

A People Transformed

Small Group Bible Study Notes

The people of God have historically and globally worshipped under all circumstances including threats, war and persecution – and for us, now, in a time of pandemic. They have had to ask new questions about what it means to continue to live out their calling to be a faithful presence and prophetic witness in their communities under new circumstances. ‘A People Transformed’ is a 4 session small group resource exploring those questions by drawing on the experience of the early church recorded for us in Acts, and is written to be used in an online context.

Hosting an online small group

With current restrictions in place our groups may not be able to meet physically for a while but that doesn't mean they can't meet. It's been so encouraging to see the number of churches responding to the challenge by going online with their worship services, and with internet-based tools, small groups can continue to gather as well. If you're not currently part of a small group, this could be an opportunity to start one.

The two main online platforms are Zoom or Google groups. Each comes with pros and cons – googling them will offer some video help on using them.

If you're new to online gatherings, here are a few tips to help make it a good experience:

1. Recommend that group members download the software at least 30 minutes before the group starts, just in case they have technology issues they need to work out.
2. Base yourself in the quietest room that you can and it helps to have only one device running in any one room as using more than that can produce feedback.
3. Encourage participants to mute themselves unless they're talking as if everyone is unmuted the sound quality can be an issue and it's hard to hear the person who is talking.
4. Create a plan for how group members can indicate they'd like to speak – some platforms have a 'raise hand' function that's really helpful for this.
5. The material here is written for a group meeting for about an hour.
6. It would be helpful for group members to read the passages before you gather, and to read the whole of Acts 1-8 before embarking on study 1.

A People Transformed

Introduction

'Unprecedented' is a word that we're hearing a lot in these days. Without a doubt we're living through a time unlike any other in many of our lifetimes, and each day brings new challenges as we navigate new and different ways of living, working and sharing in life together. As the people of God we are not immune from the mild inconveniences, the bigger challenges and the deep, deep losses and grief that are being experienced not just in the UK, but around the globe.

How do we live through these days as people of hope, holding fast to the belief that the gospel of Jesus is truly good news both for our own lives, and for our neighbours and communities? How do we respond to the questions and fears of those around us, not in a triumphalist or callous way, but with a genuine belief that in any season and in any circumstance, our only real hope is to be found in Jesus?

There are big questions that we're wrestling with right now, and so much that we don't know and are at a loss as to how we plan for what is ahead. The book of Acts offers us some insight into what it was like for the first disciples as they walked into unprecedented days, having received Jesus' commission to make new disciples and to be his witnesses "... in Jerusalem, in all Judea and in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

In his first book, Luke tells the stories of how Jesus reached out to those around him, people of every status and standing and proclaimed the arrival of the kingdom. In Acts the story of Jesus continues, but through the lives of those who believe in him and follow his ways. The book of Acts is the inspiring account of the early disciples as they formed the early church and spread the Good News of Jesus.

However, *"The Church doesn't just come into being simply by Jesus talking about it – it happens when the Holy Spirit falls on the first believers. Just as Jesus lived his life in the power of the Spirit, so the Church also lives in the Spirit, continuing Jesus' mission in the world."* (The Bible from Scratch)

When we first meet up with the disciples again in Acts 1, they watch as Jesus ascends into heaven, and do as he has instructed them - to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes. We start our studies on the day of Pentecost – on that day the disciples were a people transformed by the power of the Spirit who then went on to transform their communities, and community after community to the ends of the earth.

The heart of our vision as a diocese is that we would be 'Healthy churches transforming communities'. The story of Acts continues with us, and the only way that our churches will be truly healthy and for us to be agents of transformation in our communities is as we know afresh the transformative presence of the Holy Spirit in our own lives.

Study One: A People Transformed

Acts 2:1-41

As you begin to gather online take a few moments to catch up with each other, to see what the highlights and lowlights of the week have been and once all settled, you might like to begin by praying this prayer together:

As we join together to look at your word, may the light of your presence, O God, set our hearts on fire with love you for; now and for ever. Amen.

Allow a few moments to read over the passage either quietly, or if in a smaller group you could share out the reading between you.

1. Is there anything that immediately strikes you about the passage?

Just before his ascension Jesus had told his disciples to wait for the Spirit, and so they waited. Jesus knew that the prophecy from Joel, given hundreds of years earlier, that Peter would go on to quote was about to be played out right in front of them.

