

1. throughout the day

you know what it's like

you think you are alone or you are in your own little world when you suddenly, or maybe gradually, become aware of someone else nearby. You catch a movement, hear a sound or just sense a presence. Sometimes it is like that with God. We think we are alone and then something happens and we think about God.

It was like that for Jacob. He was on a journey when God got his attention. He said: "Surely the Lord is in this place and ***I was not aware of it!***" (Gen 28:16). We can easily miss God through the day. We need to develop sensitivity to his presence.

- Can you think of one moment recently during the day when you became aware of God. What happened? What made you think about God?
- Are there other things that trigger your awareness of God?

"In Him we live and move and have our being"
Acts 17:28

"O God, you know me inside and out, through and through. Everything I do, every thought that flits through my mind, every step I take, every plan I make, every word I speak you know even before these things happen."
Psalms 139:1-4

a bit of a Problem

"I seem to suffer from spiritual amnesia. I believe God is with me but I keep forgetting him. I quite often read the bible in the morning and sometimes pray at night, but in between he is not even on the radar. If I do think about him through the day it is usually "after the fact" – after I have lost the plot or missed opportunity to connect with him or to serve him or just to enjoy him. I get the distinct feeling I'm either running on ahead of God or lagging behind"

What questions could we ask this person?

What suggestions could we make?

what can we expect?

One of the pictures the bible uses to help us grasp God's day-to-day relationship with us is the shepherd/sheep analogy. (ancient middle-eastern shepherd, that is - completely different to rural NZ!)

From the following passages build a picture of how God wants us to experience him on a day-to-day basis. (passages oversee if needed)

Psalms 23

John 10:2 – 5, 27-30

Isaiah 41:10

A W Tozer, commenting about people who seemed to have a close relationship with God:
"They had one vital quality in common, spiritual receptivity.Without attempting anything like a profound analysis I shall say simply that they had spiritual awareness and that they went on to cultivate it until it became the biggest thing in their lives. They differed from the average person in that when they felt inward longing they did something about it. They acquired the lifelong habit of spiritual response.....God is always trying to get our attention, to reveal himself to us, to communicate with us. We have within us the ability to know him if we will but respond to his overtures. We will know him in increasing degree as our receptivity becomes more perfect by faith and love and practice. (*Pursuit of God – Tozer*)"

Look at the following examples of people relating to God on a day-to-day basis. What do you notice?

Daniel 6:10	Nehemiah 2:1- 5	Psalms 16:7- 8; 119:97

putting it together

- Identify opportunities throughout the day to connect with God
- Come up with creative practical ways to connect to and respond to God
- Each choose one to try this week.
- Remember to share how you get on next week

Psalm 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,

³ he restores my soul.

He guides me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk
through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and love will follow me

all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD

forever.

John 10:2 – 5

The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. ³ The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."

John 10:27 – 30

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."

Isaiah 40:11

He tends his flock like a shepherd

He gathers the lambs in his arms

And carries them close to his heart;

He gently leads those that have young.

experiencing God

2. one to one, in private

you know what it's like

you meet at a café, you sit down, there's a bit of an awkward silence, you exchange a few pleasantries, things slowly warm up, then you are into it, you're really talking and it's good. If you haven't seen one another for a while there's the added 'catch-up' factor,

If you are meeting regularly the dynamics change. Things can become a little more routine but no two times are ever really the same.

So what about your times alone with God?

- **Can you think a time recently when you were alone with God and you really connected? What happened?**
- **Are there other times when things are more routine? How do you feel about this?**

a bit of a Problem

"I'm an action person. I find it difficult when things get quiet. I always turn on the radio when I get in the car. If there is no one at it is automatically TV, Internet, phone or txting. I do enjoy connecting with God with other people, like in a small group. I love the interaction, but this solitude thing is all a bit foreign. To sit alone with a God who I can't see is hard work and sometimes quite disappointing – boring even. Somehow I never seem to find time to do it. Life is too busy"

What questions could we ask this person?

