

## Bible studies for August 2020

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## Introduction for leaders

During August, even without this year’s coronavirus-related constraints, church often has a different routine and feel to it. This year many church buildings may not be in use, most people are not away on holiday, and ‘being church’ is much more family or household-based. With that in mind, we have used the published ROOTS resources to compile a Bible study for each week of August.

The studies are designed to be used by an individual or the members of a household at home, with their Bible and nothing more. Very little preparation, if any, and no input from anyone else is required.

Each study can be emailed or printed and delivered to those who would use it. But they can also be used in other ways – e.g. in an online Zoom group – and for that you may wish to adapt what is presented here.

Each week looks at a familiar story from Matthew’s Gospel (the one that might have been heard that week

in church), and is explored using resources hand-picked from across the range of ROOTS resources published for that week, adapted as necessary for home use. Two practical craft or active worship ideas are suggested for each week to offer choice – and a good balance between the active and the more passive elements such as reading and reflection.

In addition to these Bible studies, ROOTS has produced a [five-week ‘Summer Club’](#) for use at home with children and young people. Each week has five sections that could be used: one each day, Monday to Friday, or adapted to suit your needs.

Do also look at the article [‘Matthew’s messages of hope’](#) for more inspiration from Matthew’s Gospel. It has reflections and activities to do this summer for parents/carers and children, young people, church leaders and whole church communities.

2-8 August 2020: Matthew 14.13-21

## Feeding the 5000

*This study can be used by an individual, a small family/ household group, or by an online group. Suggestions in orange are specifically aimed at online groups.*

### Begin with an opening prayer

Mighty God of miracles, we come before you.  
We imagine what it might have been like  
being part of a crowd of 5,000.  
There may be far fewer of us here today,  
but we think about the people in other churches  
in our town, village, and country,  
also seeking to worship and serve you.  
We are all bound together by your great love,  
and we gather in spirit to meet with you. **Amen.**

### Read the passage

*Consider different ways to read the text. For example, hearing it in more than one version of the Bible.*

*In an online group, you could share parts between those present, or use/adapt this suggestion:*

*In advance, rehearse reading the text and note exactly how long it takes. Share your screen and display an [online countdown timer](#). Set the timer to the measured time and start it as the reader begins. The clock counting down reflects the urgency of the situation.*

### Explore and respond to the text

*Start by reading the Bible notes below. You may want to read them more than once, or pause after each paragraph to reflect on what you have read.*

#### Bible notes

Matthew's account of the feeding of 5,000 begins with Jesus withdrawing on the news of John's death. Is he seeking solace in the wilderness, taking stock of his movement now John has gone, or getting out of Herod's way? Whatever the reason, this story has a profoundly political location, beginning with the empire acting against Jesus' movement, and ending with the feeding of an army in the wilderness. In between these brackets we are treated to a story of compassion in action, of the lavish grace of a God who loves and provides for all.

The crowds followed Jesus, and his response was to meet their needs. The disciples – maybe keen to ensure that they could meet Jesus' need – want to send the crowds away. But Jesus challenges them to

meet the crowds' need for food (v.16). Rightly the disciples object that they have barely enough for their own needs (v.17). So, Jesus feeds the crowds so that the disciples will learn what compassion looks like, just as much as because they all need a meal.

Although the miracle is Jesus' doing, the disciples are invited to play their part by making the seating arrangements, distributing the food and clearing up afterwards. Amazingly, five loaves and two fish had become a banquet for 5,000 men and unnumbered women and children, with more left over for the disciples than they had started with. Two strong resonances in the story should not be missed. The first is the reminder of how God provided manna in the wilderness. Matthew does not labour this, but the fact that he describes the place as a wilderness suggests that he has the wanderings of the people under Moses in mind. And the fact that the crowds are looking to Jesus for leadership suggests that they see him as a new Moses.

The other resonance is the strong echo of the Eucharist in the language of verse 19b. Of course, no one in the crowds or the disciples would have got this, but we do – because we are reading this story after the Last Supper became the central celebratory meal of the Christian tradition. And with this, there is a strong echo of the messianic banquet of Isaiah chapter 25: here God's people feast in celebration of the coming of his kingdom and their place in it.

There is one other echo that is worth noting. The story immediately before this one was set in a lavish banquet presided over by a self-aggrandising empire builder (Herod). Here we have the opposite: another king, generously providing for all those who look to him for guidance and leadership in a kingdom of grace and welcome.

