



HOLIDAYS, HOLY DAYS
TERM 4, 2015

How to be in a small group

Another year, another Bible study group. Time to sign up, turn up and get things rolling for another year. Time also perhaps to ask some questions about your small group. Do you feel as if you just go along because that's what you're expected to do? Does the group have a clear purpose, or does it just exist because it has always existed?

More to the point, what part are you going to play in this year's group? What can you be doing to make the group a success? There are many books and guides and training materials for small group leaders (like *Growth Groups* from Matthias Media), but what about the humble group member? What can each of us be doing to make the most of our small groups?

Why go in the first place?

People go to small groups for all sorts of reasons to fulfil expectations, to make friends, to pursue romantic possibilities, to receive encouragement and counsel, to learn, and so on.

While most of these might be perfectly acceptable reasons to join a small group, the first and indispensable reason must be clear in our minds. Our primary reason for belonging to a small group is to give us opportunity to love and encourage other people in Christ. It's not about Me; it's about Them. And it's about Them because of Christ.

This after all is what the Christian life is about. Our most basic principle is to love other people as Christ has loved us, to lay down our lives for them as Christ did for us. This applies as much to small groups as it does to marriages, families, workplaces, and larger Christian meetings. We go to small groups not primarily to have our needs met, but to meet the needs of others. Of course, we have needs too, and no doubt they will be met along the way—but we can let others worry about that. In fact, paradoxically, the more we focus on loving others, and doing whatever we can for them, the more encouragement and strength we find ourselves.

There are many ways we can love and encourage the other people in our groups. Here are five powerful ones (complete with alliterative titles).

1. The power of presence

This is the simplest and most obvious, but is no less powerful for being so. Just being there each week without fail is a powerful encouragement to the other members of the group. In making the group time a solid commitment, to be missed only in times of emergency, you send a very clear message to the other members: "Being with you matters very much to me. Unless something very important comes up, you can expect me. Encouraging you is a top priority."

Conversely, inconsistent attendance sends a somewhat less encouraging message: "I don't mind coming, but it's not that important. If I feel a bit tired or something else crops up, don't expect me. Being with you and encouraging you isn't really a very high priority for me."

Turning up regularly requires no extraordinary gifts or talent, but it is a powerful way of loving other people.

2. The power of preparation

Most small groups complete their evening's Bible study with a plaintive plea from the leader for people to read the passage and prepare for next week's study. The leader knows full well that most people won't, but there's no harm in trying!

However, preparing for the group time is another powerful way to love the members of the group. Of course, having read the

passage, or done the homework, greatly increases the benefit you yourself receive from the discussion. More importantly, however, it equips you to encourage others by what you say. Rather than throwing in whatever occurs to you at the time, you have actually thought about the Bible passage and the issues that it raises. You are much better prepared to say things that stimulate and encourage and teach others if you have bothered to give it some thought beforehand.

3. The power of prayer

Paul's friend and fellow worker, Epaphras, would have made an ideal small group member. According to Paul, he was always "wrestling in prayer" for the Colossians, that they might "stand firm in all the will of God". Paul was able to vouch that in doing so, Epaphras was "working hard for you" (Col 4:12-13).

Praying for others is hard work, but real work. It is one of the most loving things we can do for our fellow group members, not only because it is through our prayers that God does his work in people's lives, but because it is such a quiet, inconspicuous form of ministry. Making a casserole for someone, by comparison, is much more satisfying—you see something very tangible for your efforts, and you have the pleasure of delivering it to the person and receiving their warm expressions of thanks. Prayer has none of those rewards. You do it for one reason only: that you care for that person and want what is best for them in Christ. And so you pray for them.

4. The power of personality

The alliteration may be starting to stretch a little thin here, but the point is solid enough—that a powerful way of loving others in your small group is to be willing to share your own life and personality with them.

This is by no means an easy thing to do. Many of us would much rather keep quiet and not give too much away. However, by opening up and sharing our lives and thoughts and struggles and joys, we do others a great service. We not only show them that we have the very same struggles that they have (but thought they were alone in suffering); we also encourage them to open up as well.