What suggestions could we make?

what can we learn from Jesus?

Jesus lived his life out to a one-person audience – his Father. He ordered his life not to please himself, or others, but "Him who sent me" (John 5:30). "For I always do what pleases him (John 8:29). But he was hugely popular and constantly travelling. How did he get the time alone to stay in step with his Father?

Check out the following verses, reading the context. What do you notice about how Jesus went about getting time with his Father? What resulted? (Passages on back of sheet)

Mark 1:32 – 39

Luke 5:15,16

Luke 6:12 – 15

Luke 9:18 – 27

Luke 11:1-13

"Through a spiritual discipline we prevent the world from filling our lives to such an extent that there is no place left to listen. A spiritual discipline sets us free to pray or, to say it better, allows the Spirit of God to pray in us."

"Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. Solitude begins with a time and a place for God, and him alone. If we really believe not only that God exists

The Psalmist David loved getting time alone with God. Examine the passages below and try to figure out some of the different things he included in his time with God.

Psalm 5:1- 3	Psalm 108:1 - 2	Psalm 142: 1 - 2	119:147 - 148	Psalm 143:7-10

putting it together

- What are some different approaches to time alone with God you have heard of or tried?
- Make a list of various ingredients that could be included. (Temperament may play a part here)
- Each pick up on one new idea to try this week
- Remember to share how you get on next week

Mark 1:32 – 39

That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. ³³ The whole town gathered at the door, ³⁴ and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ Simon and his companions went to look for him, ³⁷ and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

³⁸ Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else--to the nearby villages--so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." ³⁹ So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

Luke 5:15 - 16

Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. ¹⁶ But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

Luke 6:12 - 15

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. ¹³ When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: ¹⁴ Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, ¹⁵ Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, ¹⁶ Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

Luke 11:1 – 13

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." ² He said to them, "When you pray, say:

"Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.

And lead us not into temptation.

⁵ Then he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread,' ⁶ because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.'

⁷ "Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' ⁸ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

⁹ "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

¹¹ "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Luke 9:18 – 27

Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?" ¹⁹ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life." ²⁰ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "The Christ of God." ²¹ Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. ²² And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." ²³ Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. ²⁵ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? ²⁶ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. ²⁷ I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God."

Psalm 5:1-2

Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray. In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.

Psalm 108:1 – 2

My heart is steadfast, O God; I will sing and make music with all my soul. Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn

Psalm 119:147 – 148

I rise before dawn and cry for help; I have put my hope in your word. My eyes stay open through the watches of the night that I may meditate on your promises.

Psalm 142:1 – 2

I cry aloud to the LORD; I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy. I pour out my complaint before him; before him I tell my trouble.

Psalm 143:7 – 10

Answer me quickly, O LORD; my spirit fails. Do not hide your face from me or I will be like those who go down to the pit. Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul. Rescue me from my enemies, O LORD, for I hide myself in you. Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground

Leaders notes:

One of the goals here is to help people come up with ways of getting time alone with God that really work for them. This will depend to some degree on their temperament and life-patterns. However, for everyone this will require focus and discipline. (See Henri Nouwen's article below).

Most people need help to think through the when, where and how of meeting with God, and most also need some help with the what – what to do when meeting with God.

Sometimes patterns and plans can be helpful to get people started:

Here are some prayer patterns

Acts

Adoration
Confession
Thanksgiving
Supplication

Joy

Jesus
Others
You

Maybe a helpful exercise will be **constructing an approach** to meeting with God that you would like to try. Here is a sample:

A Sample Plan for Time with God

- Be still for a moment before God (Psalm 46:10).
- Ask God to search my heart and guide my time (Psalm 119:18, 139:23-24).
- Read a section of Scripture slowly, several times, at least once aloud.
- Meditate on the passage, and choose a verse to memorize.
- Write down what God has shown me.
- Take time to praise God for who He is.
- Tell God about any sins I'm struggling with, and ask for forgiveness and for His power to abandon them. Ask what I should do.
- Pray for the needs on my list.
- Commit myself and my day to the Lord.