#### Reflection

*Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.*

Can we make a link between the need to feed the hungry and projects to feed schoolchildren during the school holidays, when school meals are not provided? Churches used to supply soup kitchens during the great depression of the 1930s. It is shameful to realise that such hunger can exist today, and that until recently society was unaware of the need. How should we respond?

### Questions for reflection

You may wish to use these questions and the picture to help you think about or discuss issues of sharing.

*In an online group, you could share your screen to display the image and questions.*



- Why is there a need to share?
- What are the best things about joining together with your church community?
- What would you share with them?

### Something to eat

You may wish to investigate hunger projects and how you can make a practical response. *In an online group, cover more ground by getting different people – or groups of people, using breakout rooms – to investigate different projects.*

Use your phone, tablet or computer to find out about projects that are tackling holiday hunger among children (e.g. [Feeding Britain](#); [End Hunger UK](#); [TLG](#); or read this article from [Premier Christian News](#)). Then decide if there is anything you can do about this. Or, if you are a church that is already engaged in this work, how you might communicate the importance of what you are doing to others who may not have heard about it.

### A simple worship activity

Spread out a large tablecloth on the floor. Offer everyone in your household an [‘Urgent’ note](#) and a pencil. Ask them to identify things for which ‘the hour is late’ – i.e. that need urgent attention – locally, nationally, internationally or personally – and to write or draw something on their note to represent it. Put the notes on the tablecloth. Gather round the cloth, observing what others have offered. End with the prayers that follow.

### Pray for others

*Sections of this prayer could be said by different people. Adapt it to your local context.*

Lord, we pray for people who have little or nothing: for those who feel trapped in their situation, and can’t see the bigger picture, or even any tiny glimmer of light.

We pray for people who are hungry: for parents who struggle to feed their children, and themselves.

We thank you for the work of food banks, and pray that they would have the resources to continue to meet so many needs.

We pray that you would give us an appreciation of our food: the work that goes into producing and distributing it.

Teach us not to be wasteful, but to preserve and pass on the goodness of your earth.

**Amen.**

### A prayer to end the Bible study

By the end of the day,  
the crowds must have been exhausted.  
They left with full stomachs and full hearts.  
They had met with Jesus.  
You have fed us today, Lord,  
and we go now to live the lives you call us to.  
May we be conscious of your perfect timing  
in our lives, as we reach out to the outsiders  
as well as to our own.

Bless us, Lord.

**Amen.**

### Live your faith

Write yourself a note to remind you either to give something away or share something with someone else. It doesn’t need to be a big or expensive gift, just generous!

9-15 August 2020: Matthew 14.22-33

## Peter walks on water

*This study can be used by an individual, a small family/ household group, or by an online group. Suggestions in orange are specifically aimed at online groups.*

### Begin with an opening prayer

As we approach you today, Lord,  
we probably feel pretty much like Peter –  
full of bravado to begin with,  
but then just not quite so certain of ourselves.  
We come to you, Jesus,  
trusting that even if we feel ourselves  
beginning to sink under the pressures that we face,  
we know you are still there holding us up.  
Please reassure us that you won't let go,  
no matter how we feel.  
Thank you, Lord. **Amen.**

### Read the passage

*Consider different ways to read the text. For example, hearing it in more than one version of the Bible.*

*In an online group, you could share parts between those present, or use/adapt this suggestion:*

Share your screen and display an [image of the Sea of Galilee \(Lake Tiberias\)](#) while the text is read. Choose one that looks across the lake to 'the other side' (v.22). Also, find [a recording of strong wind and rain](#) and play the sound from verses 24 to 32.

### Explore and respond to the text

*Start by reading the Bible notes below. You may want to read them more than once, or pause after each paragraph to reflect on what you have read.*

#### Bible notes

The quick dismissal of the disciples and then the crowd is probably because Jesus wanted to avoid being set at the head of a militia ready to march on Jerusalem. Instead he wanted to pray. Perhaps we should hear an echo of the temptation narrative: Jesus is seeking strength to stick to his guns in the face of the temptation to take a different route.

The twelve spend the whole night battling the elements out on the lake. As dawn breaks, they are confronted with the sight of Jesus striding out across the water. And they are terrified. But Jesus speaks comfort. Far from being a ghost, he says, 'It is I.'

