

# Water for the Journey

Small Group Studies

by Craig Mitchell

# Water for the Journey

Water is an essential part of our daily lives. We use it for drinking, bathing, washing, cooking, watering gardens and crops, and more. Water is also one of the biblical symbols for the Holy Spirit - cleansing us, filling us, refreshing us.

God's presence in our lives is like fresh water. These studies explore God's call to us to travel to new life and a hope-filled future. The water represents the gracious presence of God which guides, sustains and refreshes us. Our God who calls is always a God who equips us for the journey ahead.

We will be exploring what it means for us to be the people of God today - in our homes, in our towns, in our world. Through these studies you are invited to journey with the people of Israel in the Old Testament, and to journey with Jesus in John's Gospel. As we listen for God's call, we are invited to reflect on the journey of our own lives, and to discover God's purpose for our lives in a new way. As we look at what it means to journey with God, we will also ask what it means for us to help others discover Jesus Christ as the source of life-giving water.

You are invited to look at where you have come from as a church and to ask questions about where you are heading together. May this be a great time of listening to God's Spirit, looking at the needs in our towns, and encouraging each other's gifts for ministry.

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Each study aims to explore three things:

<b>My Story</b>	<b>my life and my faith</b>
<b>God's Story</b>	<b>the Bible and the church's teachings</b>
<b>Our Story</b>	<b>our church and our world</b>

These Bible Studies were originally written for use in Lent in Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary. The intention was that study groups would meet during the week, and then hear the Bible passages read on the following Sunday in worship. In this way the studies will help people prepare for worship. This same process may be followed at other times.

<b>Week 1</b>	<b>Called to Follow</b>	
	Genesis 12:1-4a	The Call of Abram and Sarai
	John 3:1-17	Jesus and Nicodemus
<b>Week 2</b>	<b>Called to Trust</b>	
	Exodus 17:1-7	Israelites at Rephidim
	John 4:5-42	Jesus and the Woman at the Well
<b>Week 3</b>	<b>Called to Give</b>	
	1 Samuel 16:1-13	Samuel anoints David
	John 9:1-41	Jesus and the Blind Man
<b>Week 4</b>	<b>Called to New Life</b>	
	Ezekiel 37:1-14	Valley of Dry Bones
	John 11:1-45	Jesus and Lazarus
<b>Week 5</b>	<b>Called to Serve</b>	
	Isaiah 50:4-9a	Servant Song
	Philippians 2:5-11	Christ's Humility

birth comes from God alone. The message to Nicodemus and to us is that when we are gripped by God's grace and nudged towards new life, we may respond by believing in Jesus Christ. Through him a new relationship with our Creator is possible. To discover and claim this is the start of a remarkable journey to wholeness of life.

### Discuss

- *What does Jesus describe as the benefits of this new birth?*
- *In what ways are our spiritual birth and our human birth similar? In what ways are they different?*
- *What have been the signs of new life in Christ in your own life?*

### Our Story

The Bible passages are about the invitation to go on a journey - to a new home, to a new life. God calls us to move on when the old place or the old life is no longer what is best for us, when we need to change for our own sake and for the sake of others. This is not change for the sake of change. Instead, it means a willingness to say 'yes' to God's call to grow.

### Discuss

- *Who were some of the Pioneers in your church and your town? What risks did they take to get things started?*
- *What are some of your hopes for the future of your town? As a group, write these on a piece of paper. These may be shared with the congregation.*
- *What are some of your hopes for the future of your church? Write these down on a piece of paper as well.*
- *What are some things that prevent us from saying 'yes' to God's call?*

### Read this prayer together.

God of new beginnings and new horizons,  
our ancestors who made a home here  
were people of great faith and courage.  
Sometimes we become settled and satisfied where we are.  
Help us to hear your call to journey,  
to discover what is best for our lives and for your world.  
Help us also to hear your call in the hopes of others.  
Together may we journey into the future that you prepare for us.  
In the name of Christ. Amen.



Our first study looks at what it is like to begin a new journey in response to God's call.