Some helpful suggestions for time alone with God

1. Pray for God to speak
2. Mark your Bible as you read. .
3. Choose a favourite verse to be the basis of your prayer, meditation, and application.
4. Seek a regular place.
5. Find a bodily position that will keep you alert.
6. Prepare your heart in prayer and worship.
7. Balance Bible reading and prayer.
8. Learn to concentrate.
9. Use a prayer list.
10. Include many types of prayer, especially plenty of praise
11. Maintain variety
12. Develop an expectant attitude.

Can you think of others?

Excerpts From Making All Things New (Henri Nouwen)

1. Hard Work

The spiritual life is a gift. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit, who lifts us up into the kingdom of God's love. But to say that being lifted up into the kingdom of love is a divine gift does not mean that we wait passively until the gift is offered to us.

Jesus tells us to set our hearts on the kingdom. Setting our hearts on something involves not only serious aspiration but also strong determination. A spiritual life requires human effort. The forces that keep pulling us back into a worry-filled life are far from easy to overcome.

"How hard it is," Jesus exclaims, ".....to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mark 10:23). And to convince us of the need for hard work, he says, "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).

2. The Small, Gentle Voice

Here we touch the question of discipline in the spiritual life. A spiritual life without discipline is impossible. Discipline is the other side of discipleship. The practice of a spiritual discipline makes us more sensitive to the small, gentle voice of God.

The prophet Elijah did not encounter God in the mighty wind or in the earthquake or in the fire, but in the small voice (see 1 Kings 19.9-13). Through the practice of a spiritual discipline we become attentive to that small voice and willing to respond when we hear it.

3. From an Absurd to an Obedient Life

From all that I said about our worried, overfilled lives, it is clear that we are usually surrounded by so much outer noise that it is hard to truly hear our God when he is speaking to us. We have often become deaf, unable to know when God calls us and unable to understand in which direction he calls us.

Thus our lives have become absurd. In the word absurd we find the Latin word *surdus*, which means "deaf." A spiritual life requires discipline because we need to learn to listen to God, who constantly speaks but whom we seldom hear.

When, however, we learn to listen, our lives become obedient lives. The word obedient comes from the Latin word *audire*, which means "listening." A spiritual discipline is necessary in order to move slowly from an absurd to an obedient life, from a life filled with noisy worries to a life in which there is some free inner space where we can listen to our God and follow his guidance.

Jesus' life was a life of obedience. He was always listening to the Father, always attentive to his voice, always alert for his directions. Jesus was "all ear." That is true prayer: being all ear to God. The core of all prayer is indeed listening, obediently standing in the presence of God.

4. The Concentrated Effort

A spiritual discipline, therefore, is the concentrated effort to create some inner and outer space in our lives, where this obedience can be practiced. Through a spiritual discipline we prevent the world from filling our lives to such an extent that there is no place left to listen. A spiritual discipline sets us free to pray or, to say it better, allows the Spirit of God to pray in us.

5. A Time and a Space

Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life. Solitude begins with a time and a place for God, and him alone. If we really believe not only that God exists but also that he is actively present in our lives healing, teaching, and guiding—we need to set aside a time and a space to give him our undivided attention. Jesus says, "Go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to the Father who is in that secret place" (Matt. 6:6, JB).

6. Inner Chaos

To bring some solitude into our lives is one of the most necessary but also most difficult disciplines. Even though we may have a deep desire for real solitude, we also experience a certain apprehension as we approach that solitary place and time. As soon as we are alone, without people to talk with, books to read, TV to watch, or phone calls to make, an inner chaos opens up in us.