This is a strong suggestion that there is something in Jesus' identity that is beyond human. God in the Old Testament spoke as the 'I am', so Jesus possibly does the same here. There is also a strong echo of the instances when God is pictured in the Old Testament as walking on or through the sea (Job 9.8; Psalm 77.19; Isaiah 43.16).

We are then treated to one of the great entertainments of the Synoptic Gospels: Peter inviting Jesus to tell him to get out of the boat, doing so and almost immediately sinking and crying out for rescue. Back in the boat, Jesus gently chides his lack of faith and the disciples worship him as 'Son of God'. Is there something beyond seeing Jesus as the king of Israel here?

Some have seen this story as a resurrection narrative that is out of place, perhaps one that exists in the same narrative world as that in John 21. There is little evidence for this, although Matthew would agree that the resurrected Jesus was the Jesus who lived with his disciples prior to the first Easter. Rather, this seems to be a story that is more centred on Peter and his faith than on Jesus and his identity. It is a story that encourages ordinary Jesus-followers as it confirms that 'the twelve', despite their proximity to Jesus for three years, still struggled with their faith. And perhaps Jesus (v.31) is not so much chiding Peter as recognising the frail material he has to work with. Here is someone who, along with the others, has seen Jesus conjure a meal for 5,000 out of a packed lunch and yet seems to find faith a struggle.

#### Reflection

*Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.*

An exploration of Jesus' possible tone of voice may be helpful. How does he say 'Come' in verse 29? Is it an invitation or an order? How does he say, 'Why did you doubt?' Is it a rebuke, or does he take delight in the lesson he has taught? There isn't just a single tone of voice in which God calls us.

### Questions for reflection

You may wish to use these questions and the picture to help you think about or discuss issues of sharing.

*In an online group, you could share your screen to display the image and questions.*



- Does this image speak more of faith or doubt?
- What step/leap of faith have you taken recently?
- Are we too risk-averse in living the gospel?

### What are you doing here?

Make a postcard (you could [use a template](#), or any unused postcards you have around, or simply fold a piece of paper to the right size). Imagine that you are Peter, and you have just experienced the events described in the Gospel reading. Write a postcard to someone about what has happened and what you think it could mean for you.

### A simple worship activity

Using any creative media you wish – e.g. art and craft materials; streamers for dancing; musical/percussion instruments – choose a way to respond to the [‘Mars’ movement from Holst’s The Planets](#) (or use a different piece of music if it would be more helpful to you). Express yourself in any way that you wish. When the music ends, be quiet and still. You could sing gently, or listen to, ‘Be still for the presence of the Lord’.

### Pray for others

Sections of this prayer could be said by different people. Adapt it to your local context.

Lord God, we come before you to pray for all those people for whom taking risks is a way of life.

**Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.**

We pray for our emergency services – medics and paramedics, the police, the fire service – and all who daily face difficult situations as they seek to help to protect us and make our world a safer and more peaceful place.

**Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.**

We pray for people who work in troubled areas – the armed forces in war zones, those who, at risk to themselves, bring humanitarian aid into areas of natural disaster, and many more.

**Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.**

We pray for people who take risks in your name – those who take your word where it is most needed – and for people who grapple with faith and doubt.

**Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.**

**Amen.**

### A prayer to end the Bible study

Peter only knew life as a fisherman.

But he got out of the boat and followed you, Lord.

Help us to hear your voice,

get out of our boats and follow you.

In the week ahead,

may the world and its problems decrease  
as you increase in our lives.

Keep us focused on your way,

looking ahead and trusting you.

**Amen.**

### Live your faith

Take a risk this week. For example, you might say ‘Hello’ to someone you see regularly but have never spoken to; or make an apology that is overdue; or do something practical – that you would not normally do – to help someone struggling with the current pandemic restrictions.

