest that you allow 15 minutes each day to work through the Bible passage with the notes. It should be a meal, not a snack! Readings from other parts of the Bible can throw valuable light on the study passage. These cross-references can be skipped if you are already feeling full up, but will expand your grasp of the Bible. *Explore* uses the NIV2011 Bible translation, but you can also use it with the NIV1984 or ESV translations.

Sometimes a prayer section will encourage you to stop and pray through the lessons—but it is always important to allow time to pray for God's Spirit to bring his word to life, and to shape the way we think and live through it.

## We're serious!

All of us who work on *Explore* share a passion for getting the Bible into people's lives. We fiercely hold to the Bible as God's word—to honour and follow, not to explain away.

**1**  
Find a time you can read the Bible each day

**2**  
Find a place where you can be quiet and think

**3**  
Ask God to help you understand

**4**  
Carefully read through the Bible passage for today

**5**  
Study the verses with *Explore*, taking time to think

**6**  
Pray about what you have read

**the goodbook**  
COMPANY

BIBLICAL | RELEVANT | ACCESSIBLE

# Welcome to Explore



Tim Thornborough is the Publishing Director at The Good Book Company

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



# Finite

*One of our chief problems in life is that we lack perspective. We get so engrossed in our own little world, that we fail to appreciate the wider picture. Prepare to have that tendency challenged...*

---

## The great gulf

### Read Psalm 90

- ❓ *What does the psalm tell us about God?*
- ❓ *What does the psalm tell us about ourselves?*
- ❓ *What is the point of the contrast the writer draws between the two?*

One of the themes through Psalms 80-90 has been about the safest and best place to dwell. Here, we are reminded that God himself is our dwelling place. The safest place is in his arms, in his will. This is because when we dwell in God's presence, we are in the arms of the eternal God. His eternal dominion is in sharp contrast to our finite natures.

God existed before the world began. He is the one who created it. This doesn't just mean that his existence is stretched out over infinite years. God transcends and rules time so that "A thousand years ... are like a day".

By contrast, our earthly existence is fleeting. God made our bodies from the dust and will return them to dust. We are fragile and frail; Ecclesiastes compares our life to vapour—a morning mist that quickly evaporates when the sun rises. We know that our life expectancy is around 70-80 years. So, the psalmist asks God to "Teach us to number our days" (v 12). In other words, we need to learn how to make the best use of our time.

This comes when we learn to fear God. It includes an awareness of his just anger, but

it also requires us to fall upon the mercy and compassion of God. We number our days when we trust him and him alone to satisfy us.

### Apply

In a time when life expectancy has been growing, we can be tempted to act as though we are invincible and our lives will go on for ever. The reality is that our time here can end at any point through illness or accident. Even without those risks, our earthly lives are finite.

Take time to consider how you will make best use of your time. If you have 20 years of active service left, what do you want to do with it? What if you had only ten years to go? What would you prioritise? What will it mean for you to live this day as though it could be your last day?

### Pray

Ask God to help you to use the day ahead of you wisely and for his glory.

Pray that you would live today with the grand perspective in view—of God's greatness and your lowliness.

But rejoice that, despite this, his love for you is unailing (v 14). Pray about this until you are satisfied, singing for joy and gladness.



# GENESIS: Lot's line

*We pick up the story in Genesis after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot's sad story continues in a downward direction.*

---

At first glance, it is hard to find an edifying “thought for the day” from this particular Bible passage. But careful reading reveals something helpful...

## Read Genesis 19:30-38

- ❓ *Why don't Lot and his family settle in Zoar, do you think?*
- ❓ *What is the girls' predicament?*
- ❓ *What verdict is given here on their “solution”?*

Lot and his daughters had just survived the equivalent of World War 3. Their home and region had been blasted to ash. Their wider family were all dead; their wife and mother had been calcified before their very eyes. It was likely that the locals were eyeing them with suspicion (v 30). They were reduced to living in a cave. But no rescuers were on the way, and no insurance payout was going to put them back on their feet.

The girls' situation was something like this: *Father is getting on. No one will have us. Here our family dies* (see v 31). The one desperate alternative which would keep the line of Lot alive was not, of course, one to which Lot himself would agree, and so they must ensure he knew nothing about it. Accordingly, they made him drunk—probably not difficult with a shocked and depressed old man—(v 33a), and in that condition, on two separate nights, each daughter had sex with him (v 33b).