Of course, it is anything but loving to indiscriminately dump everything we are thinking or feeling onto the group. We need to heed the advice of Proverbs and think carefully before we speak; as well as the words of Ephesians 4: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Eph 4:29).

5. The power of love

Whatever you do in the group—every word you say, every action—do it for the sake of others. Look for how you can support and help the leader. Look for ways to care for the members of the group—those who could really do with a phone call or visit; those who would benefit from having someone to pray or read the Bible with; those who need financial or other material help; those who just need a friend to have pizza and a video with.

Belonging to a small group can be a very demanding exercise. It can cost us our lives, because that is what it means to be a follower of Christ—to lay down our lives for the sake of others. If we grasp the possibilities, small groups represent an enormously fruitful opportunity for doing just that.



AN INTRODUCTION TO ISRAEL'S FEASTS & DAYS

Whether it's Saturday morning brunch, Christmas lunch, chocolate at Easter, pizza with the guys, friends over for dinner, a Maccas run, or a birthday cake, food is much more than just keeping our bodies operating. It is important in our relationships and our celebrations. It's especially so on special days and holidays. And we Aussies love a holiday too—Australia Day, Queen's Birthday, Anzac Day, Boxing Day... Feasting and holidays are a feature of life in our society, and ancient Israel was no different.

For Israel, nationally defined as God's chosen people, feasts and holy days had religious significance. They helped Israel explore their faith and lives before God. They were an expression of Israel's life as the community of God's people. Through feasts and holy days, Yahweh's faithfulness was remembered and became the basis for Israel's hope for the future. Shared sacrifices, festive meals, prayers, singing and dancing, times of travel and times of rest renewed Israel's sense of belonging with God.

Some of their feasts and holy days had historical associations, while others were based in agriculture. This reminded Israel of the God who formed them, and the God who blessed them by giving them land and provisions. Other feasts and days reminded Israel of God's good creation, his concern for the poor, and his concern for all nations of the world. Each feast and holy day told a part of the story of God's redemptive love, and brought Israel into the story and made them part of it.

Each feast and holy day also points us to Jesus. In Colossians 2.16-17 Paul talks about feasts, religious festivals, New Moon celebrations, and Sabbath days. He says, **“These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”** A shadow is just a shape, just an outline, of the real thing. As we work through a few of Israel's many feasts and holy days, we're going to discover how their reality is in Christ.

When we think of a holiday we often think of a trip to the beach. But the word *holiday* originally meant *holy day*. A holy day was a day devoted to God. Summer holidays aren't far off for us. Will our holidays just be holidays? Days devoted to ourselves and our families and doing the things we want to do? Or will they also be holy days – days devoted to God and what he's already done for us?

STUDY 1; THE PASSOVER

Preparation

- Complete this section of preparation **before** you meet at Small Group.

Reading the passage before Small Group greatly increases the benefit you receive from the discussion. But it's also a powerful way to love the others in your group as you share what you have discovered.

- Pray and read Leviticus 23

What are the various feasts ordained by God?

Small Group Study

One of Australia's favourite days is Anzac Day. Why do you think Anzac Day is such a big deal for us?

Read Exodus 12

What was Israel's situation in Exodus 12?

The book of Exodus starts with the story of Israel's rescue from Egypt. It was God's most incredible and powerful act of rescue in Israel's history. Check out Exodus 1.6-22 and 5.6-9, and skim over chapters 1-11 to remind yourself of the story.

How does God plan to bring about this rescue (12)?

What were the Israelites instructed to do, and why (21-23)?

What substitution will take place if the Israelites do this?

Check out verses 24-28 and Deuteronomy 16.1-8. Why did God instruct Israel to re-enact this every year?

The Passover was an incredible act of rescue. God brought both judgement against sin and salvation for his people. He did this by giving them a substitute, a lamb that would be killed so that they would live. Every year the Israelites were instructed to kill a lamb, to remember God's amazing rescue from judgement and death. But this rescue would one day be eclipsed by an even greater rescue...