16-22 August 2020: Matthew 15.10-28

## Jesus meets a Pharisee and a Canaanite woman

*This study can be used by an individual, a small family/ household group, or by an online group. Suggestions in orange are specifically aimed at online groups.*

### Begin with an opening prayer

Lord God, as we come before you now,  
we open our hearts to you.  
Help us to see that we can learn so much from others,  
even from those with whom we think  
we may not share much in common.  
Make us willing to stand out from the crowd,  
to hear your voice, and act upon it. **Amen.**

### Read the passage

*Consider different ways to read the text. For example, hearing it in more than one version of the Bible.  
In an online group, you could share parts between those present using or adapting this suggestion:*

*Delegate a group of people to take on the role of the disciples in the reading, with one nominated as 'Peter'. You will also need a narrator, Jesus and the Canaanite woman. The Bible text (15.10-28) – but omitting some of the 'he/she/they said' phrases – provides the script.*

### Explore and respond to the text

*Start by reading the Bible notes below. You may want to read them more than once, or pause after each paragraph to reflect on what you have read.*

#### Bible notes

At first glance the two sections of this passage seem unconnected. But read together, the second story (from v.21) takes on a different hue. It all starts with the Pharisees criticising Jesus' followers over their hygiene (v.2), to which Jesus replies that what makes people unclean does not come from what they put into their mouths, but from what is in their hearts. His disciples tell him that he has upset the Pharisees with this answer, and he tells them that he does not care – because they are blind guides. When Peter asks Jesus to explain the parable, it's unclear what he is referring to – is it verse 11 or 14? Jesus explains his saying about food, and goes on to say that people demonstrate they are unclean by what they say and how they treat other people.

The story of Jesus' encounter with the woman shares the thematic link of food and belonging. Indeed, the

whole of chapter 15 can be seen as a collection of stories that have to do with the basis of inclusion in God's people.

So, a Canaanite – and we might recall that there are two such women, Rahab and Tamar, in Jesus' family tree (Matthew 1.3-4) – seeks healing for her daughter. Jesus is silent. But the woman must have persisted because his disciples implore Jesus to send her away because of her incessant shouting. Jesus tells her he has come only for those born in the house of Israel – perhaps one of the disciples had suggested that if Jesus did what she wanted, she'd leave them alone. But she persists, kneeling before him, imploring him to help. Jesus reiterates his previous answer, injecting it with typical Jewish anti-Gentile invective – 'dogs' – suggesting that what is meant for Israel should not be given to outsiders.

Generally, use of the term 'dogs' in the Old Testament is a derogatory one, a metaphor for people who are beyond the pale. It sounds like a final rejection of the woman's request. Yet, it could be seen as a proverbial saying that offers an invitation to respond. And this the woman does, giving as good as she gets, concluding the proverbial statement by suggesting that the children, of course, are fed first – but the house dogs then get their share.

Jesus is amazed. Peter, listening to this, was told a short time ago that he was a man of little faith; now he hears Jesus saying that this woman has great faith. The contrast is obvious, and not just with Peter but also with the leaders of Israel (15.1-9). Although Jesus has primarily come as Israel's Messiah, his ultimate goal is to reach the nations with his saving grace.

#### Reflection

*Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.*

The Pharisees are scandalised by Jesus' words, so shocked that they cannot listen – the word Matthew uses literally means 'a stumbling block'. The singer Stormzy has many songs with a religious message, but some people will find the style and the language so off-putting that they are unaware of the content. The style is a 'stumbling block' to hearing what he has to say. Are both Jesus and Stormzy deliberately provocative in their message? Do we need to be?

### Questions for reflection

*You may wish to use these questions and the picture to help you think about or discuss issues of sharing.*

*In an online group, you could share your screen to display the image and questions.*



- When have you experienced life from the viewpoint of an outsider?
- How can we be better at listening to those who are 'outsiders'?
- What new understandings might we gain from listening to them?

### Listen carefully

Listen to a challenging song! Do an internet search for 'Stormzy Glastonbury knife crime 2019' and find out about Stormzy's performance wearing a stab-proof vest. *In an online group, discuss what message this gives to you. Why might it be hard for some people to hear?* Watch a video presentation of Stormzy's song '[Blinded by your grace](#)'. What was moving? Did you miss the message of the song because of the bad language? What did you learn?

### A simple worship activity

You will need paper, a pencil and scissors. Make some [daisy chain people](#). Sing or listen to the song, '[Jesus Christ is waiting](#)', and while doing so tear off a single figure and hold it in your hand to help you reflect on the people described in the song. Do it again as more people are mentioned. During the last verse, put down all the figures to make a line of those following the journey Jesus calls us to.

### Pray for others

*Sections of this prayer could be said by different people. Adapt it to your local context.*

The Canaanite woman sought your help, Lord Jesus. She loved her daughter so much, she was so desperately in need, that she wouldn't give up till she had her answer.

