

What does the Bible say about changing the world?



Methodist Relief &
Development Fund

MRDF Study Pack 2009
Leader's Notes

Thank you for using MRDF's study pack *What does the Bible say about changing the world?* We hope that your group finds it useful and thought-provoking. These notes are to be used alongside the study pack booklet.

Tips for using this pack

- Adapt any of the material to suit your group's needs. It is designed so that you can pick and choose from a variety of questions and activities
- Everyone in the group, including yourself, will need a copy of the booklet (phone 020 7467 5132 for free copies or download from www.mrdf.org.uk/pages/study-pack.php)
- Prepare materials for each week in advance so that everything is ready in time
- Involve other group members before and during the sessions in reading, praying or preparing materials
- Read through the Bible passage, Leader's Notes and discussion questions in the booklet before the meeting and pray for your group as you prepare to study them together.

The New International Version of the Bible is used in this study pack. References for statistics and quotes used in the study pack are printed at the back of the Leader's Notes only.

Each session follows a similar outline and should last no more than 90 minutes.

- ▶ **Discussion starter:** a short warm-up activity to start people thinking about the topic. This should last no more than ten minutes.
- **Bible reading and discussion questions:** not every discussion question is answered in the notes, as many depend on the group's experience and opinions. However, there are some suggestions and guidance on selected questions.
- **Activity:** material to stimulate thought and discussion.
- ▶▶ **Action:** a practical response to what has been learnt or discussed. At the start of each meeting, share a meal or a drink together and discuss your progress. How hard or easy were the actions from the week before? What can you learn from each other? This should be a time of encouragement and recommitment, not of making people feel guilty for their inaction!

If you are using this study pack in the weeks before Easter 2009, listen to Sunday Breakfast on Premier Christian Radio between February 22 and April 12. The shows will include exclusive interviews with some of the people featured in the study pack and special prayers. Additional audio material and extra resources to accompany each Bible study are also available online at www.mrdf.org.uk/pages/study-pack.php.

Week one – fighting injustice

Main focus

God's commitment to social justice should be reflected in our everyday lives.

Equipment needed

'Hole in the Bucket' film clip available from www.youtube.com. Type 'Make Poverty History Drop the Debt' into the information bar. Have this clip ready at the beginning of the session: It is 3 minutes and 12 seconds long.

► Discussion starter

At the start, spend some time in welcome, introductions and finding out what people expect from this course. This is especially important for a new group.

After the introductions, ask the group to have their Bibles ready. Issue a challenge to see who can be the first person to find Amos 5:24, stand and read it out loud.

■ Bible reading

If time allows, read Amos 5:3-12, 21-24 from the Message translation as well.

Background

The war with Syria had ended and Israel had gained access to trade routes, which made it easier to buy luxuries from all over the world. This was an era comparable to Solomon's times in terms of economic stability and opulence. There was no middle class in Israel – only the rich and the poor. The wealthy were selling the poor into slavery to recoup money that the poor owed to them, dispossessing farmers and charging inflated prices for goods – to heap up more and more profits for themselves. Although this was a time of social and moral decay, religion was thriving. The rich made regular visits to shrines and flocked to the religious festivals. Thirty or 40 years after Amos spoke out against injustice, Assyria destroyed Israel.

|| Discussion answers

1. Flagrant disregard for the poor, insensitivity to injustice and relentless pursuit of profit and pleasure.
2. God is deeply concerned about the poor and the needy – he always has been. Leviticus 19:9-10 gives specific guidance on how to take care of the poor. It was always in God's plan that they should be provided for.

3. For example, India (upper classes and the Dalits – 'untouchables'); Zimbabwe (ruling party politicians and normal civilians).
4. God does not seem to be condemning the wealthy for having money, but rather denouncing the means by which they had amassed their wealth. Abraham, Job and David were wealthy people, and God does not take issue with this. The emphasis in the Bible is not on how much money we have, but rather what we do with it. For further study, read 1 Timothy 6:17-19.
5. God is not interested in religious actions if they do not come from a heart of obedience and if we do them whilst neglecting the needs of the poor.
6. Sometimes we can become desensitised to issues of injustice and poverty, especially if we regularly see images of people affected by natural disasters or conflict.
7. Amos was a poor man doing an ordinary job – he looked after fig trees (regarded as a food for the poor then) – but he was willing to relay God's message to northern Israel. We may not be rich, powerful or in full-time Christian ministry, but we can still do something extraordinary, if we are willing.

You can use either one of the following activities during this week's session.

● Activity 1

Encourage the group to think about the marginalised groups in your community and to suggest practical ways that they could represent them.

● Activity 2

Watch the 'Hole in the Bucket' film clip. Refer to the study booklet.