Scripture offers neither judgment nor condemnation, but in this account we see the moral ruin of a whole family—and the rot started when Lot chose to “live dangerously” among the pagans.

The names of the children probably gave the neighbours a sly laugh (see v 37-38)—“Moab” sounds like the Hebrew for “from Father”, and “Ben-Ammi” = “son of my people”. Their descendants, however, would turn out to be fierce enemies of Israel. Lot took a pragmatic but ultimately self-serving choice. His daughters are only doing the same. But from these choices came centuries of enmity for Lot's family line and the children of Abraham.

## Pray

Lot was blessed (because of Abraham) but he himself ultimately brought trouble to God's people. Our moral choices can affect more than our own lives. What legacy will you pass on in your family and in your church?

Pray for wisdom in the decisions you make now and their future consequences.



# Abysmal

*The story of Lot has been a sorry saga. But thank God for the great heroes of faith who never failed, right? That, at least, is how we might feel until we read Genesis 20.*

---

## The line of promise

### Read Genesis 20

- ❓ *What was the last thing that God told Abraham about the promised son (Genesis 18:10)?*
- ❓ *How is God's promise to Abraham now threatened?*
- ❓ *Why does God intervene as he does (Genesis 20:3, 18)?*

Incredibly, Abraham botches it again! Once again (compare 12:10-20), the deception that Sarah is his sister separates Abraham from his wife (20:2). And far from being two isolated incidents, it seems this was a strategy that they regularly resorted to when meeting strangers (v 13). Perhaps the experience with Pharaoh suggested it could earn them unexpected cash bonuses (12:16)!

But now the conception of Isaac is imminent. If Abimelek sleeps with Sarah, the fatherhood of Isaac could be called into question. Little wonder then that God's confrontation of Abimelek is so drastic (20:3), and all births cease in Abimelek's household (v 18).

## Pray

Abraham's cautious habit actually reflects a failure to trust God.

- ❓ *What similar habits of ungodly prudence do you fall into?*

Ask God to help you give them up.

## Grace abounding

- ❓ *Why does Abimelek stay innocent?*
- ❓ *What must he do to be restored after God's judgment on his household?*

God intervenes to keep Abimelek innocent by warning him in a dream of Sarah's true identity (v 3-6). Yet even a clean conscience cannot keep us out of trouble. Abimelek has unwittingly sailed into dangerous waters, but he must follow God's instructions to escape (v 7). And although Abraham has acted without any integrity or concern for Abimelek's innocence, still, as God's covenant-bearer, he is the one who must intercede for God's mercy on Abimelek's behalf.

It is Abimelek who emerges with honour, giving massive gifts to Abraham which confirm Sarah's innocence (v 14-16). Abraham compares badly. But once again, we see how God's covenant is one of total grace.



# An heir is born

*At last we come to the long-awaited event...*




---

## High point?

### Read Genesis 21:1-7

 *What does verse 1 emphasise?*

The birth of Isaac should surely be presented as the high point of Abraham's story. And yet these verses are remarkably understated—just like the accounts of the resurrection! God is centre-stage here (v 1). He does for Sarah “what he had promised”. There is no need for a great fanfare, as if it were remarkable that God does as he has said. What else would you expect?

-  *Why, do you think, is the birth of Isaac described as what the Lord had promised to do for Sarah, rather than Abraham?*
-  *What is Abraham's part in this event?*
-  *How does the account underline that this birth is truly a miracle?*

## Bearing the burden of the future

In spite of God's repeated, detailed promises to Abraham (12:2; 13:16; 15:4; 17:6), the focus here falls on Sarah, for, at this point, it is Sarah who must literally “bear” the burden. But Abraham is the one who officially names his son with the name given by God (17:19)—Isaac (= “he laughs”). And it's Abraham who, in line with God's earlier instruction (17:12), circumcises Isaac (21:4). Abraham's age, mentioned in verse 5, reminds us that this is indeed a miracle—as

much as creation or even the resurrection (see Romans 4:17).

For Abraham and Sarah this is a moment of pure joy—particularly for Sarah, whose “laughing boy” has at last given her something to smile about, but also for Abraham, who has received a gift beyond what anyone would have guessed. How often God exceeds what anyone would have believed.

## Apply

Abraham and Sarah's trust in God's promise was patchy—much like ours perhaps. But God's faithfulness to his own promises is never in doubt. Thank God for his faithfulness to Abraham and Sarah, which means that we can now enjoy salvation.

**Read Romans 8:22-25** and be encouraged that patience in relation to the promises of our faithful God will always, finally, be rewarded.