**We pray in faith. Hear us, blessed Lord.**

Lord, may we learn from this woman, to wait on you expectantly, patiently, persistently, doggedly. Grant us the courage of our convictions when we truly believe we are doing your will.

**We pray in faith. Hear us, blessed Lord.**

We pray today for those who feel excluded, whatever their situation, whatever the reason: for prisoners, refugees, the homeless; for the sick, the mentally unstable; for any who feel that they are outsiders.

**We pray in faith. Hear us, blessed Lord.**

We pray for ourselves when our faith is weak, or we feel that we don't belong.

**We pray in faith. Hear us, blessed Lord. Amen.**

### A prayer to end the Bible study

We go out today,  
renewed and strengthened in faith,  
ready to serve you, Lord,  
and find you in the people we meet.  
We go out to follow you, and our hearts.  
Lead us, good Lord.

**Amen.**

### Live your faith

Do something that gives you another perspective this week: e.g. listen to some music or watch a TV programme that you do not normally listen to/watch. Talk with a friend about the experience.

23-29 August 2020: Matthew 16.13-20

## Jesus speaks to his disciples about who he is

*This study can be used by an individual, a small family/ household group, or by an online group. Suggestions in orange are specifically aimed at online groups.*

### Begin with an opening prayer

‘This was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.’ (Matt. 16.17)

The Lord blessed Simon because he finally understood who Jesus was. He called him Peter, and said that great things would come to pass through him. He promised him the keys to the kingdom.

Lord, we already have so many keys on our bundles. Help us to find the right ones to open the doors you choose for us. Make us ready to be like Simon, and to become Peter, doing great things in your strength and for your kingdom. **Amen.**

### Read the passage

*Consider different ways to read the text. For example, hearing it in more than one version of the Bible.*

*In an online group, you could share parts between those present, or use/adapt this suggestion:*

*Use an image search to find a photograph of the ruins of Caesarea Philippi, or a drawing or model of a reconstruction. Share your screen and display the image as the text is read. It is important that we understand that it was a real place!*

### Explore and respond to the text

*Start by reading the Bible notes below. You may want to read them more than once, or pause after each paragraph to reflect on what you have read.*

#### Bible notes

Jesus has taken the disciples a long way north to the city of Caesarea Philippi. This is the seat of Roman rule through a puppet king – Herod the Great’s son, Philip. He had built the city, naming it as he did to distinguish it from Caesarea Maritima where the Roman governor lived. Jesus went there to ask pointedly political questions about his identity. First named in a list of those the crowds thought Jesus might be is John the Baptist, executed by Philip’s brother. But the others – Elijah and Jeremiah – were political troublemakers in their own time.

In this charged atmosphere, Jesus asks the twelve who they think he is. Peter shoots back, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. In the shadow of the walls of the seat of government, where there was a king, this was dangerous talk. But like the voice at his baptism and on the mount of transfiguration, Jesus confirms that Peter has spoken God’s view on the matter.

Is this where Jesus gives Simon the nickname ‘Rocky’? It is possible. More importantly, is it Peter or his confession that is the rock on which Jesus will build his Church? Surely the latter: the Church is founded on the simple confession of faith that Jesus is Lord. But this is not a religious matter; it is a political one. Caesar was ‘Lord’, and in his empire there could be only one Lord. So, if Peter was saying that Jesus is Lord, then he is also saying that Caesar is not.

More startlingly, Jesus says that not only will he build his Church on this confession, but that the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. Is this about breaking in or breaking out? Again, surely the latter. This confession means that this little band will break out of Caesar’s empire and take countless thousands with them. But not only will God’s people be set free by their confession of allegiance to king Jesus, they will also hold the keys to God’s kingdom. This administrative image indicates that the disciples will organise life in their movement to ensure that everyone enjoys the liberating benefits of the confession.