Read Matthew 26.1-2 and John 1.29

What is the significance of the timing of Jesus' crucifixion? What is the significance of John calling Jesus *the Lamb of God*?

Read 1st Corinthians 5.7b

Just in case it's not clear, Paul puts it together for us. What does it mean that Christ is our Passover lamb who has been sacrificed?

Jesus has set us free from sin and judgement. Jesus died in our place, he was our substitute so that we can escape death. One good way we can be deliberate about remembering that is by celebrating The Lord's Supper, which we do every now and then at church (check out 1st Corinthians 11.23-26). What are the benefits of remembering and celebrating what Jesus has done?

Get in pairs and brainstorm and share some real ways you could remember Jesus' rescue this week. Spend some time praying for each other—that you would be deliberate about doing those things, and that you would see the benefits of it.

STUDY 2; THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

Preparation

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- Pray and read Leviticus 23

There are variations in the feasts, but what features do they have in common?

Small Group Study

What do people do to deal with guilt?

Read Leviticus 16

The Day of Atonement was all about what *God* has done to deal with the guilt of his people.

What situation has prompted God to establish a Day of Atonement (verse 1, see also chapter 10.1-3)?

Aaron and his sons were priests, and their job was to represent Israel before God in the Tent of Meeting, which was also called the *Tabernacle* (later replaced by the temple). Though God is holy and perfect, he gave his people a way of approaching him. Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu came into God's presence without permission. Because they were sinful, guilty humans, they died.

What does God prepare Aaron for (1-14)?

Why does God do this (2, 6, 11, 13)?

God also instructs Aaron to make atonement for the Tent of Meeting and the altar because of the uncleanness of the Israelites (15-19). What does all this preparation say about the sinfulness of the people compared to the holiness of God?

How does God symbolically deal with the people's sin (20-22)?

Read Hebrews 9.7-14

What does our sinfulness and guilt before the holy God deserve (14)?

Jesus has become our scapegoat! Jesus was not sinful, nor guilty like we are, but God placed our sin on Jesus, just like Aaron placed Israel's sin on the goat. Many people today find it offensive that God would let his son be killed when he was innocent. What does Jesus' death show us about the offensiveness of our sin and guilt before our holy God?

Read Leviticus 23.26-32

The Day of Atonement was not a celebration. It wasn't a feast. It was a solemn day, a day of denying yourself. It was a day of owning and admitting sin and guilt and the death you deserve. It was a day of remembering that unless God did something about it, you would be swallowed up and destroyed in the fire of his holiness. Why is this still a good thing for us to remember today?

Read 1st John 2.2

Our Day of Atonement happened the day Jesus died for us. What can we do to grow an attitude of humility and thankfulness for that day?

STUDY 3; THE FEAST OF FIRSTFRUITS

Preparation

- Complete this section of preparation **before** you meet at Small Group.

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- Pray and read Leviticus 23

What value would the feasts have in the yearly cycle of life for Israel?

Small Group Study

Read Leviticus 23.9-14

Where are Israel while God is speaking to them in Leviticus 23 (hint in verse 10)?

What are Israel instructed to do when they reap their first harvest in the Promised land?

The Feast of Firstfruits was a celebration of what was to come—the harvest. It wasn't a celebration of Israel's skill in ploughing and irrigating and sowing seed and planting trees—far from it! God brought them into the Promised Land, a land already fertile and famously described as 'flowing with milk and honey'. This was a celebration of God's harvest, the good life that God was giving his people. The first fruits were the first taste!

Read Mark 16.1-6

The Feast of Firstfruits occurred on the first day of the week, the day after the Sabbath. What happens in Mark 16 on the day after the Sabbath?

Read 1st Corinthians 15.20-23

Why does Paul call Jesus the firstfruits?

By calling Jesus the firstfruits, Paul is saying that Jesus is the first taste of the coming harvest. Who or what is the harvest to come?

What does Jesus' resurrection guarantee?

