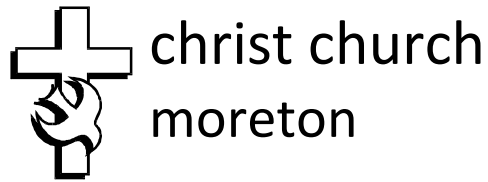


christ church
moreton

**GOD'S
STORY,
MY
STORY**

Christ Church
Home Groups
Autumn 2015



making disciples
growing disciples
being disciples

When you meet someone for the first time, what sort of things do you want to find out about them, and how do you discover those things? How do you get to know someone? Or – when someone asks you ‘tell me about yourself’; what do you do? Although the initial answer might be to give them some facts about yourself – job, hobbies, house etc, pretty soon you will need to get on to telling something of the story of your life. Because all the things that have happened in the past go to make up the person we are now.

How do you get to know someone? Through them telling you their story. And how do you get to know God? The answer has to be the same – through God telling you his story. And that is what the Bible is – God’s story. Not the whole of God’s story – there wouldn’t be enough books in the universe to contain the whole story – but enough for us to know who he is.

But there is more to the Bible than just being God’s story. We could all probably tell each other a brief version of our life story, and make sure that we included the really important events which have shaped us. But our personal stories are set

within a much bigger story – God’s story. We are who we are not only because of what has happened to us personally, but also because of what happened when God created the world, when Adam and Eve rebelled, when Abraham was chosen, when the Israelite slaves were freed, when Jesus came, died, and rose again. These aren’t just events from the distant past – they are part of our story.

So – the Bible is God’s story, and our story. Knowing God’s great story, and seeing how we fit into it, will help us to live as disciples here and now.

The programme for the term looks like this:-

Wednesday 2 nd Sept	Prayer Meeting
Week beginning Mon 7 th Sept	Study 1
Week beginning Mon 14 th Sept	Study 2
Week beginning Mon 21 st Sept	Study 3
Week beginning Mon 28 th Sept	Study 4
Wednesday 7 th Oct	Prayer Meeting (7.45 pm)
Week beginning Mon 12 th Oct	Study 5
Week beginning Mon 19 th Oct	Study 6
Week beginning Mon 26 th Oct	Free Week
Wednesday 4 th Nov	Prayer Meeting (7.45 pm)
Week beginning Mon 9 th Nov	Study 7
Week beginning Mon 16 th Nov	Study 8
Week beginning Mon 23 rd Nov	Study 9
Wednesday 2 nd Dec	Home Groups Together
	<i>Informal Communion Service at 7.45 pm)</i>

1. In the beginning

WELCOME

What is your earliest memory?

WORSHIP

Psalm 19 begins as a hymn of praise for the wonder of creation, and then goes on to say that actually God's word is even more wonderful, because it reveals God's ways to us. Starting with Psalm 19, praise God for the things you most appreciate in creation, and then praise him for the things he has told you through his word.

WORD

This summer we spent a couple of weeks in the French Alps. Every day we were surrounded by the most amazing scenery – mountains stretching as far as the eye could see, lakes that were the most perfect blue. It was a constant reminder of God's creative power, and his generosity in giving us such a beautiful world.

Then we came home, and found news stories of atrocities in Syria, a terrorist attack in France, a devastating explosion in China, and much more. It was a constant reminder of the suffering in the world.

How can we make sense of it – the glory and the pain of life on earth? It is the start of the Bible which shows us why the world is as it is, and that is where we need to start if we want to know God’s story, and our own story.

Read Genesis 1:1-2:3

Christians sometimes seem to see this passage as a good excuse to have an argument about how the universe was formed, but important though that issue is, I hope you’ll be able to leave it on one side.

- Who is the main character in this passage – *who* (rather than *what*) is it telling us about? And what does it tell us about him?
- What do you think it means for human beings to be created in the “image” and “likeness” of God?
- What are some of the ways in which human beings may be “like” God? On the other hand, what major differences are there between God and human beings?
- What role did God have for the man and woman he created? Does this role give permission to human beings to exploit the environment?

Read Colossians 1:15-20

Paul tells us that Jesus is the “image” of the invisible God. How does Jesus help us to understand what God is like?

Humans were created in the image of God, but, as we will see in a moment, that image has been spoiled. But Jesus is the perfect image of God.

- What does Jesus show us about how human life was meant to be?

Read Genesis 2:15-25

This is not so much a different version of the creation story as a more detailed description of the place that the man and woman had within that creation.

- What does this passage tell you about the relationships that the man and woman had:
 - with each other?
 - with the animal world?
 - with God?

What does God tell Adam he can do, and what does he say Adam can’t do?

Read Genesis 3

The Bible doesn’t always tell us everything we would like to know. And here, the Bible doesn’t tell us where the talking serpent comes from, or how it is possible for something God had created to spoil the perfection of his creation. There will

always be an element of mystery surrounding the origin of evil in the creation.

However, if the Bible doesn't tell us everything we would like to know, it does tell us everything God wants us to know.