This chaos can be so disturbing and so confusing that we can hardly wait to get busy again. Entering a private room and shutting the door, therefore, does not mean that we immediately shut out all our inner doubts, anxieties, fears, bad memories, unresolved conflicts, angry feelings, and impulsive desires. On the contrary, when we have removed our outer distractions, we often find that our inner distractions manifest themselves to us in full force. We often use these outer distractions to shield ourselves from the interior noises. It is

thus not surprising that we have a difficult time being alone. The confrontation with our inner conflicts can be too painful for us to endure.

This makes the discipline of solitude all the more important. Solitude is not a spontaneous response to an occupied and preoccupied life. There are too many reasons not to be alone. Therefore we must begin by carefully planning some solitude.

7. Write It in Black and White

Five or ten minutes a day may be all we can tolerate. Perhaps we are ready for an hour every day, an afternoon every week, a day every month, or a week every year. The amount of time will vary for each person according to temperament, age, job, lifestyle, and maturity.

But Then we will be able to say to our friends, neighbors, students, customers, clients, or patients, "I'm sorry, but I've already made an appointment at that time and it can't be changed."

8. Bombarded by Thousands of Thoughts

Once we have committed ourselves to spending time in solitude, we develop an attentiveness to God's voice in us. In the beginning, during the first days, weeks, or even months, we may have the feeling that we are simply wasting our time. Time in solitude may at first seem little more than a time in which we are bombarded by thousands of thoughts and feelings that emerge from hidden areas of our minds.

One of the early Christian writers describes the first stage of solitary prayer as the experience of a man who, after years of living with open doors, suddenly decides to shut them. The visitors who used to come and enter his home start pounding on his doors, wondering why they are not allowed to enter. Only when they realize that they are not welcome do they gradually stop coming.

This is the experience of anyone who decides to enter into solitude after a life without much spiritual discipline. At first, the many distractions keep presenting themselves. Later, as they receive less and less attention, they slowly withdraw.

9. Tempted to Run Away

It is clear that what matters is faithfulness to the discipline. In the beginning, solitude seems so contrary to our desires that we are constantly tempted to run away from it. One way of running away is daydreaming or simply falling asleep. But when we stick to our discipline, in the conviction that God is with us even when we do not yet hear him, we slowly discover that we do not want to miss our time alone with God. Although we do not experience much satisfaction in our solitude, we realize that a day without solitude is less "spiritual" than a day with it.

10. The First Sign of Prayer

Intuitively, we know that it is important to spend time in solitude. We even start looking forward to this strange period of uselessness. This desire for solitude is often the first sign of prayer, the first indication that the presence of God's Spirit no longer remains unnoticed.

As we empty ourselves of our many worries, we come to know not only with our mind but also with our heart that we were never really alone, that God's Spirit was with us all along. Thus we come to understand what Paul writes to the Romans, "Sufferings bring patience ...and patience brings perseverance, and perseverance brings hope, and this hope is not deceptive, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom. 5:4-6, JB).

11. The Way to Hope

In solitude, we come to know the Spirit who has already been given to us. The pains and struggles we encounter in our solitude thus become the way to hope, because our hope is not based on something that will happen after our sufferings are over, but on the real presence of God's healing Spirit in the midst of these sufferings.

The discipline of solitude allows us gradually to come in touch with this hopeful presence of God in our lives, and allows us also to taste even now the beginnings of the joy and peace which belong to the new heaven and the new earth.

The discipline of solitude, as I have described it here, is one of the most powerful disciplines in developing a prayerful life. It is a simple, though not easy, way to free us from the slavery of our occupations and preoccupations and to begin to hear the voice that makes all things new.

3. in the Bible

you know what it's like

You are casually reading a book, a magazine, the paper even, when something really gets your attention and you are away! You don't want to be interrupted. You have to keep reading. You have to find out more. Have you had that experience recently?

- **When does this happen for you? What sort of reading material?**
- **What is going on here? Why does this happen at sometimes and not others?**

Can you think of a time when you were reading the bible and you experienced something like this - you really started thinking deeply and connecting with God?