### My Story

Here is a simple activity to see how much you know about other people in the group. Write your answers to the following five questions, BUT for one answer, don't tell the truth. Then read out your answers and see whether the group can guess which answer is false.

1. My middle name is .....
2. When I was young I had a secret ambition to be a .....
3. The best holiday that I ever had was in .....
4. My favourite music is .....
5. If I had \$1000 I would buy a .....

### A New Journey

In the early 1960's my mother and father-in-law left their family farm in Peak, South Australia to find a new home. With two brothers sharing the farm, and a nephew about to finish school, they decided that they needed a place of their own. Seeing an advertisement for land in Tenterfield, they set off on the long drive to see if this might be a suitable place. On the way, they stopped over in West Wyalong, as many people do even today. Parking outside the estate agent, they saw a property listed, and were shown over it that very day. Although they continued the journey to Tenterfield, it turned out that "Waratah" in West Wyalong became their home.

Shifting a family and a farming business with four children in those days wasn't easy, saying farewell to family and friends, the truck loaded to overflowing with personal belongings and farming implements. As it turned

out, Dad's brother and family made the move as well and bought the adjoining farm. West Wyalong has been a wonderful home for the family, with my brothers-in-law now working the two farms. Two generations later, my brother and sister-in-law's eldest son is in his last year at school and making choices about his future. The journey continues...

## Discuss

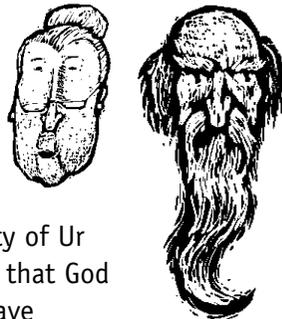
- *Talk about when your family or ancestors moved to this area. When did they arrive? Where did they come from? Why did they decide to move? What was it like for them to make the journey?*
- *When have you had to move or take a big step in life? Where were you at the time? What did the big step involve? How did you feel about it? Were you aware of God's presence and guidance at the time?*

## God's Story

### Read Genesis 12:1-9

#### The Call of Abram and Sarai

Abraham and Sarah were seen as the real ancestors of the nation of Israel. They were the ones who received God's call and promise to move from the city of Ur to the land of Canaan. It was to Abraham and Sarah that God promised the homeland which the people of Israel have struggled to occupy ever since. Most of Israel's history is about land - about having a home, losing your home, and finding a new home. Adam and Eve are expelled from their home in Garden of Eden. Noah and his family have to leave their home by boat. The ancient world was based on agricultural communities, so owning land and working the land was vital for many people's existence. However, the promise to Abraham and Sarah is not just a new home, but a hopeful future for their family. They will have many descendants and their family will know God's blessing and goodness.



Walter Brueggemann says that the Bible is full of stories of people being 'out of place' and searching for a home. The place they are seeking is not just a new home town, but a place where they can live with God - to create the kind of caring and prosperous community which God intends for all people. Yet much of Israel's history is a history of being travellers or being

in exile, rather than living peacefully in the Promised Land. Life with God is a journey that is always moving us on towards God's promised future.

Abram and Sarai decide to move to a new place not for their own sakes, but for the sakes of their children and the generations to come after them. Abram was seventy-five years old when he received this call from God, and packed up his goods in obedience to the call. Abraham and Sarah were in their nineties when God promised them a child! In Genesis chapters 15 and 17 God establishes a covenant with Abraham and Sarah. Their change of name is a reminder of this covenant. God is not simply handing out gifts of land and children. God is making a covenant which will last for all time. God's covenant love calls us to a new place of blessing and a hopeful future.

