

The Community of St Cuthbert

Introductory Study Guide
for Spiritual Support Groups

Five Old Testament Studies

Welcome!

from the Prior of the Community of St Cuthbert, Rev Dr Richard Briggs

I am delighted to welcome you to the adventure of being part of the **Community of St Cuthbert**. Our community is about living out our Christian faith together, as we grow in knowing and trusting our Lord Jesus Christ. This is a journey for all of us – young and old, beginners or experienced in the Christian life.

One of the Bible's words for those of us who follow Christ is 'disciple' – which basically means 'follower', or 'learner'. In the Community of St Cuthbert we want to be disciples together, recognising that we need each other's help, support and encouragement. This is why we are developing **Spiritual Support Groups**.

We also grow spiritually when we hold each other accountable. To do that involves having a Spiritual Support Group where we first of all encourage each other. That enables us to share with each other what we want to be held accountable for. Then we can lovingly and faithfully follow up with each other in later meetings how we are doing.

To focus our discipleship, the Community of St Cuthbert was launched in 2020 with five **Rhythms of Grace**. You can read more about them in this booklet. This booklet also contains 5 introductory studies on the rhythms of grace that a Group can work through together. There are two different introductory booklets you can use for this, and we recommend that your group uses both of them. This one offers five **Old Testament studies**. Another booklet offers five New Testament studies. In each case, there is one study on each rhythm of grace.

I hope you will find this an exciting and rewarding part of the life of our church. Please do get in touch if you have questions, as we develop our Community and its resources through 2021. Your group leaders will also have ways of contacting further support and help.

(You can contact Richard at prior@stnics.org.uk)

Five Rhythms of Grace

Prayer: Resolve to pray each day. Spend time with God in prayer, listening to God as well as speaking to Him. Pray for at least ten minutes each morning or evening.

Hospitality: Practise hospitality. Look at the way the church played a role in the life of the early church in Acts 2. Consider how Jesus - especially in Luke's Gospel - links food and welcome in parables and in action. Break bread together with those who know Jesus and those who have yet to know him as a way of expressing God's love.

Study: Set aside time for study and learning, read a passage from the Bible each day. Use reading notes or study guides to deepen your understanding of the Bible and wider issues of theology. Read a Christian book, listen to a podcast or watch a film that will encourage, inspire and challenge you.

Justice: Serve others and work for justice. Recognise God's bias to the poor at home and abroad. Undertake acts of generosity without being asked. Get involved in a community initiative that will help others. Oppose inequality and injustice whenever you encounter it.

Witness: Share your faith with others. Participate in God's Mission both locally and globally. Ask God to give you the courage to share your faith, look for opportunities to explain what you believe to close friends or relatives, and get involved in a world-mission initiative: offer prayerful, practical or financial support

Spiritual Support Groups

Spiritual Support Groups give structure to our dispersed community.

They consist of small groups of people who commit themselves to meet regularly to encourage and support each other in their desire to become people deeply rooted in God and to grow in spiritual maturity.

What happens when the group meets?

We recommend that a group plans to meet for about an hour (or an hour and a quarter maximum). It is better to have an hour together every week than a longer meeting every two or three weeks. A typical meeting might look like this:

- Opening catch-up 10 mins
- Study - 20 mins
- Closing question – what has challenged you, what can we pray for – ask one person to note it down - 10 mins
- What encouragements/challenges can we catch up on - 10 mins (*This is where accountability comes in – e.g. what did we say we would do last week and have we done it?*)
- Time of prayer - 10 mins

It is important that each member in turn is given space to speak honestly about some aspect of their current Christian journey. After a member has spoken in this way, there will be a short time for silent reflection, followed by a time when the other members can comment on what has been said. It is usual at the end of each meeting for each member to choose some specific task to work at in the days leading up to the next meeting.

How often do groups meet?

All the practical questions about how, when and where a group meets will need to be decided by the group, whose leaders will be in regular communication with the Prior of the Community. In this way we hope each group will feel part of the larger community and not isolated or left on its own.

Introduction to the Studies

This booklet contains five introductory **Old Testament studies**, one on each of the rhythms of grace. Each study follows the same format:

- we focus on a short passage of scripture
- there is a short note on where the passage comes from
- there are some questions to help groups focus on what the passage says
- there is an invitation to ask how we can live in a way that honours this particular passage

It is important that each member of the group is invited to participate in the reflection on how to live in the light of the passage.

Two additional points:

(i) the goal of responding to passages of scripture is transformation of our lives. This is based on a good understanding of the passage, but often there is more than one way of helpfully understanding Bible passages. Studying together can therefore enrich us, and groups will develop habits of listening to each other's insights and not having one person teach everyone else their own way of looking at the Bible.

(ii) In 2020-21 we cannot ignore the COVID pandemic, and the difference this might make to how we live as disciples, so each study also ends with an optional further question about how each rhythm of grace might be different right now during COVID. Groups will make their own decisions about how much time they want to give to that discussion.

Justice

Micah 6:6-8

Have one person read the passage out loud to the group, and then let everyone read it again silently to themselves.

where does the passage come from?