Israel traipsed through the desert for 40 years, surviving on only water, manna, and quail. The thought of a bountiful harvest from God in the Promised Land would've made their mouths water! What situation do we find ourselves in that makes us long for the coming harvest?

What does Christ's resurrection teach us about the harvest to come?

If we are anticipating and rejoicing in the resurrection of all who belong to Christ Jesus, what will we devote time to (check out Matthew 9.35-38)?

Spend time praying that God would send out labourers into his harvest. Think about all the opportunities there are for that to happen in the upcoming holidays.

STUDY 4; THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

Preparation

- Complete this section of preparation **before** you meet at Small Group.

Reading the passage before Small Group greatly increases the benefit you receive from the discussion. But it's also a powerful way to love the others in your group as you share what you have discovered.

- Pray and read Leviticus 23

What is the value of celebrating what God has done "by the calendar" and not just whenever we feel like it?

Small Group Study

What would you do differently if you got to start life over again?

Read Leviticus 25.8-55

What is proclaimed when the Year of Jubilee begins (10)? What happens in the Year of Jubilee?

What might occur that would take people away from their land and family in the first place (25, 29, 35, 39, 47)?

There is a lot of detail in the chapter, but in a nutshell, in the Year of Jubilee all debts are cancelled, all slaves are set free, and all land is returned to its original owners (land was a

big part of God's promise to Israel). What reason does God give for doing this (23, 42-43, 54-55)?

For Israel, the Year of Jubilee happened once every 50 years. It didn't happen often, but it did repeat regularly. Isaiah the prophet hoped for a Jubilee Year that would set God's people free forever.

Read Isaiah 61.1-3

What makes the Year of Jubilee Isaiah is looking forward to better than the Year of Jubilee celebrated every 50 years by the Israelites?

Read Luke 4.14-21

Jesus has brought a never-ending Jubilee Year to those who put their trust in him. How has Jesus cancelled our debt? How has Jesus set us free? How has Jesus returned God's promises to us?

We live now, in the Year of Jubilee. It's a totally new start. What does it mean for us, as followers of Jesus, to cancel each other's debts?

What does it mean for us, as followers of Jesus, to set each other free?

What does it mean for us, as followers of Jesus, to bring each other back to God's promises?

STUDY 5; THE SABBATH DAY

Preparation

- Complete this section of preparation **before** you meet at Small Group.

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- Pray and read Leviticus 23

What does this chapter show us about how God wants us to spend our time? What does it teach us about the things that should captivate our hearts?

Small Group Study

What does *downtime* mean to you?

The Sabbath was different to the other feasts we're looking at for two big reasons. First, it happened every week! Not every year, or every 50 years. Second, Israel was commanded to keep the Sabbath in the ten commandments. Sabbath is a Hebrew word which means cease, stop, or rest.

Read Exodus 20.8-11 & Deuteronomy 5.12-15

What are the Israelites not allowed to do on the Sabbath?

Exodus and Deuteronomy give two different reasons for the Sabbath, but they're both about God's work. What are they?

What a relief for recently released slaves to know that God has created humans not only for work, but also for rest in and with our Maker!

Read Psalm 92

If you had to choose three key words to describe what the psalmist is doing on the Sabbath, what would they be?

We live in a world where people are *time-poor*, and we all know that *time is money*. Life gets faster, life offers more and demands more. We long for rest, but the rest we get is over all too quickly.

Read Matthew 11.28-30

Where does rest (Sabbath) come from?

What does Jesus mean when he says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."?

Read Hebrews 4.1-11

How do we enter God's rest (verse 2, verse 6)?

Just as we're made to live God's way, we're made to rest in God. In fact, the two go together! Being made to rest in God should push us to look carefully at our diaries and calendars, and ask whether we are spending real time being with God, expressing our thanks, wondering at his character, and rejoicing in his salvation, like the Psalmist in Psalm 92.

How should the fact that we're made to rest in God shape the way we treat our Sundays?

Holidays aren't far off! How will the fact that you're made to rest in God shape what you do with your time these holidays?