# Inheritance

*Ah, the joys of family life! Martin Luther called married life a “school for character”. For Abraham’s family it is a very tough school indeed.*

---

## Family conflict

### Read Genesis 21:8-14

- ❓ *In what way is Sarah right?*
- ❓ *In what way is she wrong?*
- ❓ *Why is Abraham less willing to agree with Sarah’s demand this time (compare 16:1-6)?*

The joy following the birth of Isaac lasts only a year or so, until Isaac is weaned. Then Sarah’s old wounds begin to fester. Sarah is right in her assertion that Ishmael will never share in Isaac’s inheritance of God’s covenant promises. However, it is meant as a statement of hostility in response to Ishmael’s “persecution” of Isaac (see Galatians 4:29). Sarah’s attitude here is far from exemplary and not at all the calm trust in God’s faithfulness to his promises that we might expect.

## ▼ Apply

Sarah’s earlier actions (Genesis 16:2) left a legacy of bad feeling which has persisted until now. Her answer is to drive out the “cause” of the problem, regardless of the cost to the people involved.

- ❓ *What legacies of past failings still haunt you?*
- ❓ *How could you avoid following Sarah’s example here?*

## Family therapy?

Unlike previously, Abraham is distressed by his wife’s demand (compare 16:2b). Ishmael is, after all, also his son (21:11). However, God reassures Abraham that he should indeed do what Sarah says, so as to secure Isaac’s inheritance (v 12). God himself will take care of Ishmael (v 13). So Abraham sends Hagar off the next day (v 14).

### Read Genesis 21:15-21

- ❓ *Why does God hear “the boy crying”—rather than Hagar—do you think?*
- ❓ *Why is God gracious to Ishmael and Hagar?*

God is not ignoring Hagar (see 16:7), but the emphasis here is on the link with Abraham (see 21:13). Ishmael is rescued to pursue a life separate from Abraham’s line (v 21), but God is with him as he promised.

## ⬆️ Pray

Pray for families in strife, especially those in your own church.

And pray that in times of stress and division between you and your family members, you would pursue what makes for peace.



# Well hard!

*Abraham's family line is at last secure and he is personally prosperous. He has also demonstrated the ability to hold his own in a fight. He is a force to be reckoned with.*

---

## Read Genesis 21:22-34

- ❓ *What is the purpose of Abimelek's visit?*
- ❓ *How do you think his previous encounter with Abraham (chapter 20) has influenced his attitude to Abraham now?*
- ❓ *And how do you think it has influenced Abraham's attitude to Abimelek?*

Abimelek is himself a God-fearer (see 20:3-7), and he sees that God is with Abraham (21:22). Abraham's false dealings with him nearly brought him to ruin. Although Abraham appears to have no stake in the land, Abimelek wants Abraham to swear on oath before God that he will treat Abimelek as generously as Abimelek once treated him (v 23).

Not surprisingly, and especially given the bad conscience he must have had, Abraham quickly agrees (v 24).

## Water fight

Events, however, soon put this to the test. Water then was like oil today, a scarce resource which could easily become a focus of conflict. And that's what erupts over a well Abraham had previously dug (v 30). Abimelek's servants seize the well and Abraham complains (v 25). We do not know, and nor could Abraham, if Abimelek spoke the truth (v 26). But in the light of his earlier actions, Abraham was in no position to stand on his dignity. If the affair was to be settled

peacefully, a peace gesture had to be made. So Abraham made a covenant with Abimelek and handed over gifts (v 27) to validate his ownership of the well (v 28-30).

As God's people we live in the real world. This may mean being prepared to meet others halfway, and not always "standing on principle".

## Apply

- ❓ *When might it be "better" for God's people to be defrauded? See, for example, 1 Corinthians 6:1-7.*
- ❓ *Are there any circumstances in the past when you have unhelpfully stood on what you thought was a principle? What might you have done differently with hindsight?*

## Pray

Pray for tact and diplomacy in dealing with others, especially when you are right.