Week two – living compassionately

Main focus

We should show compassion towards those who would usually be overlooked because of their low status – just as Jesus did.

Equipment needed

Small, blank cards.

► Discussion starter

The number of people living with HIV:

- (i) Live in Sub-Saharan Africa – 22 million
- (ii) Live in Asia – 5 million
- (iii) Live in Eastern Europe and Central Asia – 1.5 million
- (iv) Live in Latin America – 1.7 million
- (v) North America, Western and Central Europe – 2 million
- (vi) Are children – 2 million

Background

Throughout the Bible we catch a glimpse of a God who is consistently concerned with the plight of the marginalised and stigmatised. When he came to Earth, Jesus regularly spent time with the sorts of people who would be socially excluded from our society – beggars and prostitutes, for example.

Adultery was punishable by death, under the Jewish law (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22). The Pharisees were hoping to trap Jesus – either he would condone a sin that the law condemned or he would be unforgiving. In his wisdom, he did neither.

The passage on the woman caught in adultery in John 8 has been incorporated in different places in some manuscripts, and some of them exclude it. The text is also stylistically different from the rest of the gospel. The historical veracity of the text, however, is generally accepted – some scholars think it was an oral tradition that was passed down. Although the origins of the text are unknown, it is worth considering its meaning.

|| Discussion answers

1. The characters in the story are scribes, Pharisees, the woman caught in adultery and Jesus.
2. No one knows! It has been suggested that he was listing the sins that the crowd may have committed or writing as if he did not hear them. But what he wrote on the ground is not recorded.

3. Jesus did not condone adultery, but he did approach the woman with an attitude of compassion.
4. Compassion is 'pity inclining one to be helpful or merciful', according to the Oxford Dictionary. A translation of the Greek word is 'to feel sympathy with', essentially sharing someone's pain.

►► Action

Hand out the small, blank cards. Refer to the study booklet.

Week three – giving graciously

Main focus

We should view giving as a privilege and do it cheerfully.

Equipment needed

Reflective music and statistics or statements (enclosed). Photocopy and cut out.

► Discussion starter

Hand each person a statistic or statement and ask them to read it out. Play the CD softly in the background. Allow time for reflection after each statistic has been read. Give each person a chance to share their thoughts on any of them.

Background

A drought in AD 45-47 had triggered serious food shortages, and the church in Jerusalem was severely affected. The churches in Macedonia (situated in the northern province of Greece) – Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea – had responded by sending an offering, even though they were poor themselves and had suffered because of their faith (Philippians 1:29-30). The Corinthian believers had money and had planned to make a collection for the church in Jerusalem the year before, but when Paul was writing, this donation had not arrived. Paul hoped that the generosity of the Macedonian church would encourage the Christians in Corinth to translate their good intentions into action. It worked. Romans 15:26 tells us that the Corinthian believers did send their gift.

|| Discussion answers

1. Answers may include:
 - They gave during a time of extreme poverty
 - They gave beyond their means
 - They begged Paul for an opportunity to give.
3. In our own difficult times, we can still help others. The Macedonians' willingness to help in their own time of need was a sacrificial gesture that we can learn from.
4. Jesus gave up his rights as God to become human. He subjected himself to the limitations of time and space. Our sacrifices are small, compared to what Christ gave. In Philippians 2:5-11 Paul mentions Christ emptying himself, taking on the form of a slave and humbling himself, even to dying on a cross.

6. Answers may include:
 - We should try to give, especially if we have made a commitment to do so
 - Our willingness to give is more important than the amount we give
 - We should give in proportion to what we have
 - We should make up our own mind how much to give
 - We should not give reluctantly or in response to pressure
 - If we give a little, we will reap a little – but we should not give to get
 - We should give cheerfully.

● Activity

Draw an imaginary line in the room – one end is 'strongly agree', the other end is 'strongly disagree'. Get group members to position themselves on the line according to what they think of this statement. Encourage them to be a bit controversial to stimulate discussion.

Week four – seizing every opportunity

Main focus

Sometimes God gives us an opportunity to do good that only we can fulfil. He may strategically place us somewhere to help an individual or a group of people.

Equipment needed

Esther's story (enclosed).

► Discussion starter

Ask someone to read the background section below to the group or play the audio clip of Esther 4 (available from www.mrdf.org.uk/pages/study-pack-extras.php). This will set the scene for the Bible study.

Or photocopy Esther's story (enclosed), cut up the different sections and ask the group to arrange the story in the correct order.

Background

Esther, a young Jewish girl, was selected by King Xerxes to be his wife after a nation-wide search for a new queen. The king's previous wife, Vashti, was deposed after she refused to appear when summoned by the king to show off her beauty. Esther married the king but, on the advice of her uncle Mordecai, did not reveal that she was a Jew.