- **Share some of these experiences with one another**
- **What contributed to this sense of connecting with God?**

"The Bible is no mere book, but a living creature with a power that conquers all who oppose it"

Napoleon Bonaparte

"The Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart"

Heb 4:12

a bit of a Problem

The bible is almost 2000 years old and it's no ordinary book. In fact it is a whole lot of books – 66 in all, covering law, history, philosophy, poetry, prophecy and doctrine, written by 40 authors – kings, poets, prophets, prisoners and fishermen, etc, written over a period of 1600 years! It is not as accessible as a modern novel or the latest magazine.

"I just don't feel confident about reading the bible. I don't feel as though I can interpret it correctly. What do I do with the bits I am unsure of?"

What questions could we ask this person?

What suggestions could we make?

what is possible?

The Psalmist David only had the first few books of the Old Testament to read. A lot of this focussed on Laws and commandments, which many people find quite hard going. However, David got so excited reading these scriptures that he composed a song-prayer to God about it all. Turn to the other side of this sheet and check what he wrote.

As you go through the song:

- Circle the words and phrases that indicate his **attitude** to the bible
- Tick the words that reveal what he **did** with the bible
- Underline the **key prayers** he prayed as he read the bible
- Make a list of all the **benefits** he gained

(you may want to divide these tasks between you)

To say David experienced God in the bible is a bit of an understatement.

How do we account for this? What do you think of the quotes in the box on the right?

"The bible is not simply an object to be studied and understood. If it were, then we would just master it and teach it as experts. But rather it is a beam of light that finds its source in God, and as we follow it along to that source we discover reality in a dynamic way. Every reading becomes an opportunity to connect our lives to those in the Scriptures and beyond them to the God who has made himself known." **Anon**

"God didn't give us the bible because he knew the best we could hope for was a remote second-hand academic knowledge of himself. No, he gave us a book designed to help us have a living vital first-hand relationship with himself. If we read it impersonally with an information-gathering frame of mind we will almost certainly misread it. To read the bible to 'get something' out of it is to have the wrong mentality. If, however, we read it to 'meet someone' and that someone is God, it will come to life for us." **Approach to the Bible**

putting it together

- How many different ways can you think of, to connect with God using the bible?
- Share any ideas you have for bridging the time and culture gap
- Each pick up one new idea to try this week
- Remember to share how you get on next week

Here are some good questions to ask as you read the bible:

- What happened in my spirit as I read this passage?
- What feelings surfaced (eg comfort, fear, anger, regret, excitement, longing)
- What personal issues and circumstances come to mind
- What is God asking me to do/not do?

Psalm 119

¹⁴ I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.

¹⁵ I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.

¹⁶ I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.

¹⁷ Do good to your servant, and I will live; I will obey your word.

¹⁸ Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.

¹⁹ I am a stranger on earth; do not hide your commands from me.

²⁰ My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times.

²¹ You rebuke the arrogant, who are cursed and who stray from your commands.

²² Remove from me scorn and contempt, for I keep your statutes.

²³ Though rulers sit together and slander me, your servant will meditate on your decrees.

²⁴ Your statutes are my delight; they are my counsellors.

²⁵ I am laid low in the dust; preserve my life according to your word.

²⁶ I recounted my ways and you answered me; teach me your decrees.

²⁷ Let me understand the teaching of your precepts; then I will meditate on your wonders.

²⁸ My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.

²⁹ Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me through your law.

³⁰ I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws.

³¹ I hold fast to your statutes, O LORD; do not let me be put to shame.

³² I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.

³³ Teach me, O LORD, to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end.

³⁴ Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart.

³⁵ Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight.

³⁶ Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain.

³⁷ Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.

³⁸ Fulfil your promise to your servant, so that you may be feared.

³⁹ Take away the disgrace I dread, for your laws are good.

⁴⁰ How I long for your precepts! Preserve my life in your righteousness.

.....

⁹⁷ Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.

⁹⁸ Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me.