Micah was a prophet to the (Southern) kingdom of Judah, around the 8th century BC. Like most prophets, he focused on calling God's people to live according to God's standards. In Micah 6 the issue is: what sort of life does God require of God's people?

what does the passage say?

- What is God *not* pleased with? (vv.6-7), and why would people have tried to please God in the ways listed?
- What might be some similar things we would do today to try to please God?
- Verse 8 lists 3 ways we *are* invited to please God: why might justice, mercy and humility be related together here?

how can we live in a way that honours the passage?

Each person talk about an example where you or someone you know has:

- acted justly – with mercy and humility, *or*
- loved mercy – with justice and humility, *or*
- walked humbly – with justice and mercy

Which one of these might be most relevant to you in a situation you are facing in your life at this time?

reflecting in a time of COVID:

Does justice in the light of Micah 6 look different during the COVID pandemic?

Discuss your different views on this in the group.

Study

Psalm 1:1-3

Have one person read the passage out loud to the group, and then let everyone read it again silently to themselves.

where does the passage come from?

Psalm 1 is written as an introduction to the book of Psalms, to encourage people to make the most of all the Psalms that follow. It focuses on the way that studying scripture ('God's law') can transform us. God's 'law' (*torah*; 'instruction') can mean 'what God says about how we should live'.

what does the passage say?

- What does the 'blessed' person avoid (v.1) and delight in (v.2)? And what might be today's equivalents of these things?
- What might it mean – then and now – to 'meditate on God's law day and night'?
- What does it mean for a tree to yield 'fruit in season'? (v.3) and why is the tree an image of meditating daily on God's law?

how can we live in a way that honours the passage?

Each person talk about your own experience of trying and/or failing to meditate on God's word day and night. What encourages you to persevere, and what are some problems that discourage you?

Share suggestions for how to help each other with a rhythm of studying, together or individually.

reflecting in a time of COVID:

In the light of Psalm 1, can the COVID pandemic be a season of fruitfulness for studying scripture or a season of barrenness? Discuss your different views on this in the group.

Prayer

Proverbs 30:7-9

Have one person read the passage out loud to the group, and then let everyone read it again silently to themselves.

where does the passage come from?

The book of Proverbs is a collection of sayings designed to help us grow in wisdom. It was compiled over many years in Israel, from the time of Solomon onwards. There is only one prayer in the whole book: this passage in Proverbs 30. Common themes in Proverbs include thinking rightly about money (what we own) and our words.

what does the passage say?

- What are the 'two things' the writer asks of God?
- 'Keep falsehood and lies far from me' might refer to other people's lies, or not lying myself. Which option strikes you as most relevant?
- Why does the writer pray for a middle way between poverty and riches?
- How can this prayer help us understand the Lord's prayer (Matt 6:9-13)?

how can we live in a way that honours the passage?

Each person talk about how you think prayer can keep you in touch with God and thus able to resist 'disowning' or 'dishonouring' God (v.9). Share with the group an area of your own life where the kind of prayer found in Proverbs 30 would help you. +Remember to check back with each other next time about how it is working out.

reflecting in a time of COVID:

What could it mean to pray for 'neither poverty nor riches' during the COVID pandemic? Discuss your different views on this in the group.

Hospitality

Genesis 18:1-8

Have one person read the passage out loud to the group, and then let everyone read it again silently to themselves.

where does the passage come from?

This story from the life of Abraham leads on to other famous incidents – such as Abraham arguing with God about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah – but it starts out in Gen 18 as a simple tale of visitors on a hot day, a long time ago ...

what does the passage say?

- What might have made Abraham hurry out to meet the three men, and why does he want them to stop and visit?
- What does Abraham provide for the men, and what might it have symbolised?
- How does the passage show us the value of what Abraham offers?
- Readers know (v.1) that it is 'the LORD' who appears to Abraham, but as far as Abraham is aware it is just 'three men' (v.2). Is this story perhaps in view in Hebrews 13:2? How might that New Testament verse speak to us?

how can we live in a way that honours the passage?

Each person talk about a time when you have experienced unexpected and/or generous hospitality and how it made you feel. What are some practical situations in which we could show the same generosity today?

reflecting in a time of COVID:

Are there ways we might offer socially-distanced hospitality during the COVID pandemic? Discuss your different views on this in the group.

Witness

Isaiah 44:6-8

Have one person read the passage out loud to the group, and then let everyone read it again silently to themselves.

where does the passage come from?

Isaiah 44 is part of the book of Isaiah's great announcement that the LORD – the God of Israel – will bring God's people back from exile in Babylon, to their own land, in the 6th century BC. Part of the issue is reminding God's people that the LORD alone is a true God, compared to the gods all around them in Babylon.

what does the passage say?

- How would the Israelites in exile have heard v.6?
- 'You are my witnesses' says v.8. What have these witnesses seen and heard about God?
- What comfort is there in this passage for the Israelites living in difficult conditions in exile?
- What does it mean to say that God is a rock?

how can we live in a way that honours the passage?

Each person talk about what makes it hard to be a witness for God, and what can encourage us to be witnesses. What is one thing about God in this passage that gives us confidence?

reflecting in a time of COVID:

Are there helpful parallels between the Israelites needing hope in the exile and the church needing hope in a pandemic? Discuss your different views on this in the group.