## Discuss

- *What was promised by God to Abram and Sarai?*
- *What was required by God of Abram and Sarai?*
- *How would you have felt in their situation?*
- *What would your neighbours say if this happened to you today?*
- *We worship a God who calls seventy year-olds to move house and ninety year-olds have children. How comfortable are you with this?*
- *Why were Abram and Sarai willing to believe and follow God's call?*

### Read John 3:1-17

#### Jesus and Nicodemus

In this well-known story we hear another invitation to a journey. This time it is the invitation from Jesus to Nicodemus to take a journey to new life. What is this birth like? Maybe Nicodemus' misunderstanding gives us some insight. Our birth is perhaps the most dramatic and exciting journey we undertake, yet we don't remember the details. We do not cause our birth. Instead we are carried along because it is time for us to come into the world. There really is no turning back. And while we are thrust from gentle darkness to the harsh light of day, we are also passed into our mother's arms to be cuddled and nurtured.



Perhaps our spiritual birth is like coming out from the womb again. Jesus' words make it clear that salvation is totally a gift from God. The Spirit blows where it chooses. While we have a part to play in human birth, our spiritual

## Wellsprings

### Chorus:

*Like the woman of old  
Each day - we go to the  
Wellsprings of life to find Jesus there*

1. Some days the well seems dry  
We can't reach the water - it's too hard  
Some days our legs won't take us  
Our hearts are aching - crying

### Chorus

2. Some days our minds are reeling  
There's too much happening we need to stop  
Some days our souls are parched  
We need the water - so thirsty

### Chorus

3. Some days there's no escape  
Life's routine and madness  
Some days we don't want to go  
We can't see the rhyme or reason

### Chorus

4. Some days we're resurrected  
We feel new life inside us  
Some days our faith moves mountains  
We feel life's glory - earth and heaven

### Chorus

Words and music: © Don Stewart 1995. Used with permission

## Read this prayer together.

Lord, when we want to look back,  
help us to give thanks for the past  
and to look ahead with new hope.  
You promise to walk with us  
when we feel overwhelmed by changes taking place.  
You love and provide for us even when we fail to trust you.  
Fill us with courage, patience and peace. In the name of Christ. Amen.

## Study 2 Called to Trust

Our second study looks at the times when we find the journey hard going and want to turn back.

### My Story

Our eldest children are twin girls, Grace and Ellen, who weighed 5 lb. 11 oz. (2700 g) and 6 lb. 10 oz. (2980 g) at birth. My wife is not a large person, and I vividly remember her discomfort as the twins approached full term (as well as my relief that it wasn't me who was carrying them!). There were many times when she wished that the birth would all be over as soon as possible. Our nine months of waiting was a time of mystery, wonder and hope. At the same time, there were many moments of tiredness, discomfort and pain. And in the end we were rewarded with two wonderful daughters.

### Discuss

- Have you ever begun a new journey or a new task, and ended up having second thoughts about it? eg. a long trip, a new job, renovating a house.
- Talk about your experience. What struggles or difficulties did you face? Did you ever want to give up? What helped you to get through?

### God's Story

#### Exodus 17:1-7

#### The Israelites at Rephidim

A hot day. A heated argument. "Whose idea was it to come here?" "You're going to get us all killed!" "We were better off back where we started!" Our second episode in the Israelites' journey is not starting out well for Moses, their leader. Let's rewind to Episode One. Abraham and Sarah's journey took them first to



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Canaan and then on to Egypt, where their descendants ended up in slavery. It was a later generation which had to take up the call to follow the God of Abraham and Sarah to this Promised Land. The book of Exodus tells the saga of the journey of the people of Israel from captivity to a new home in Canaan.

No sooner have Moses and the Israelites begun their journey to freedom than the going gets really tough. First, the water in the desert is too bitter to drink (chapter 15), then there is nothing to eat (chapter 16), and now there is nothing at all to drink (chapter 17). The people quarrel and complain, blaming Moses and God for their plight. "We were better off back in slavery. We want to go back to the good old days."

Throughout the Old Testament is a recurring theme: God promises a hopeful future; the people rebel and refuse to trust in God's provision; the situation gets worse; God remains faithful and provides for the people. When the going gets too tough, God always provides what is needed - manna from heaven, fresh water from a rock. Unfortunately, the Israelites always come to their leaders with complaint and lack of trust rather than patience and faith. Moses is the meat in the sandwich. Yet God remains faithful to the covenant promise to bless the descendants of Abraham and Sarah.