Haman, one of the king's officials, took a dislike to Mordecai because he did not bow down to him, and resolved to kill all of the Jews. Esther is told of the plot and risks her life to speak with the king, without being summoned, in order to ask that the Jews be spared. Her courage pays off – the Jews are spared, and Haman ends up being hanged.

Today, at the Jewish feast of Purim this story is read and the audience sometimes boos when Haman's name is mentioned and cheer when the speaker says Mordecai's name.

|| Discussion answers

If time allows, read all of Esther 4 as a group.

1. Only those people who were summoned by the King could go in to see him. The king had the power to execute anyone who tried to see him without an appointment. Also, the king had not called for Esther for 30 days – she did not know whether he wanted to see her.

3. Under enormous pressure, Esther:
 - listened carefully to her uncle
 - considered the price she would have to pay before declaring 'If I perish, I perish'
 - made the necessary preparations, in this case calling for prayer and fasting amongst the Jews
 - took action when it was needed, proving that one courageous decision can have great effect.

Throughout the book of Esther, the heroine comes across as a shy and compliant person. Her decision to take such a courageous step shows that we may be required to do something that is 'out of character' for the greater good.

4. Answers may include:
 - God is faithful and compassionate and he works through humans to fulfil his plans on earth – we work in partnership with him
 - God has a plan for each of our lives and opportunities will arise for us to fulfil elements of this
 - We need faith and courage to put God's will first.

You can use either one of the following activities during this week's session.

● Activity 1

Ask the group members to turn to Page 16. Is God calling us to look for 'Esther moments' in our own lives? Ask each person to write their name in the middle circle and to write the names of the people that they have some influence over or contact with – family members, friends, neighbours, for example – in the surrounding circles. Ask each person to share what he or she could do to have a more positive impact on the lives of the people in their sphere of influence. If time allows, split the group into pairs and ask each person to pray for their partner – that they will be more effective in their impact on others – and for the people they have listed in their net of influence.

● Activity 2

Answers

Martin Luther King Jr

Edmund Burke

Mahatma Gandhi

Week five – working together

Main focus

The Judaeans worked together – and we see that teamwork can accomplish a great deal.

Equipment needed

Paper and pens.

► Discussion starter

Split the group into two. Ask Group 1 to write a list of the advantages of working as a team and Group 2 to write a list of the disadvantages. After 5-10 minutes, ask each group to feed back their responses.

Background

The Judaeans were taken captive by the Babylonians in 586 BC when Jerusalem was captured. This was the southern kingdom of Judah, so only Judaeans were taken into exile. The name 'Israelites' should refer to all 12 tribes of the people of Israel. After Solomon, the kingdom was split into ten tribes in the northern kingdom of Israel and two tribes in the southern kingdom of Judah.

The book of Nehemiah tells the story of a third group of Jewish exiles returning to their homeland, Israel. The first group returned with Zerubbabel in 538 BC. They rebuilt the temple of Jerusalem. The second group returned with Ezra in 458 BC. Most of the returnees settled in cities and places outside of Jerusalem. 12 years after this, Nehemiah returned with a group of people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. This had been neglected as the previous returnees sought to rebuild their own homes and communities elsewhere. On Nehemiah's return, many of these people - from Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon and Mizpah – helped with the work.

In the ancient world, the walls of a city were important for protection, but also as a statement of independence and some degree of power. Nehemiah committed himself to the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls.

|| Discussion answers

The Bible passage does include a lot of names. However, getting the pronunciation right is not as important as understanding the principle of working together outlined in the text.

1. It takes effort and co-operation, with God's help, to get work done.

2. Co-operation and unity can get a lot done. The priests repaired the sheep gate – this is where people brought sheep to be sacrificed. The noblemen from Tekoa did not take part. They could have been lazy or just against the work – an explanation is not given in the passage. The work was successful without them.

● Activity

Ask someone to be the group's note-taker during this activity. Emphasise that everyone's contribution is valuable. Remember to include prayer as a way for group members to be involved. For a list of possible activities, visit www.mrdf.org.uk/pages/study-pack-actions.php.

►► Action

If the group would like to do this, try to keep it as simple as possible by setting a realistic goal – dependent on the group's expertise and availability. If you do put on this event, please write to us at MRDF to let us know!

Week six – walking in hope

Main focus

Whilst on earth, there will always be suffering and struggling, but 'in Christ' we have glimpses of heaven and hope in our midst.

Equipment needed

Paper and pens and Feedback forms.