- So – what essentially was it that Adam and Eve did wrong?
- How does the serpent try to undermine Eve's trust in God?
- What was it about the fruit that made it desirable to Eve?
- What were the immediate results of Eve taking the fruit?

In v.14-19, God pronounces a series of judgments against the serpent, the woman and the man.

- What are these judgments?
- How do they show that the relationships between humans and God, humans with each other, with themselves, and with the world around have been damaged?

Strangely, at first, the serpent seems to be right: Adam and Eve do *not* immediately die. Or do they? One of the things this story should do is to make us reflect long and hard on just what "death" means. The physical life of Adam and Eve does not stop the instant they taste the fruit: this isn't the poison

apple of the fairy tale. But something in them and between them *does* die.'

And that is the beginning of a tragic tale of Paradise Lost. By the time of Noah, the situation was hopeless. *'The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time'* (Genesis 6:5).

God floods the world, saving only Noah and his family. Noah is described as *'a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God,'* (Genesis 6:9) but even he cannot return to Eden, and after the flood things once again get worse.

WORK

The story of creation and fall is tragic, but it is only the start of the story. But as far back as Genesis 3:15, God promised that he would act to redeem the situation. And that is what Jesus did in his death and resurrection.

One of our most important tasks as disciples is to help others to see their need of Jesus – the only one who can rescue them from the mess of this fallen world, and the one who ultimately is worthy of their worship. Over the next 3 Sunday evenings our 'Home Group Extra' will be thinking about how we do that. How can you as a group help one another to put that into practice?

2. A Fresh Start

WELCOME

When you set out on a journey, do you like to know exactly what route you need to take to get to your destination? Or do you like to work your route out as you go along?

WORSHIP

Psalm 15 tells us what is required of those who would come into God's presence. Use the psalm, then thank God that even though we all fall short of that ideal, Jesus didn't – he is the one who can fulfil it on our behalf.

WORD

Last time we saw the beginning of our story – as God created man and woman and placed them in Eden. Everything was wonderful. It is clear from the first 2 chapters of Genesis that human beings are *good* as God creates them. At its beginning, creation was full of *shalom* – the Old Testament word for the rich, relational wholeness God intends for his creation. The life of Adam and Eve is the life of *shalom*. They walk with God, they have each other, the garden provides all they need as they work its fertile soil and prune the flourishing plants. They truly were God's people living in God's place under God's rule.

But the man and the woman rejected God's rule, and were thrown out of Eden. And the way to it is barred. And, as descendants of Adam and Eve, we are born outside Eden. We are born into a world that has rejected God's rule, and so is banished from God's place.

Read Genesis 11:1-9

- What was wrong with the people's desire to build the tower?

- What was God's punishment?

The breakdown in relationships that we saw beginning in Genesis 3 now moves on to include breakdown between groups.

- How does what happened at Babel contribute to our story today?

Read Genesis 12:1-8

Until this point, the Bible has given us the story of the whole of humanity. But now the focus changes. Instead of wiping out humanity and starting again with one man (as with Noah), God chooses one man from among humanity, and makes a fresh start with him.

How are the blessings promised to Abram reversals of the curses in Genesis 3 – 11?

Read Genesis 15:1-16

God's promise is here expressed in terms of a covenant – a binding commitment.

- What was Abraham's side of the covenant? (v.6)

- What was God's side?

- How does the promise to Abraham become part of our story? (see Galatians 3:6-9)

Read Hebrews 11:8-12

Even in the Promised Land, Abraham was still 'like a stranger in a foreign country.' God's promise did not ultimately relate to a land in the Middle East, but something greater.

- What do you think the 'city with foundations whose architect and builder is God' refers to?

Genesis then moves on to the stories of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.

Read Genesis 25:19-23

God choose Jacob rather than his older twin Esau. But as you read Jacob's story, you find that he was a cheat, and that he had the ultimate dysfunctional family.

- So – why did God choose him?

WORK

"Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness." Genesis 15:6

As we follow through the Bible's storyline, finding out about God, but also about ourselves, one thing stands out – that human effort will never be enough to be accepted by God. Abraham's experience was that it was believing the Lord that brought him into a right relationship with God.

But we live in a society where many people who would say that they believe in God, have no idea that God wants a personal relationship with them, based on their believing him.

Pray for opportunities to speak about your own relationship with God in the coming week.

And share anything you learned about doing that from the first 'Home Groups Extra' last Sunday evening.

3. A Chosen People

WELCOME

What is the best gift you have ever received? What made it so special?

WORSHIP

The Bible is full of promises which God has given to his people. Take some time to remember those promises, and to thank God for them.

WORD

God's promises to Abraham could be summed up as the promise of God's people living under God's rule in God's land – just as had been the case for Adam and Eve. But by the beginning of the book of Exodus, while Abraham's descendents had grown into a great people, they were not in their own land. Genesis ends with the Children of Israel moving to Egypt, where Joseph had become an important person, in order to escape famine in Canaan. But with the passing of time, they moved from being welcome guests to being slaves of the Egyptians. But it was out of this

unpromising situation that God acted to establish Israel as his people.