⁹⁹ I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes.

¹⁰⁰ I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts.

¹⁰¹ I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word.

¹⁰² I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me.

¹⁰³ How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

¹⁰⁴ I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path.

¹⁰⁵ Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

¹⁰⁶ I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws.

¹⁰⁷ I have suffered much; preserve my life, O LORD, according to your word.

¹⁰⁸ Accept, O LORD, the willing praise of my mouth, and teach me your laws.

¹⁰⁹ Though I constantly take my life in my hands, I will not forget your law.

¹¹⁰ The wicked have set a snare for me, but I have not strayed from your precepts.

¹¹¹ Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.

¹¹² My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end.

.....

¹²⁹ Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them.

¹³⁰ The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.

¹³¹ I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands.

¹³² Turn to me and have mercy on me, as you always do to those who love your name.

¹³³ Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me.

¹³⁴ Redeem me from the oppression of men, that I may obey your precepts.

¹³⁵ Make your face shine upon your servant and teach me your decrees.

¹³⁶ Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed.

¹³⁷ Righteous are you, O LORD, and your laws are right.

¹³⁸ The statutes you have laid down are righteous; they are fully trustworthy.

¹³⁹ My zeal wears me out, for my enemies ignore your words.

¹⁴⁰ Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them.

¹⁴¹ Though I am lowly and despised, I do not forget your precepts.

¹⁴² Your righteousness is everlasting and your law is true.

¹⁴³ Trouble and distress have come upon me, but your commands are my delight.

¹⁴⁴ Your statutes are forever right; give me understanding that I may live.

Leaders notes:

One of the key outcomes is to help group members to gain confidence to come to the bible for themselves and hear God, rather than being forever reliant on devotional notes written by others.

A helpful way to gain this confidence is by reading the bible with others. You could suggest people pair up and do this sometime during the week.

You may also want to do a bit of on the spot bible reading as a group using some of the ideas below to help people get the idea.

There are a variety of resources below from which you may choose something to photocopy if you think it will be helpful for your group.

Key Passages on the Bible:

What does the bible say about itself?

2 Tim 3:16, 17 2 Peter 1:20,21 Acts 20:32 John 17:17 Hebrews 4:12

The Holy Spirit and the Bible

1 Corinthians 2:12 –14 John 16:13, 14 2 Corinthians 3:18

Key attitudes as we approach the bible

Daniel 10:12 Ezra 7:10 Jeremiah 15:16 James 1:22-25 Psalm 46:10

Some Key Resources

Books to purchase:

NIV Study Bible – notes

The IVP Bible Background Commentary – Kenner

How To Read the Bible for All It's Worth – Gordan and McFee

Papers (on LifeNet Website)

Approach to the Bible 1 & 2 (Especially helpful for getting your mind around how to think about the bible and bridging the time and culture gap and encountering God in the bible)

Some questions to ask:

Read a passage from the bible and talk to God about these kinds of questions:

- What does this say about **God's** character, purposes and relationship with people?
- What does this say about my **inner life** – my character, heart, attitudes, my identity and purpose?
- What does this say about my **relationships with other people**, my friends, family, 'neighbours'?
- What does this say about my **outer world** – my work, my studies, health, money, possessions? What does it say about the world I live in – the govt, environment, justice, arts...?

Where you sense some connection, talk to God more about your specific situation and re-read the important sections, perhaps even taking notes of any new insights or perspective. These might come from:

- Warnings...on things to avoid
- Promises...to claim
- Examples...to reflect on
- Commands...to follow
- Good thoughts...to stick in your memory