### Discuss

- Imagine what it was like to leave Egypt and then get stuck in the desert. What feelings would you have had in their situation?
- Put yourself in Moses' shoes. How would you have reacted to the complaints of the people? What does Moses learn from this experience?
- Does God require trust or obedience in order for us to experience the benefits of covenant love?
- What does the story say to you about trusting in God and trusting in Christian leaders?

### John 4:5-42

#### Jesus and the Woman at the Well

What is most remarkable about this familiar story? We are not surprised that Jesus speaks to someone whom he should steer clear of - she's a foreigner and a woman. After all, Jesus associates with lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, disabled people and other



social misfits.

Are we surprised that Jesus uses an everyday conversation to speak of spiritual matters? Imagine yourself doing the same at the drink fountain in the local park. Jesus always looks to our deepest needs and speaks words of compassion and invitation.

Perhaps we are disappointed that Jesus takes note of the woman's marital situation without casting judgement. Instead, his words and presence invite her to a more hopeful future. The story presents Christ as one whose life-giving Spirit is available to all people. This is good news for those who feel far away from God because of their background, circumstances or lifestyle.

### Discuss

- What surprises you most about this story?
- Which people in your town might the Samaritan woman represent? What does Jesus Christ offer to them today?
- How would your church need to change in order to connect better with these people?
- When our lives are a struggle, God's grace comes to us like a stream of refreshing water. What has been your experience of this?

## Our Story

It has been said that in this century the world has seen the greatest change in all human history. Change affects our world and our church.

### Discuss

- Make a list of some of the changes you have seen in the world and in the church in your lifetime. Which changes have been for the best?
- What feelings do you have about these changes? Do you wish you could go back to the good old days?
- How do people in your congregation respond to change? How do they treat those in leadership when change is suggested?
- What do these Bible stories say to you about how God responds when we are faced with difficult times and hard choices?
- We can imagine that Moses encouraged the people to keep travelling to the Promised Land by reminding them of how great it was going to be. What gives you encouragement when you think about the future of your church and your town?

# Our Story

The Bible passages remind us that God chooses and uses those we least expect to accomplish surprising things, even in the face of opposition.

- Which people in your church are the “Davids” - the ones whose gifts tend to get overlooked or ignored?
- What particular gifts do you see in the young people in your church? What are some ways that the congregation could encourage young people to use their gifts and have a say in what happens?
- Which people in your town are the “blind ones” - the ones that we would never expect to have an encounter with Jesus? Where are the places that we would need to go to meet with them?
- Discuss this statement:

*“We have been preoccupied with whether our churches are growing; we should be preoccupied with whether our mission is dying. We have been preoccupied with whether we are yet alive; we should be preoccupied with whether we are yet in the world.”*

Kennon Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership*, Harper&Row, San Francisco, © 1990.

1. Like a candle burning wildly  
Raging soft against the night  
Spark that leaps to clear the shadows  
Sending warm disturbing light  
We are called to live the passion  
Hope stands strong against all pain  
For it's only in the burning  
That the candle shows its flame

2. Like a river running freely  
Rapids swirl beside our feet  
Swiftly flowing from the high land  
Comes to rest, still waters meet  
All our journeys rising, falling  
Making turns we least expect  
When the Spirit churns within us  
Know God's power through the test

3. Like an angel walking lightly  
On this fragile earth of clay  
Touching folk with raw compassion  
Laughing, playing on the way  
Freely living every moment  
In the mystery of grace  
Giving, dying, living, rising  
See the beauty of God's face

4. See the hope that burns in darkness  
Show compassion, strong and kind  
Bind the hurt and broken-hearted  
Be God's hands and voice and eyes  
Sing a new song every sunrise  
Climb to places out of reach  
Walk in freedom of God's Spirit  
As we die so we shall live

Words: Craig Mitchell

Music: Tim Beale

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## Study 3 Called to Give

Our third study looks at God's call to us to use our gifts to help us along the journey together.