# The test

*Child sacrifice was not an unusual feature of the religions of the ancient near east. Still, God's clear command must have come as a shock to Abraham...*

---

## Sacrifice

### Read Genesis 22:1-14

- ❓ *What do God's words emphasise, as he instructs Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (v 2)?*
- ❓ *Find the signs of Abraham's calm trust that God would work it all out.*
  - v 5:
  - v 8:
- ❓ *What do you think was the basis for Abraham's trust?*
- ❓ *What does it mean to "fear God" (v 12)?*

God's command to sacrifice Isaac must have been a shock to Abraham after all the years of hearing God's promise and waiting for his son's birth. Even God mentions Abraham's love for Isaac (v 2). And yet there are no complaints, no questions, no delays, no alternative plans. Instead, the very next day Abraham sets out with Isaac and two servants (v 3). And when he leaves the servants so that he can go on alone with Isaac, he tells them, significantly, that "we" will return (v 5).

When Isaac notices that they lack the customary lamb (v 7), Abraham shows his trust in God to provide (v 8). He reasoned that ultimately God would keep Isaac safe so that his promises to Abraham wouldn't fail (Hebrews 11:19). And so it turned out.

The story confirms Abraham's fear of the Lord (Genesis 22:12), and also the grace

and faithfulness of God. And it sets a precedent for the future: "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided". This place, Mount Moriah, would become the temple mount in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 3:1)—a picture of Jesus' redeeming work (John 2:19-22), just as the sacrificial lamb was a picture of him (1 Peter 1:18-19).

The demand for sacrifice, and its provision by God, go hand in hand. This is what trusting God is all about—obeying his word even when it will cut us deeply, and seems crazy from our limited viewpoint. This is the "work" that shows that faith is real.

### TIME OUT

---

### Read James 2:20-23

- ❓ *What commands from the Lord do you find particularly difficult to take on board?*

## Pray

Ask God to give you faith like Abraham's and an obedience that is unquestioning and uncomplaining.

Thank God, who has not held back his own Son so that we could be forgiven.



# Emergency services

*You have a nasty accident, you're threatened by someone, a fire breaks out. What do you do? You reach for the phone, dial the emergency number and ask for help.*

---

Some situations are far more scary than those above, and which the fire brigade is unable to help you deal with .

## Where do we dwell?

### Read Psalm 91:1

What better security can there be? Like a ship safe in harbour during a storm, we dwell in the shelter of the Most High. Like someone sheltering under a tree from the intense heat of the sun, we rest in the shadow of none other than the Almighty.

**?** *When are you most prone to forget the protection of God?*

## What will we say?

### Read Psalm 91:2

When trouble comes, the writer openly expresses his trust in the Lord. Easier even than dialling the emergency services, we simply put our trust in the one who is our refuge and fortress.

**?** *Think about what you have planned for the coming week. When will you most need to remember to say this?*

## What will God do?

### Read Psalm 91:3-16

The psalm becomes more personal in v 3: "Surely he will save you".

**?** *In the final three verses, God is the one doing the speaking. I found eight things he promises to his people—can you find them all?*

## Apply

Of all the promises in verse 3-13, pick the three you find most relevant. Rephrase them to reflect the dangers you will face this week.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

## Pray

You may not be in any physical danger at the moment, but there are plenty of God's people around the world who are. It is estimated that, on average, over 300 believers die for their faith each day.

Pray for your persecuted brothers and sisters throughout the world. Ask that they might rejoice in the truth of this psalm.



# Son of promise

*In response to the tense climax of this mountain-top moment, God once again restates his promise to Abraham. Obedience leads to blessing...*

---

## Read Genesis 22:15-24

These few verses provide a crucial verdict on Abraham, and echo earlier affirmations of God's promises.

- ❓ *What's new about God's restatement of his promise in verses 16-17?*
- ❓ *Why does God take this further step?*
- ❓ *What is meant by "your only son" (v 2, 16, 12)? What about Ishmael?*

God adds to his promises by making an oath. Lacking anything greater to swear by, God confirms his covenant with Abraham by swearing by his own self (v 16). He does this to "make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear" to Abraham and his descendants (see Hebrews 6:17).

God does this in response to the readiness of Abraham to offer his own, and only, son (Genesis 22:16). Here is an increasing spiral of grace... faith... obedience... greater grace... There is a link between God's grace and how his people live it out.

## Which son?

Muslims claim that "your only son" (v 2, 12, 16) must refer to Ishmael, not Isaac. Isaac, they argue, was never Abraham's "only" son, whereas Ishmael was, at least for a while. But Ishmael is now out of the picture, not only physically, but also regarding the promise and inheritance (17:18-21; 21:14). Isaac is the only son of promise.

Earlier, God told Abraham to "keep the way of the LORD" (18:19; 17:1). In offering "his only son", Abraham was keeping "the way of the LORD". Surely, God himself would do no less than he demanded of Abraham. The ram (22:13) wasn't just a substitute for Isaac. Nor did it simply represent a future greater sacrifice to God, but one *by* God (see John 1:36)—of his "one and only Son" (John 3:16).