Without a doubt something happened! With the outpouring of the Spirit the scared disciples poured out onto the streets with a new-found boldness, and new-found languages, declaring their praises and Peter preaches the sermon of his life!

2. What differences do you see in Peter from what you've previously read of him in the gospels?

3. In Acts 2:5-12 the crowds ask three questions – what were they?

4. How does Peter respond to them in his speech?

5. What impact did Peter's speech have on the people who heard him?

6. What do you think it means to be 'cut to the heart?' (v37)

On this first day of Pentecost, with the gift of the Spirit we don't just see a slightly improved Peter, we see a complete transformation. Empowered by the Spirit Peter has a real clarity to be able to share both the historical story of God, and the disciples own experience of what they'd witnessed as they lived life with Jesus over the previous three years – his miracles, his teaching, his everyday life. Peter's life was transformed – his eyes and heart were opened to see how the story of God fit together, he was given an incredible gift of preaching, and the boldness to open his mouth and speak.

Peter declares in v32 that they were witnesses to God raising Jesus to life and that's the message he was sharing. To be a witness simply means giving an account of what you've seen. One of the strands of Vision 2026 is Being Witnesses which sets out our intention as God's people in Lancashire to be those who can simply give account to what we've seen and known of God in our own lives and how we have known the transforming nature of the Spirit.

7. Who was it that first introduced you to God?

8. How have you seen the transforming nature of the Spirit in your own life and in the lives of others?

9. Read v 39 again, what strikes you about who is included in the promise of the Holy Spirit?

10. Reflecting on this passage and your conversation so far, what thoughts are being prompted in you and what questions does it raise for you?

As you close take some time to pray together either as a whole group, or using the breakout room facility.

Study Two: A People Gathered

Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-37

As you begin to gather online take a few moments to catch up with each other, to see what the highlights and lowlights of the week have been and once all settled, you might like to begin by praying this prayer together:

As we join together to look at your word, may the light of your presence, O God, set our hearts on fire with love you for; now and for ever. Amen.

Allow a few moments to read over the passage either quietly, or if in a smaller group you could share out the reading between you.

- 1. Is there anything that immediately strikes you about these passages?*
- 2. Share a positive experience you have of community. What was it that made it positive?*
- 3. What are some of the risks of committing yourself to a community?*
- 4. What was nature of the early church community? Is it important where they met?*

In v42 Luke tells us that the early church ‘devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.’ (NIV)

- 5. When you hear the word ‘fellowship’, what comes to mind?*

The Greek word for fellowship is ‘koinonia’ and whilst it doesn’t have an exact translation in English it refers to concepts of covenantal relationship with God and each other, and joint participation.

- 6. How do we see the early church living this out?*
- 7. How has the nature of community and fellowship changed in this season of not being able to physically gather together?*
- 8. Is there anything we can learn from the early church in this time of lockdown, about how we gather around Christ and care for each other?*

In v46 we’re told they met ‘day by day’ which indicates a consistent and extended period of time, such as weeks, months, years or even a lifetime. They were deeply committed to each other, ensuring that no-one went without.

- 9. How do you think this would have changed their worshipping life together?*
- 10. Reflecting on this passage and your conversation so far, what thoughts are being prompted in you and what questions does it raise for you?*

Close by praying for each other that you’ll experience true community around Christ in your small group and in the wider church fellowship.

Study Three: A People Sent

Acts 3:1-16 and 5:12-16

As you begin to gather online take a few moments to catch up with each other, to see what the highlights and lowlights of the week have been and once all settled, you might like to begin by praying this prayer together:

As we join together to look at your word, may the light of your presence, O God, set our hearts on fire with love you for; now and for ever. Amen.

Allow a few moments to read over the passage either quietly, or if in a smaller group you could share out the reading between you.

1. Is there anything that immediately strikes you about these passages?

In Acts chapter 2 we saw that literally immediately after Pentecost the apostles knew more about Christ than they had known from three years of being His disciples. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit gave them the gift of faith and abilities they had not experienced before. They were now experiencing the abundant life Jesus had spoken about.

As we move on through the book of Acts we see God pouring out His power on the world as He establishes His church. He takes ordinary men and women and empowers them with the Holy Spirit and enables them to fulfil the commission he gave to them in Matthew 28 that ‘as you go’ you are to make disciples. God’s intent was always that faith should be lived out in our everyday lives, - ‘as we go’. That, yes, we’re a people gathered in community but we’re also a people sent out to be those who share the good news of Christ in word and deed, bringing his life to our communities. This is exactly what Peter and John were doing.