### My Story

I remember attending a church family camp when I was living in Canberra. I was about 22 years old. I don't remember the theme of the camp. What I do remember, though, is leading one of the study sessions. With a great deal of nervousness I guided people who were much older than myself through a Bible study. This month I have been helping to plan another church family camp, and we've been looking for 'big name' speakers to invite to the camp. I am struck by the difference. The church and minister in Canberra placed a great deal of faith in a younger member of the congregation. They encouraged me to use and develop my gifts, small though these seemed at the time. I can look back over my time of growing up in the church and identify other times when a youth leader, a Sunday School teacher, a friend of the family, a minister, gave me some responsibility and a chance to discover what God could achieve through me. I believe that I am still part of the church today largely because of the trust and opportunity that were offered to me in those times.

### Discuss

- Tell a story about a time when someone encouraged you to use your gifts. What happened? How did you feel?
- Go around the group and focus on one person at a time. Others in the group say to this person, "One gift that I appreciate in you is..."
- How does it feel to receive encouragement from others?
- What causes us to avoid encouraging others more often?

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# God's Story

1 Samuel 16:1-13

## Samuel anoints David

This powerful story makes one wonder how much the fate of nations depends upon simple choices. About 200 years after the arrival of the tribes of Israel in the land of Canaan, Saul is chosen by the prophet Samuel to become Israel's first king. Samuel is the key figure in the selection of both Saul and David, bringing God's will to bear on the leadership of Israel. Saul has proven himself unfit to rule, and God sends Samuel to choose his successor. Samuel naturally looks to the eldest son of Jesse's family, yet finally ends up with the smallest son whom the father has left in the fields.



This story once again demonstrates God's way of choosing the unexpected - a pair of seventy year olds to travel to a new home, a murderer with a stutter to lead the Israelites from Egypt, a small shepherd boy to become the nation's greatest King, an insignificant Middle eastern nation to bring light to the world, a carpenter's son to be our Saviour. God sees the potential in each person. But God also has a way of doing something new by turning our ideas about power and greatness upside down. We are reminded that it is God's calling and God's power which turns a young shepherd into a mighty ruler.

## Discuss

- Read the story again quietly to yourself, and try to imagine the sights and sounds. Talk about what stands out to you about the story.
- How would Jesse and David's brothers have reacted to Samuel's choice? Look ahead to 19:2 to see how King Saul reacted.
- What does God's choice of David say to you about the way that God uses people?
- Who are the Samuel figures in your church today, the people who encourage the young ones and ones in the background to use their gifts for God?

John 9:1-41

## Jesus and the Blind Man

Light bursts into the darkness. John's Gospel paints vivid pictures of Jesus as the light coming into the world and into our lives. This story presents powerful images - Jesus spreading mud on the man's eyes; the man staggering from the pool with blinking eyes; the accusing disbelief of the Pharisees; the frightened parents; and the bold testimony of the man who was once blind. Jesus brings a dramatic change and a strong reaction from those whose lives he touches. As always he reaches out to those whom society rejects.



According to Barnabas Lindars, this story about the blind man is not just about healing. For John, it demonstrates the power of Christian conversion, and the washing in the pool is a reminder of Christian baptism. The blind man's ability to see is in stark contrast with the blindness of the Pharisees concerning Jesus' identity and power. The blind man is a threat because he shows that God is working outside the synagogue. The challenge for us today is to realise that God is working beyond the church to bring people to faith.

People in the early church who read this story would have been reminded of the opposition which they experienced, particularly the threat of being excluded from the Jewish synagogue. John reminds us that the experience of the true light of Christ is life-changing, but it is likely to invite disbelief and even hostility from other people.

## Discuss

- If you could take a photo of one part of this story to hang on your wall, which scene would you choose? Describe what you see in the picture. What impresses you most about this scene?
- What steps can you identify in the blind man's journey to faith in Christ?
- What does the story say to you about the way that Jesus touches people's lives today?
- Have you ever experienced hostility from others because of your faith?
- Who might the Pharisees represent in the church today? What do verses 39-41 say to us?

