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INTRODUCTION



We are truly excited to be able to make this study guide available to you. It is a collaboration between biblical scholars, especially Prof. James Crossley of University of Sheffield Biblical Studies Department and Bible Society. By working in partnership we can help scholarly research stimulate ordinary Christians, to enrich our minds and hearts. These sessions are prepared with church home groups and similar contexts particularly in mind.

What are these studies for?

Through these studies we will be refreshing our understanding of who Jesus was in his own context – focusing on the Jewishness of Jesus.

We will note, for instance, that when Jesus was engaging in very vigorous debates with the Pharisees about ‘the Law’, he was not necessarily being rude or aggressive, but was debating within the normal ‘conventions’ – rather like Prime Minister’s Question Time in the House of Commons. In turn this might prompt us to think about the validity of frank debate about important matters of faith and Christian behaviour.

We will also explore how Jesus was perceived and how he saw himself, both vital issues for us as Christians.

Why these studies really matter

As we see more clearly the Jewishness of Jesus and understand his words and actions more fully, we can enrich our relationship with Jesus today.

- It will help to ensure that the picture of Jesus we all inevitably develop, and through which we relate spiritually to him, is as accurate as possible.
- It will lead to a better understanding of both the context and the meaning of the biblical text at some critical places.
- We will be less likely to project unhelpful stereotypes from the Gospels into our contemporary consciousness – which, for example, has sometimes led to anti-Semitism.

Content of the studies

In six sessions we will explore together six different aspects of the Jewishness of Jesus.

1. Jesus in his world – and some of the groups which surrounded him.
2. Jesus and the Law – wealth.
3. Jesus and the Law – divorce.
4. Jesus through others' eyes – 'Who do people say that I am?' – some categories that people used as they tried to understand who Jesus was.
5. Jesus through his own eyes – 'Who do you say that I am?' – looking at a range of understandings of the term 'Messiah' which would have coloured the views of both the disciples and Jesus himself.
6. Jesus and prayer, especially the Lord's Prayer.

We will link these in with our own experience of contemporary life.

How the sessions work

While particularly important for group leaders, we suggest that everyone involved in this biblical journey of exploration reads the following introductory notes.

For group leaders

Leading

Your focus should always be to lead your group in the most helpful and appropriate way.

- If it is a new group, you will probably want to encourage people to introduce themselves before the first session gets fully underway.
- For any group, you may want to have some spare Bibles ready in case people forget their own.
- Encourage everyone to become involved in the conversation, and gently control those who may tend to dominate it.
- It is often helpful to include prayer early on in a session, but it is up to you whether you choose to do that right at the start, or after the 'opening experience', or elsewhere.
- Please feel free to adapt and use the material in ways that best help your group.

Continuity

Some groups have one leader throughout, but others prefer to rotate the leading. In the latter case, please take extra care about continuity.

- Some people may have missed the previous session, so it can be helpful to start with a brief recap.
- Some people may have carried out an activity or research between sessions. Providing opportunities for them to feed back may be good for the whole group – but be careful about time.
- At the end of the session, alert people to the next topic and encourage them to familiarise themselves with the content.

Suggested timings

Assuming you have an hour for your session, suggested timings for each part of the process are indicated in brackets below. Please adjust proportionally if you are planning a shorter or longer session.



Opening experience (15 minutes)

This allows us to engage with some aspect of the topic which will be explored later through the key Bible passage(s). It is an integral part of the whole learning experience – as well as acting as an ice-breaker, initiating conversations and helping to develop relationships and deeper understanding between group members.

Each ‘opening experience’ has been carefully crafted to affirm the importance of people’s own experiences and reflections on the life issues to which the biblical material relates. This will help to increase a sense of the significance of the topic which is to be explored by the whole group.

The ‘opening experience’ will also enable those with less biblical literacy to make a vital contribution to the group’s learning. If handled well, such a group activity will create a real alertness and eagerness for the biblical encounter to come.



Bible encounter (30 minutes)

In our ‘Bible encounter’ we will look at one or more passages from the Gospels. Sometimes additional notes or resources for further study will also be included. It is important that the Bible passages take centre stage. Often there is one particular passage to focus on – the ‘key passage’ – and there are many ways to help the group take in its significance.



- One person can read the whole passage.
- The passage can be broken up into sections and different voices (even different translations) used for the reading.
- Sometimes it is helpful to leave a pause of 30 seconds between the sections, so that people can recall or ‘live in’ that section before moving on.
- Group members can be asked to follow the passage in their own Bibles and, if the translation is different, to comment on the differences they notice.
- People can be asked to close their eyes and simply listen to the passage. Bible Society’s recording **YGTT (You’ve Got the Time)**, read by professionals, can add another dimension.
- The group can read the passage silently before discussions begin.

YGTT is available to download free from biblesociety.org.uk/ygtt

Using a variety of approaches over the six sessions can help add interest and keep things fresh. The important thing is to ensure that group members pay careful attention to the key passage, so that it is the focus of the discussions that follow.

Group discussion questions (15 minutes)



This section provides questions for the group to help them engage together with the 'Bible encounter'. There is no need to deal with all the questions, nor all at the same depth.

- As leader you may have sensed through the 'Bible encounter' section which questions are most significant for your group.
- Alternatively, you could ask the group which questions they want to work with.
- Sometimes you could split the group and ask each smaller group to work on different questions.

Suggestions for reflection



These are intended to help anyone wishing to continue to engage with the issues raised on their own outside the group. For those groups who want to meet more frequently, they could form the basis of a more open or less structured conversation. There is usually one idea for some kind of action and another for prayer.

At the end of some sessions, additional study resources are also suggested.

Preparation

- We hope that you will familiarise yourself with the content of each session well beforehand, so that you have time to check details if you need to do so.
- Text panels offering more detailed information on aspects of each topic are spread throughout the session pages. You may find it useful to engage with this extra material before the group meets. Often it may not be necessary to share or discuss these details with the group, but it offers an extra resource to draw on if necessary.
- Asking God to help and guide you, as well as praying for the members of your group, is also an excellent practice.

Protocol

From time to time relevant websites are offered as a resource. This raises a question of group 'etiquette'. It might be stimulating and helpful if someone with a smartphone or laptop can access these websites while the group is operating. However, in some groups this might be seen as impolite or as a distraction, so it would be advisable to clarify this protocol with your group right at the start.

Pastoral support

Occasionally the issue covered might cause pastoral needs to surface. Sessions 2 and 3 on wealth and divorce respectively are obvious possibilities in this regard. There is no need to be over-anxious about the challenges that may arise. Jesus frequently seems to have brought disturbance, so we can hardly expect it to be otherwise today! Nevertheless, understanding, kindness and support are vital components of a good experience in a group. So please support people for whom these are sensitive matters, and if necessary help them to link with others in the church who can provide more specialised help.

For members

Every member of the group has an important contribution to make.

- Be willing to share your own experiences on a number of issues, to the extent that you feel comfortable doing so.
- Carefully read (or listen to) the biblical passages and other material. Each of us is likely to discern different things from the passages and the topic as a whole, and sharing these discoveries will benefit everyone.
- Within the group, always try to 'respond well'. This includes being prompt in attending meetings, being sensitive to other members and encouraging them by listening attentively and sympathetically. Such responses can greatly enhance everyone's experience and learning.
- Allow the group leader(s) to guide and shape the study time. It is also good to pray for your leader(s) as they prepare for each session and lead the group.

- Bringing a Bible, and occasionally other things as requested, indicates real involvement. Through this demonstration of commitment, other members will gain an enhanced sense of the value of the time spent together.