2. What do you think prompted Peter and John to stop and respond to the lame man?

3. What is the relevance and importance of Peter saying ‘In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth?’

4. How did the lame man respond?

5. How did the crowds at the temple respond once they heard about the miracle?

6. What opportunity did this open up for Peter?

The early church came to the notice of their neighbours because of the way in which they sacrificially cared for the poor, the enslaved and the disregarded groups in their society. Their longing was that their community would flourish – they could have pulled out and hidden away but instead, as an overflow of having known the goodness of God and his transforming power, they went out to serve with abundant generosity with the absolute belief that our only hope is life in Christ. They took seriously Jesus’ words to proclaim that the Kingdom is near – whether that was to a crowd of thousands or one lame man that others overlooked.

Each week, and for many of us each day, we pray the Lord’s Prayer, and ask that ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’.

7. *What do you think it would look like if that prayer was answered in your community?*
8. *What role can we play in fulfilling that? How can we recover the courage and sacrifice of the early church through service and proclamation – and where do you see that already happening?*
9. *Where are your ‘as you go’ places that you can demonstrate the goodness and love of God?*

The philosopher and theologian Dallas Willard claims that the only cure to the distressed human condition, individual and social, is a spiritual one – the transformation of people through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He goes on to say that we need, as ordinary individuals who make up the human race today, to show how we can become through the grace of Christ, a love-filled, effective and powerful community.

9. *How do you respond to Willard’s claim?*

10. *Reflecting on this passage and your conversation so far, what thoughts are being prompted in you and what questions does it raise for you?*

As you close take some time to pray together, maybe using the words of Jesus recorded for us in Matthew 5:

‘You’re here to be light, bringing out the God colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand – shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in Heaven.’

Matthew 5:14-16 (The Message)

Study Four: A People Scattered

Acts 6:8-15, 7:54 – 8:8

As you begin to gather online take a few moments to catch up with each other, to see what the highlights and lowlights of the week have been and once all settled, you might like to begin by praying this prayer together:

As we join together to look at your word, may the light of your presence, O God, set our hearts on fire with love you for; now and for ever. Amen.

Allow a few moments to read over the passage either quietly, or if in a smaller group you could share out the reading between you.

1. Is there anything that immediately strikes you about these passages?

In Acts 1:8 Jesus had told his disciples ‘you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ In Acts chapters 7 and 8 we begin to see how that dispersion starts to take place – as a result of persecution.

The young, fledgling church in Jerusalem were facing severe persecution under a campaign led by Saul who went from house to house arresting and imprisoning followers of Jesus. Following the death of Stephen we’re told that all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

2. What are we told about the character of Stephen?

3. Does this challenge you in any way?

4. What do you notice about the response of the dispersed (remembering these would have been the thousands who had come to faith following Pentecost) in 8:4?

In 8:5-8 to read about one former church leader, Philip, going down to Samaria. This would have been unheard of before as the Jewish people had a derogatory view of the Samaritans – but he went and proclaimed Jesus and many responded and we’re told there was great joy in the city.

5. Do you think this is what the Jewish leaders, persecuting the church, thought would happen as they stoned Stephen?

It’s incredible how Saul’s murderous threats resulted in the persecuted Christians being mobilised into action and growing the church far and wide. As Al Mohler puts it ‘What we see as setbacks, the Lord uses for advance; where we see a detour from the obvious route, the Lord has so often plotted out a path to the growth of his people and the glory of his Son’.

Evidently what we are currently experiencing is not a great persecution on our lives as Christians but there has been much debate about the effects of our buildings being closed.

6. *Are you seeing any evidence of the reality Mohler's comment in this current time?*

7. *What are some of the losses and grief that you are facing right now, and what new things are being born?*

For many Christians around the world, persecution is a daily reality, and they have no other option but to be a scattered church.

8. *What do you think we might learn from the persecuted church in these days?*

9. *How can we better support our brothers and sisters around the world who are facing persecution?*

10. *Reflecting on this passage and your conversation so far, what thoughts are being prompted in you and what questions does it raise for you? What do you want to take away from this study series?*

As you close take some time to pray about the questions that have been raised, the actions you might be wanting to take, and for our brothers and sisters facing persecution.