- What does the story say to you about who Christ is? What does it say about the way in which he offers new life to people?

## Our Story

We cannot make new life happen. Only God can breathe newness and banish the old ways. We can be open to God. We can create spaces where God can be encountered. We can even be like midwives, being present when new birth takes place. Yet it is God alone who can take the dry bones of our lives and our churches and make them live. And the more that our lives are made whole by God's grace, the more we want to share this new life with others. For our community to be renewed, we must first wait on God with the 'stuff' of our own lives, listening for Christ's call to "come out!".

### Discuss

- If Jesus were to look at you and say, "Come out of there!", what would he be asking you to leave behind? What would he offer in its place?
- If Jesus were to look at your church and say, "Come out of there!", what would he ask you to leave behind? What would he offer in its place?
- Do young people today hear God's call to new life in different ways or different places than older people? What is the evidence of this?
- What would we need to do in order to help the next generation hear Christ's call to new life?
- Discuss this statement:

*"New life comes to us on its way to someone else."*

William Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs*, Abingdon, Nashville, © 1993.

## Prayer

Lord, these bones are tired. Please leave us alone.

Lord, this tomb is peaceful. Please leave us alone.

Lord, we know you love us just as we are, so why not leave us as we are?

Why would we want a new spirit and a new heart?

Lord, do we need a new spirit and a new heart?

Can you take away our tiredness?

Can you really make dry bones live?

Can you really open a door to a better way?

Lord, we are listening. Speak to us. Call to us.

Help us hear you. Help us receive you. Help us follow you. Amen.



This study looks at God's invitation to us to be renewed in our lives and faith.

## My Story

As a teenager I was involved in a very active youth group which ran many different kinds of programs. However I dropped out of the group for several months due to other interests. During that time the church held a mission weekend which had a remarkable effect on the group. I returned to find the youth group quite changed. There was a hunger and thirst for spirituality that I had never seen before. People would get together informally in someone's home simply to sing songs and pray. The Bible Study had taken on a new dimension of genuinely seeking what God was saying. And there was a conviction about the gospel that led to many of the group becoming involved in Beach Missions and other outreach activities.

One night while camping with some of these friends, I sat on the beach and told God that I felt that I lacked something that my friends had. While there were no lightning bolts, for me it was a real 'God-moment' of saying yes to an invitation to new life. For some time I thought of that night as my conversion. Since then I have come to realise that it was one step in a lifelong journey of turning to God. There have been many other moments when I have felt God nudge me further into this experience of new life. Sometimes these steps have been gradual, other times God has given me a bit of a shove!

## Discuss

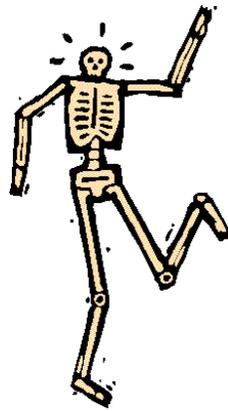
- Talk about some of the 'God-moments' in your life when you have sensed an invitation to new life from God. How did you respond?
- What has helped you to hear God's invitation over the years?

# God's Story

## Ezekiel 37:1-14

### Valley of Dry Bones

Few Bible passages are as vivid as this vision of Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet and priest living in Jerusalem at the beginning of the 6th century BC. He was taken into exile in Babylon along with many other Jewish leaders and their families following Nebuchadnezzar's defeat of the city. In the early part of the book, Ezekiel condemns Israel for idolatry and false religion and justifies God's judgement on them. Ezekiel believed that Israel had disobeyed God right from the beginning and deserved to be totally destroyed.



In the later chapters, God speaks words of comfort and hope through Ezekiel to the exiled people. Read Ezekiel 36:16-30 to discover the words from God which precede this vision. The dry bones refer to the people of Israel, spread out in many places. The Hebrew word for "breath" also means "spirit". We are reminded of God breathing life into Adam. Only God can bring life and only God can restore life. The gathering together of the bones shows a new beginning to come from bringing the people of Israel from their many dispersed places back to their homeland.