## Apply

God's grace and our response are connected. "Because you have done this" is not an empty phrase in Scripture.

- ❓ *How do grace and works relate to one another?*
- ❓ *Does obedience always result in blessing?*

Read Ephesians 2:8-10 and Hebrews 11:17-19.

## Pray

Praise God for the ultimate sacrifice, made for us in his Son.

And pray again for a determined obedience to the Lord's commands, whatever the circumstances, and whatever the potential outcome.



# Love lost

*The Bible draws a veil over what happens over the next several years. Then, inevitably, tragedy strikes.*

## Read Genesis 23

- ❓ *Where did Sarah die and where did Abraham bury her?*
- ❓ *Why do you think the purchase of Sarah's tomb is recorded in such detail?*
- ❓ *What is significant about Abraham's purchase?*

At the age of 127, Sarah breathes her last, and the depth of Abraham's loss is clear (v 2). This ancient couple, who have lived so many years together, and have been through so many hard times as well as good, are finally separated. Despite having been given the promise of land by God, this single purchase is the only land that Abraham possesses in his lifetime. But it is a seed that will grow.

## ▼ Apply

Some Bible commentators criticise Abraham for either too much or too little grief at the death of Sarah. But compare this with John 11:35 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

- ❓ *What perspectives does a godly attitude towards death and grief have that are missing from those who have no belief in God?*

## Tomb talk

As anyone who has been bereaved will know, the practical details of the funeral

must still be made, even in the midst of grief. So Abraham purchases a burial plot from the Hittites living in Canaan, in the customary Middle Eastern way (Genesis 23:3-16). The precisely detailed account of this makes it quite clear that this plot belonged to Abraham legally and completely—not stolen, or taken by conquest, but purchased by mutual agreement (v 20).

## Heavenly hope

Abraham now owns the only piece of property which will ever be personally his in the promised land—a grave. Compare this with God's words to Abraham previously in 13:14-17. We might have expected Abraham's faith in the Lord to turn to disillusionment at this difficult time in his life, but it's not so.

- ❓ *How does Hebrews 11:8-10 explain the apparent discrepancy between the promise and its fulfilment?*
- ❓ *What are the lessons here for us?*

## ▲ Pray

- ❓ *How do you think you will cope with the death of someone close to you?*

How will you cope with the thought of your own coming death? By resting on the sure promises of God. **Read John 11:25-26.**

Pray for all those mourning the loss of someone dear to them.



# The future

After Sarah's death, Abraham begins to think about finding a wife for Isaac, to whom God's covenant will pass.

## Finding a wife

### Read Genesis 24:1-9

- ❓ *Why did Abraham absolutely not want Isaac to marry a Canaanite (See 15:18-21)?*
- ❓ *Why might his servant fear that this was a "mission impossible" (Genesis 24:5-6)?*
- ❓ *What was the solution to the problem?*

Abraham knew that the Canaanites would one day come under God's judgment and be dispossessed from Canaan by his descendants. So he sent this trusted servant back to find a wife from his own people (v 4). But how to persuade a young girl to leave for ever her own land and people, and travel far and marry a man she knew nothing about from a family that she had never met? No wonder the servant raised the possibility of failure. But Abraham trusted that God would intervene to do what was necessary for his covenant to continue to the next generation (v 7), as the Lord had repeatedly promised to him.

### Apply

Abraham doesn't wait for a wife to come to Isaac, but at the same time he's fully trusting that God is in control of what happens.

- ❓ *In what situations have you needed to take the initiative while also trusting God for the outcome?*

## Passing the test

### Read Genesis 24:10-27

- ❓ *How did the servant show himself worthy of Abraham's trust?*
- ❓ *What quality would his "test" reveal?*

On arrival, the servant matches Abraham's example by praying for specific guidance (v 12-14). Notice his wisdom—a girl who would perform her own tasks but also care for the needs of a stranger shows good character (see Proverbs 31:10-31). When Rebekah "passes the test" (Genesis 24:19-21), the servant makes his move. Rebekah's lineage (v 24) is the final confirmation that she is the one (v 26-27).

### Pray

It's unwise to use this story as a strict pattern for marriage guidance. But it shows that God is sovereign in whatever happens (see 24:7-8).

Pray that you may know and do God's will right down to the details in your own life.