Here are some ways people have approached the Bible

- Blitz reading -try taking a leisurely hour each week to read great chunks of the Bible in one go
- Daily reading -15-20 minutes a day -four chapters will see you read the Bible in a year
- Put yourself into the story -think what it would be like to be there, to hear the words spoken, to experience what happened
- Learning by heart -memorize some key portions of scripture -allow the Bible to impact your thinking/responding throughout the day
- Read from a variety of versions/translations -this will bring new insights, variety and fresh impact
- Put the passage in your own words
- Keep a journal of your thoughts/reflections
- Take time -don't rush -enjoy quiet moments of reflection in God's Word Listen to music that has incorporated portions of the Bible
- Pray over a passage -turn each verse to a response to God
- Study intensively -if you're an analytical type -study the passage thoroughly -extract the meaning and implications of a small portion of the Bible
- Keep the balance between the "intellectual" (mind), the "devotional" (emotions) and the "practical" (will). Allow God to speak to your whole being. Allow God to speak to every area of your life
- Ask a variety of questions as you ponder a passage of the Bible -e.g. who is this talking about? , what's happening? , what kind of language is used? , what do I learn of God?, what does this say about who I am?, how did people respond?, how do I feel about what I read?, what does this say about my relationships?
- As you read what issues, experiences, memories, situations, people come to mind?
- Develop consistent habits that allows regular intake of God's word in your life
- Listen to God's word -find copies of the Bible on tape/CD
- Follow a topic or theme through the Bible
- Learn about the characters of the Bible -the Bible describes many people and how they dealt with the challenges of life. Look at their lives and responses to gain personal insights about God and my relationship with Him
- Choose one approach to the Bible that you could implement over the next week (2 minutes)

Praying the Scriptures - The Ancient Tradition of *Lectio Divina*

1. Reading: *lectio*

Gently read the Scriptures aloud to yourself slowly savouring and repeating the parts of the text that speak to the depths of your heart. Listen to the Word "with the ear of your heart", and be willing to linger on portions of the text that seem to speak to you in a special way.

Through repetition, gently allow the text to percolate into your memory .Be willing to set the printed text aside and to listen quietly to the Word which you have taken into your heart.

2. Meditation: *meditatio*

Lovingly and slowly repeat the text you have internalised. Allow this interior "mulling over" to help the text "yield its savour". Allow the text to interact with your memories, your hopes, your concerns. Don't be afraid of "distractions"; simply acknowledge them and let go of them, always returning to the portion of the Scriptures you have taken into your heart.

3. Prayer: *oratio*

Let the text summon you to place before the Lord all of yourself. Make the Word you have taken into yourself be a real word of consecration -a Word of blessing and a means of offering to the Lord your deepest hopes and concerns. Let the gentle repetition of the Word lead you into a dialogue with the God Who originally inspired the text, and Who has now used the Scriptures as a way of drawing you into his presence.

4. Contemplation: *contemplatio*

As you feel called to do so, simply rest silently in the presence of the Lord. Be willing to let go of the text which' has led you into God's presence. Enjoy the sweetness of silent communion with the God Who stands behind the Scriptures

4. through Suffering

you know what it's like

you come to a real low point, maybe you get sick, the budgie dies, or some other disaster strikes, then the phone starts ringing and the text messages fly. Maybe even cards and flowers arrive! You start connecting with people at a deeper level. Somehow suffering paves the way for deeper relationships.

This is even more marked when we fall out with someone. It is excruciating at first. But we work it through, the relationship deepens and the person becomes even more important to us.

- **Have you experienced this recently? What moments in your life can you pinpoint where suffering has resulted in deeper relating?**

This effect operates in our relationship with God. Suffering is a gateway to experiencing God. After all his suffering Job said, "My ears had *heard of you*, but now my eyes *have seen you*." He knew God in a new way.

- Can you identify experiences where suffering has deepened your appreciation of God, where head knowledge has been transformed into heart knowledge?

"...man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward"

Job 5:7

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God."

2 Cor 1:3,4

a bit of a Problem

"I hate pain! I hate conflict! If I'm honest I spend most of my time trying to arrange my life so that I am successful, comfortable and easy to get on with. Also, I am quite confused. I thought that if I followed Jesus he would make my life work. Didn't he say, "I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full". When I suffer I don't know whether to ask to be delivered from it, work hard at managing it, or just grin and bear it with no expectations at all"

What questions could we ask this person?