#### Reflection

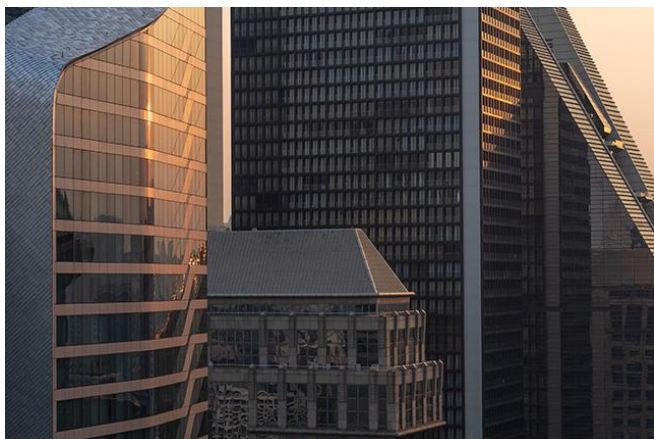
*Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.*

Empires today, like that of Rome, demand our allegiance, and indeed may require our worship in some way. And besides nations there are giant multinational businesses, media organisations and the like. So, for empires, it isn’t just Russia or China or the USA – think also in terms of Tesco, BP, Facebook, Amazon, broadcasting companies... On a day-to-day level, who do you give allegiance and offer worship to?

### Questions for reflection

You may wish to use these questions and the picture to help you think about or discuss issues of sharing.

*In an online group, you could share your screen to display the image and questions.*



- How might this image be representative of things we can put our trust in?
- What overshadows some of the stories you live by?
- What overshadows some of what you can put your trust in?

### What's the story?

Think of some well-known adverts. You could watch a few on YouTube or similar. What story is each advert telling? *In an online group, you could watch some adverts and discuss their stories together.* Decide if each advert is trustworthy or not. Write a brief that you could give to an 'advert maker' to tell the story of what Jesus offers.

### A simple worship activity

You will need some flat stones (rocks!) and a felt tip pen. Think of someone or something you would like to pray for. Write a word or two, or draw a simple image, on a stone to represent that person or thing. Repeat the process until you have a pile of stones – a prayer cairn. End by saying this prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for the opportunity to build this cairn today, to bring all of these individual prayers and concerns together. Bless each one and help us to remember that you are the solid rock we can all build our lives on. **Amen.**

### Pray for others

*Sections of this prayer could be said by different people. Adapt it to your local context.*

We pray for people who struggle with their faith:  
through self-doubt,  
through difficult circumstances,  
through bad things happening,  
through being led astray,  
by wanting fame and fortune.

**We trust you, Lord, to answer our prayers.  
Your will be done.**

We pray for people who feel in the dark,  
locked in a situation where they can find no answer,  
that they might come to understand  
that you are the key to everything they need.

**We trust you, Lord, to answer our prayers.  
Your will be done.**

We pray for ourselves:  
when we are in difficult situations,  
when we try to unlock doors  
that aren't ours to unlock,  
when we don't focus on the kingdom,  
when we don't share our story.

**We trust you, Lord, to answer our prayers.  
Your will be done. Amen.**

### A prayer to end the Bible study

We go out now,  
hearts so full of amazement and joy,  
that we can't help but share the good news.  
Go with us, good Lord,  
and help us to tell everyone who will listen.  
**Amen.**

### Live your faith

Keep a (private) list of all the things you notice that you are thankful for. By doing so, build up a story that is trustworthy. Don't tell anyone else – keep this as a reminder and an inspiration for you when other 'worldly' stories crowd in.

30 August – 5 September 2020: Matthew 16.21-28

## Jesus invites us to share in his story

*This study can be used by an individual, a small family/ household group, or by an online group. Suggestions in orange are specifically aimed at online groups.*

### Begin with an opening prayer

Lord, the disciples gathered around you, trying so hard to answer your questions, and to cope with difficult news.

We come before you now and ask your blessing, as we seek to understand more of your story – your tough and challenging, but so good story!

**Amen.**

### Read the passage

*Consider different ways to read the text. For example, hearing it in more than one version of the Bible.*

*In an online group, you could share parts between those present, or use/adapt this suggestion:*

*You need two narrators; everyone else is the 'chorus'.*

*Narrator 1 reads verse 21.*

*Chorus: Puzzle, puzzle; lots of trouble.*

*Narrator 2 reads verse 22.*

*Chorus: Puzzle, puzzle; don't make trouble.*

*Narrator 1 reads verse 23.*

*Chorus: Listen, Peter, don't be dim. Worship God, serve only him.*

*Narrator 2 reads verses 24-26.*

*Chorus: Listen all, take up your cross. Selfish life is just a loss.*

*Narrator 1 reads verses 27-28.*

*Chorus: Mortal lifted up to glory. Join him and complete the story.*

### Explore and respond to the text

*Start by reading the Bible notes below. You may want to read them more than once, or pause after each paragraph to reflect on what you have read.*

#### Bible notes

Peter thought that his confession meant that Jesus was the conquering Messiah who would lead his army to drive the Romans into the sea and take back the land. Not so, says Jesus. It means suffering and rejection. Peter is having none of it. Suddenly we are back in the desert of temptation with Jesus rebuking

the devil who would seek to divert him from his mission. Whereas his confession was a divine revelation, Peter's rebuke of Jesus was all too human, even demonic.