► Discussion starter

- (i) False – International trade is worth over £12 million a minute
- (ii) True
- (iii) True
- (iv) True
- (v) False – There are over 15,000 people employed in Brussels lobbying on behalf of companies.

Share the following information with the group if appropriate:

Rich countries spend US\$1 billion a day subsidising their farmers. When these farmers produce too much, the extra produce is sold to developing countries at vastly reduced prices. This then pushes down the price of local produce, so poor farmers can't compete. Mozambique's sugar industry, for instance, has been crippled in this way. Thousands of tons of cheap EU beet sugar are being dumped in developing countries, denying small farmers a fair chance. (Source: Oxfam)

Background

Paul wrote the book of Romans from Greece. He was about to travel to Jerusalem to give the Christians there the money that had been collected by the churches in Macedonia and Achaia. He had wanted to visit the Christians in Rome for a long time and used this letter to announce his forthcoming visit. In Romans, Paul presents a detailed account of the gospel message – it is full of theological treasures.

In Romans 8, Paul gives particular focus to the struggles we might face, emphasising that there is hope and victory through Jesus Christ, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

II Discussion answers

There are fewer discussion questions in this session than in some previous weeks to give more time to discuss the group's next steps to put what they have learnt into action.

1. In this passage, Paul refers to the suffering we might endure for the sake of the gospel. It will not last forever.
2. This could be the resurrection of the body and becoming like Christ. It is beyond anything we can imagine.
3. We do not need to be pessimistic because there is a promise of a new heaven and earth. Paul encourages the Christians in Rome (and us) to wait patiently for this. In the meantime, we have the opportunity to be Christ's hands and feet on earth. Whilst there will never be a Utopia on earth, we can take actions to make things better while trusting God to accomplish his purposes.
4. The Holy Spirit helps us to pray according to the will of God. We are not left by ourselves to cope with our problems or be overwhelmed by the injustices in the world. Many times we do not know how to pray, but with the Holy Spirit's help we can pray effectively for ourselves and for others.

● Activity 1

Hand out the paper and pens. Refer to the study booklet.

● Activity 2

Ask each group member to pray about one of the issues that has been raised over the past six weeks and that each person will take actions in their everyday lives that make a difference to others.

Feedback form

Take ten minutes in this last session to ask each group member to fill out a feedback form (included in their pack). Please send this back to MRDF as soon as possible. Groups that return their form will get a free DVD called *Drop the Debt: Unfinished Business* from the Jubilee Debt Campaign, while stocks last.

References

Week one

Activity 2 – *Hole in the Bucket*, courtesy of Jubilee Debt Campaign
Martin Luther King Jr, quote from www.thinkexist.com

Week two

Statistics (i) to (vi) from UNAIDS, *Report on the global AIDS epidemic 2008*, August 2008

Mother Teresa, quote from www.thinkexist.com

Week three

Mahatma Gandhi, quote from http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/m/mohandas_gandhi.html

Week four

Martin Luther King Jr, quote from www.thinkexist.com

Edmund Burke, quote from www.thinkexist.com

Mahatma Gandhi, quote from www.quoteworld.org/quotes/5220

Week six

Statistic (i) from World Development Movement. Statistics (ii), (iii) and (iv) from United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Statistic (v) from Corporate Europe Observatory.

Feedback form

Thank you for using this study pack. Please complete this form to help us improve future MRDF publications.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____

Name of church/group: _____

Church denomination: _____

How did you hear about the study pack?

- Small Miracles newsletter
- MRDF website
- monthly E-News from MRDF
- Premier Christian Radio
- advert in the Methodist Recorder
- advert in the Church Times
- from another publication (please specify)

How many people were in your group?

- Fewer than 5
- 5-10
- 10-20
- 20+

Have you used an MRDF study pack before?

- Yes No

Have you used any other MRDF resources before? If so, which ones?

What did you like most about the study course?

What did you like least about the study course?

What action(s) will your group be taking in response?

I/we would like to make a donation of £ _____
(cheques payable to MRDF)

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- Tick here to gift aid an individual donation (gift aid envelopes are available from MRDF for members of your group to use). I pay income tax/capital gains tax equivalent to the amount MRDF will be reclaiming on my donation. Please reclaim the tax on all donations I have made in the last six years and all donations I make hereafter.

I would like

- MRDF's newsletter, *Small Miracles*, every quarter
- monthly E-News from MRDF
- MRDF's Harvest pack (available from July)
- to find out about becoming an MRDF Co-ordinator
- information about Partner a Project – commit to supporting and learning more about an MRDF partner over a year or more

Please return, with the feedback forms from your group members, to:

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Methodist Relief &
Development Fund

MRDF makes **small miracles** possible for people living in the world's poorest communities.