On the one hand, Ezekiel's vision is about a real return to Palestine. God plans to bring an end to the people's physical suffering. On the other hand, as 36:26 says, God's concern is not simply to bring people back home again. Ezekiel's message promises a new heart and a new spirit, a restored relationship with God. God's plan is not to recover the nation as it was, but to give it a better future within God's purpose for the world.

## Discuss

- Talk about Ezekiel's vision. What does it say to you about the way in which God brings new life?
- What attitudes might the Israelites need to leave behind them in receiving this breath of new life?
- God offers the Israelites a new future, both spiritually, with a new heart and a new spirit, and politically, with the promise of a return to their

homeland. Do we sometimes focus too much on 'inner' changes or too much on 'outer' changes? What does Ezekiel's vision say about this?

- Imagine that you went to sleep one night and had this same dream. What might it be saying to you about your congregation?

## John 11:1-45

### Jesus and Lazarus

*Read the passage, asking people to read these parts: Narrator, Mary, Martha, Jesus, Disciples, Thomas, Jews.*

John is a brilliant story-teller. We feel the suspense of waiting, along with Mary and Martha, to see what Jesus will do. While Jesus isn't playing games with Mary and Martha, his delay gives overwhelming proof of the power of God. Jesus is more than an inspiring teacher or a great healer, he is the Son of God who comes to give new life.

Although the focus is on Jesus and not Lazarus, we cannot help but wonder what Lazarus' life would be like after this event. He is not raised to his old life, but to something new. He would be marked for the rest of his life as being different from other people.

At the same time, we can get caught up in the details of this miraculous sign and miss the bigger picture. For John, Jesus' actions always have a larger purpose. According to Barnabas Lindars, the reviving of Lazarus points ahead to Jesus' own death and resurrection. The tomb, the women, the waiting - all of these mirror Jesus' resurrection. John seems to be showing us that Jesus' raising of Lazarus from physical death gives proof that God can do something even greater: God can raise Jesus from death to resurrected glory.

Some onlookers tell the Pharisees what has happened. The Pharisees react by planning Jesus' death. In raising Lazarus, Jesus gives away his own life. John gives us a pointer toward the Cross, and an image of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

## Discuss

- Talk about the characters in the story and the feelings and thoughts which they may have had.
- What seems most remarkable to you about this story?

## Our Story

- Spend a short time in silence, reflecting on Christ who comes to you as a Servant. What do you wish to ask of Christ at this time?  
Share your thoughts with the group.
- How might your words and actions be different if you had more of this servant attitude of Jesus Christ?
- How might your congregation be different if people had more of this servant attitude of Jesus Christ?
- Whom is God calling you to serve in your congregation at this time?  
Write their names here.
  
- Whom is God calling you to serve in your town at this time?  
Write their names here.
  
- Looking back over these Studies, what have you learned about
  - God
  - yourself
  - your church
  - God's vision or purpose for your church?

## Prayer

Servant God,  
take our lips and speak through them,  
take our minds and think through them.  
take our hearts and fill them with your compassion,  
take our hands and use them to wash the feet of your world.  
We offer ourselves as your servants,  
to be a people whose lives are marked by faith, hope and love.  
We offer ourselves as servants to one another,  
to seek what is good for each person.  
We offer ourselves as servants to your world,  
knowing that we will meet you walking your streets.  
We love you and give our lives to you. In the name of Christ. Amen



In this final study we look at the way that God becomes a servant in Jesus Christ and calls us to become servants also.

## My Story

Several years ago I studied a subject on caring for people with intellectual disabilities. This involved acting as a chaplain to a large residential institution on a weekly basis. I had previously had a good deal of contact with people with intellectual disabilities. I realise now that I somehow thought I was doing these people a favour by going along to help them out. Despite this, I vividly remember a feeling of shock when I first visited the institution. I was almost speechless with an overwhelming sense of the strangeness of the place and the people. For the first few visits I wandered around, hardly saying anything to anyone, feeling quite threatened by the people.