The first mention of crosses is not the one Jesus will lift – he talks only of his suffering – it is the one that any who would follow him must take up. There is real risk of suffering if we follow Jesus. But there is also the hope of finding the only truly rewarding life (vv.25-26). It is not by clinging to the things that matter to us, the insights we have gained – even though they may have come from God – or the place we have carved out for ourselves in the world. All those things result in us forfeiting our lives. It is in losing everything that we find what we long for.

Finally, Jesus refers to himself as 'Son of Man'. He does this when he is making a significant statement about his identity. It is almost certainly derived from Daniel chapter 7 where the prophet sees one like a son of man ascending on the clouds and coming to God to be given all authority, an authority that he proceeds to share with all those who are with him.

The clue to what Jesus is saying here is in the final enigmatic verse. Some suggest that this refers to the transfiguration, where some of the disciples see Jesus in his glory (in Matthew's account this happens just six days after the events in today's passage). But it is more likely that this refers to those who witness his death and resurrection. As he comes to the cross and from the grave he is coming into his kingdom. Jesus' kingship is born of suffering and its glory is seen in that suffering on behalf of a world that needs a story more powerful than another one of a conqueror on a white charger. It needs the story of one who liberates and overcomes through suffering, through the cross.

#### Reflection

*Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.*

Jesus has to spell out what his coming means. 'Taking up a cross' means accepting the most degrading punishment that the empire had to wield. To Matthew's audience, this was a literal threat, not a figurative one as we so often treat it today. What might be a true modern equivalent?

### Questions for reflection

You may wish to use these questions and the picture to help you think about or discuss issues of sharing.

*In an online group, you could share your screen to display the image and questions.*



- How does this image speak to you of the Christian way of life?
- How do you respond when life is tough?
- What does losing your life for Jesus' sake mean to you?

### Keep telling the story

The story of redemption, in which suffering undermines oppression, is the heart of the Christian story, and has profoundly influenced the nature of story and storytelling within our culture. Identify stories and films that have the idea of redemption at their heart. Do these stories help you to understand the Christian story better? Here are some titles to get you started: *The Shawshank Redemption*; *Les Miserables*; *Harry Potter*.

### A simple worship activity

On a piece of card or paper, draw the outline of a cross shape. Then think of issues – locally or nationally – and/or practical steps or actions that you might take to help a particular cause or need. Write these inside the cross shape. Take up your cross – literally, pick up the card – and pray that God will help you to discern appropriate actions for the issues identified, and/or have the courage and means to do the steps or actions you have listed. Read the words of, or sing or listen to, a song or hymn about the cross, e.g. 'Take up thy cross' or 'When I survey the wondrous cross'.

### Pray for others

Sections of this prayer could be said by different people. Adapt it to your local context.

Lord God, you reproached Peter because he had only human concerns; but Peter just wanted to protect the one he loved.

We pray for people the world over who find themselves in difficult situations.

We pray that they would all have someone to care for them and lift them before you.

**Merciful God, hear our prayer.**

We pray for all who are persecuted for their faith: for all who are misunderstood, for asylum seekers who flee real danger in their homeland.

We pray for those who work tirelessly to address wrongs.

**Merciful God, hear our prayer.**

We pray for people whose lives don't always work out right, through their fault, or through no fault of their own.

**Merciful God, hear our prayer.**

We pray for the people in our lives who need your protection, Lord, that we will always be faithful in prayer for them.

**Merciful God, hear our prayer. Amen.**

### A prayer to end the Bible study

Lord God, you knew what was going to happen to you. You didn't flinch, or back away.

You calmly told the disciples – and us – what to expect.

As we go out now, remind us constantly to look to you in the good and the tough times.

Guide us as we go in your name.

**Amen.**

### Live your faith

Keep a personal tally of things you do this week that might be considered either 'self-giving' or the opposite, 'self-preserving.' How balanced is your personal scale?