What suggestions could we make?

what should we expect?

Examine the two quotes on the right. Both talk about **trusting** God and suffering. How is the trusting they mention different?

Suffering will always be a bit of a mystery. Sometimes God delivers us. At other times he leaves us in it (too long we think!), but there are certain things we can be **absolutely sure** of whenever we suffer. What are they?

Lamentations 3:31-33 Rom 8:28 Heb 12:11 James 1: 2-4 1 Peter 1: 6-7

"The whole notion that some part of the pain of life is unavoidable is not an easy idea to confront. Especially for Christians. We tend to see our lives as a series of hurdles, which, **if we trust God** and jump high enough, we can get through without scraping our knees. If we miss a hurdle, though – or come through bloody and bruised – we must have done it wrong. We have failed in some way. O worse, God has failed us. It is a strange fallacy for a people whose faith includes a cross and whose Saviour agonized in a garden over the suffering he was about to face. But it is an illusion that is, nonetheless hard to shake." **Paula Rinehart**

"The thing is to **rely on God**. The time will come when you will regard all this misery as a small price to pay for having been brought into that dependence."
C. S. Lewis

connecting with God while suffering

When we suffer we discover our deepest longings, in fact suffering is often simply the pain of unmet longings. We long to be loved, to be secure, to be significant, and so on. It is on this level God wants us to experience him. He wants to reveal himself as the one who can meet our deepest needs. So, how do we cooperate with him in this?

Examine the following passages to learn how these two men worked through their suffering to a deeper experience of God. (See over page)

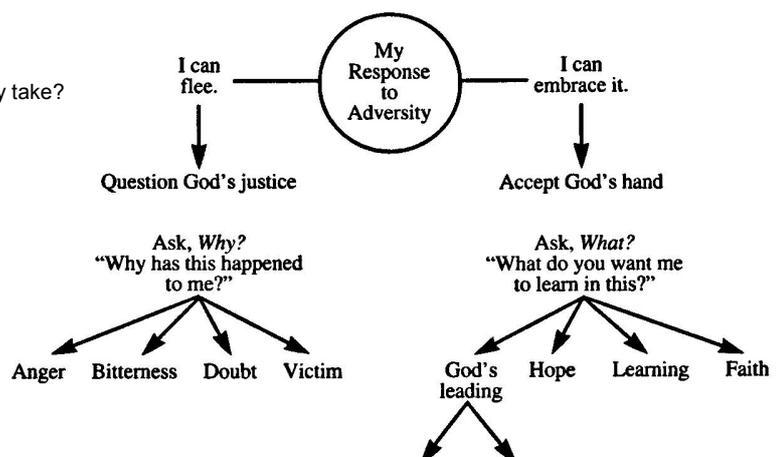
2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Psalms 73

- What do you notice about the process?
- What stages did they go through? What practical steps did they take?
- What do you think they were longing for?
- In what ways did they more deeply appreciate God in the end?

putting it together

- Identify an area of suffering in your own life at present
- Where are you in the process above? (also see the chart)
- What steps can you take to experience God in all of this?



- If you feel able, share this with the group and invite their help
- Pray for one another

Psalm 73

¹ Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

² But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.

³ For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

⁴ They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.

⁵ They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills.

⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence.

⁷ From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.

⁸ They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression.

⁹ Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth.

¹⁰ Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance.

¹¹ They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?"

¹² This is what the wicked are like-- always carefree, they increase in wealth.

¹³ Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.

¹⁴ All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning.

¹⁵ If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children.

¹⁶ When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me

¹⁷ till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

¹⁸ Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin.

¹⁹ How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors!

²⁰ As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord,

you will despise them as fantasies.

²¹ When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered,

²² I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.

²³ Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.

²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.

²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

²⁷ Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.

²⁸ But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

⁷ To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.