

# FREE to GO

The Bible – God's love liberating lives

A choice of illustrations you can use to emphasise certain points in the talk.

## Free behind bars

A prison visitor in the south of England regularly offers copies of the New Testament to those who are interested. He reports one prisoner asked for a copy as he thought the thin paper would make excellent roll-up material for his cigarettes. But the man felt guilty about treating the Bible like this and so promised himself he would read a page before using it to make a cigarette. The prison visitor reports that the man smoked his way through Matthew and Mark and was mid-way through the Gospel of John when he came to a personal faith in Jesus Christ!

## Entering into all God has promised

A young couple went on honeymoon and due to a flight delay arrived at their hotel in the early hours. In the morning they complained to the manager that their room was ridiculously small, had no windows and was furnished by a single bed settee. They'd booked a honeymoon suite but been given a box room.

The manager accompanied them upstairs and asked if they had noticed the double doors, which the couple assumed was a wardrobe. He opened them to reveal a sumptuous room complete with four-poster bed, balcony with a sea view, flowers and bottle of champagne in an ice bucket. Mr and Mrs Glum had spent their wedding night in the lobby of the best suite in the hotel!

Psalm 119 reminds us to enter into all that God has for us through the Bible and not to

be content with staying in the lobby: 'Your teachings are wonderful, and I respect them all. Understanding your word brings light to the minds of ordinary people. I honestly want to know everything you teach' (Psalm 119:129–131, CEV).

## The liberating power of the Bible

A distinguished academic has noted the power of the Bible to address contemporary issues in the developing world:

Any number of texts offer surprises. Read Ruth, for instance, and imagine what it has to say in a hungry society threatened by war and social disruption ... Or read Psalm 23 as a political tract, a rejection of unjust secular authority. For Africans and Asians, the psalm offers a stark rebuttal to claims by unjust states that they care lovingly for their subjects – while they exalt themselves to the heavens ....

Imagine a society terrorized by a dictatorial regime dedicated to suppressing the church, and read Revelation – and understand the core message that whatever evils the world may produce, God will triumph ... Read Hebrews and think of its doctrines of priesthood and atonement as they might be understood in a country with a living tradition of animal sacrifice ... James is one of the most popular sermon texts in Africa. Imagine reading this letter in a world in which your life is so short and perilous that it truly seems like a passing mist. What implications does that transience hold for everyday behavior? ...

When reading almost any part of the Gospels, think how Jesus' actions might strike a community that cares deeply about caste and ritual purity, and where violating such laws might cost you your life – as in India. Read the accounts of Jesus interacting so warmly with the multiply rejected. In many societies worldwide, the story of the Samaritan woman at the well can still startle. He talked to her? And debated?

... Or take one verse, John 10.10, in which Jesus promises abundant life, and think of its bewildering implications in a desperately poor society obviously lacking in any prospect of abundance, or indeed, of any certainty of life. This one verse may be the most quoted text in African Christianity, the 'life verse' of an entire continent.

[Philip Jenkins, Professor of History and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University and author of *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. This article appeared in *The Christian Century*, July 11, 2006, pp.22–26. Further information at [religion-online.org/](http://religion-online.org/)]

### The influence of the Bible on a community

During World War Two, American troops invaded the Japanese island, Okinawa. They found it in a state of turmoil with social and moral collapse. Advancing across the island they entered a village named Shimbakuku and found a community that was orderly and peaceful. The surrounding fields were well cared for and the village was a model of order and hygiene in total contrast to the squalor they had seen elsewhere.

An elderly man told the commander that 30 years earlier a missionary had visited the village en route to mainland Japan. He didn't stay long – but as a result of his visit two men became Christians. He taught them some hymns and prayers and left them with a copy of the Bible in Japanese. He urged them to study this book as it would help them and their community.

With no further teaching or Christian influence for three decades, these two men saw their village transformed. When the troops arrived they found no drunkenness, divorce, brothels or even a jail! Shimbakuku was an ordered community surrounded by chaos, crime and fear in similar villages.

A war correspondent, Clarence Hall, reported the story in his field reports. He quoted his driver who witnessed the village first hand: 'So this is what comes out of only a Bible and two old men who want to live like Jesus! Maybe we're using the wrong kind of weapons to change the world.'

### The paradox of service and freedom

'Since God's will is the deepest truth of our being as human creatures, we are free only when doing God's will becomes the spontaneous desire of our hearts. This is the profound paradox, expressed in the *Book of Common Prayer*, that 'to serve God is perfect freedom'.

[Vinoth Ramachandra, Sri Lankan Bible teacher and human rights advocate, in *Cover to Cover Every Day* (CWR, March–April 2010)]

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