One day I sat down near a few of the residents with whom I had begun hanging around. Ron, a short man aged about 50 with Down Syndrome, sat down next to me. With a big grin he looked up at me, put his hand on my arm, and announced in a loud voice, "You're my friend!". I felt the knot of anxiety and fear in me melt in the face of this warm acceptance. For me, it was a first step in becoming a friend with folk at the centre. I had gone along expecting to be some kind of saviour to these people, and found that Christ was already there to welcome me. I certainly received much more than I gave to this remarkable community of people.

## Discuss

- Tell a story about a time that you were involved in helping or serving others.
- Have you had a similar experience of seeing Christ in people whom you have tried to serve?

# God's Story

Isaiah 50:4-9a

## Servant Song

This passage is one of the Servant Songs in the second or middle section of the Book of Isaiah. The most well-known of these songs is chapter 53. These writings come from the time of the exile of the people of Israel in Babylon in the middle of the 6th century BC. While Christians can look back on these servant songs and see in them an image of Christ, for the Hebrew people in exile, this was not the case. For them, the question was how to find God's will for themselves in this time of captivity and humiliation. At times the servant seems to be describing the people of Israel; at other times the servant seems to be the prophet himself.

Here in chapter 50, the focus turns to the prophet. In the first verses, God reminds the people of Israel that they have not been forgotten. Their suffering is not due to God's weakness, instead it is a result of their own sin. The God of the Exodus still has the power to save them.

From verse 4 onwards, it seems that the prophet's message of hope has made him a laughing stock. His own people ridicule him when he speaks of God setting them free again. Here we see a picture of what Israel is called to be - a people who trust in God's power to save even when others ignore or punish them because of their faithfulness to God.

## Discuss

- Imagine that you are part of a community that has been held captive in a foreign country for over 50 years. For many in the community, Babylon is the only home that they know. How would you respond to people who speak of freedom and a return to the homeland?
- Now put yourself in the prophet's shoes. What would it be like to be called by God to speak this message? A privilege or a pain?
- What does the example of this prophet say to you about what it means to be a servant of God?
- Who are the 'prophets' who speak of a hopeful future for your town? Are they listened to with respect or ridicule?
- What parallels can you see between the situation of the Israelites in exile and your situation today?

## Philippians 2:5-11

### Christ's Humility

It's hard to imagine how God could become a human being like you or me. Just for comparison, think for a moment about what it would be like for you to be trapped in the body of a slug! These verses describe how God becomes a servant in Jesus Christ. Paul makes it clear that it is God's free choice that the word becomes flesh.

What does Paul mean when he says that Jesus was 'in the form of God'? He could mean that Christ had the *nature* or qualities of God, or that Christ had the *status* of God because he was higher than anyone else. At any rate, the point is that Christ who has the form of God takes on the form of a slave. Paul explains this in verse 6 by saying that he 'emptied' himself: the Greek word here is *kenosis*.

According to Paul, Jesus' death is the ultimate sign of his obedience, humility and 'self-emptying'. Here we see that God's choice of Jesus of Nazareth as our Saviour connects with Jesus' choice to carry out God's purpose. It is not only *that* he died, but *how* he died - not in battle with a sword on a white horse, but on a Cross with thieves - which shows Jesus' obedience to God.

So Paul says that not only was Jesus a human being like us: he had a particular quality and attitude of being a servant. We don't think of people serving others as being a big deal, but when it is *God* doing the serving - that is really something! So there are two aspects of God's grace being described together here - God being *human*, and God being a human who *serves*.

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## Discuss

- What does the passage say to you about Jesus and his mission from God?
- What questions does the passage raise for you about Jesus Christ?
- Jesus replaces our idea of God as a far-off King with a picture of God as a Servant who is close to us. How does this fit with your picture of God?
- Paul says that we should have the same mind or attitude that Jesus Christ had. What is it about Christ that we should be trying to copy?