Read Exodus 3:1-22

Three times God refers to himself as 'The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.'

- Why do you think this was so important for Moses and for the Israelites?

God said that he was going to free his people.

- What were they to do once he had brought them out of Egypt (v.12)?

In this episode we are introduced to the most common and distinctive name for God used in the Old Testament – *Yahweh* – which is translated in most English versions as "LORD", and which occurs around 6,800 times in the Old Testament. It isn't just a title – it is a personal name, and like most Bible names, it has a meaning. Although there is some debate about exactly what *Yahweh* does mean, it does refer to God's absolute power and changelessness – something like 'I will be who I am'

Read Exodus 12:1-13

- Why did the Israelites need to kill a lamb like this?

- Why do you think God didn't just spare the Israelite firstborn sons without them having to kill a lamb?

In 1 Corinthians 5:7, Paul says that *'Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.'*

- How does what happened at the Passover help us to understand what Jesus did for us?

Read Exodus 19:1-8

- What was God's purpose in rescuing the Israelites from Egypt?

- The Israelites did nothing to deserve being rescued by God, but once they had been rescued, and made God's chosen people, what did the Israelites have to do?

It all sounds so positive. But soon after, the people make a Golden Calf, and start to worship it (Exodus 32).

- Why was this so catastrophic?

- What does the incident of the Golden calf tell you about human ability to follow God?

Read Numbers 13:1-2, 26-14:12

- Why did the people refuse to enter the Promised Land?

- Why was God so angry with them?

- Have there ever been times when you have turned your back on something you believed God wanted you to do because it seemed too hard?

From there on, the story leads from the refusal of the people to trust God, into their 40 years of wandering in the desert. It was to be a long time before they were God's people in God's place living under God's rule.

- What does the Exodus tell you about God?

- And do you see anything in the Exodus that reflects your own life?

WORK

God's plan was to set his people free so that they could worship him. Today, thousands of Christians across the world live in situations where they are not free to worship. In some Islamic countries converts from Islam to Christianity face imprisonment or execution.

What could you do to support them? (Find out more about Christians facing persecution from The Barnabas Fund (www.barnabasfund.org) or Christian Solidarity Worldwide (www.csw.org.uk))

4. A New Home

WELCOME

Where would you most like to live? City, country, or seaside?

WORSHIP

We were reminded in our first study that God created a perfect world, with everything that people needed. As we approach harvest, give thanks to God for all the good things he has given us, especially for our food, and pray for those in other parts of the world who constantly go hungry.

WORD

Over the last few weeks we have seen God's story of the world following a depressing pattern:

In the beginning – God's people (Adam and Eve) in God's Place (Eden) living under God's rule. But then – temptation and sin, with the result that they refused God's rule, were expelled from God's place, and were no longer his people.

After the flood, the story started again, but again it soon broke down, and by Genesis 11 once again people had rejected God's rule (at Babel), and were scattered across the world; no longer God's people.

God chose Abram, and gave him the promise that he would be the ancestor of God's people, living in God's land. Finally, at the exodus, it looked as though this was about to be fulfilled, but last time we left the Children of Israel wandering in the desert, having failed to trust that God could take them into the Promised Land.

Read Joshua 1:1-9

- What promise does God give to Joshua?
- What must Joshua do?
- How are these things linked?

God promised the land to Israel, but they still had work to do in order to turn that promise into reality.

- How would God's promise have helped Joshua to be strong and courageous?
- How should the promises of God help us to be brave in serving him? Can you think of any examples?
-

Read Joshua 2:1-16

Rahab was most likely a prostitute (the word translated 'prostitute' has a range of meanings, but this is the most likely

one here. She also lied about the spies. Yet in Hebrews 11:31, she is commended for her faith.

- How could she be called an example of faith?

Rahab's awareness of God came through hearing what he had done. Our theme verse this year reminds us that it is as people see our good deeds that they will be prompted to glorify God.

- What things which we do should we expect others to be able see God through?

From here on, the story of the book of Joshua is a story of victory (at Jericho), of disobedience and defeat (at Ai), of crime and punishment (by Achan), of deception (by the Gibeonites), and finally of conquest and possession of the land. By the end of Joshua, it looks as though God's promise to Abraham has been fulfilled, God's people in God's place under God's rule.

Read Judges 2:6-19

- What happened after Joshua died?
- How did the Lord respond to this?
- Did he abandon his people?

Read Judges 6:1-14

Gideon is one of the more famous Judges. Here, at the start of his story, the Israelites had been conquered by the Midianites.

- How long did it take Israel to cry out to God?
- Why do you think it took so long?
- Why do you think the angel called Gideon 'mighty warrior'? He does seem to have done much that could be called brave so far.
- What does this tell us about how God looks at us?

Following this, Gideon summons the people, and 32,000 responded.

Read Judges 7:1-7

- Why did God need to cut the size of Gideon's army down to such a low number?

Read Judges 7:19-24

- How were the Midianites defeated? What part did the Israelite army play, and what part did God play?
- What does this tell us about the way that God works?

The story of Gideon is one example of what we saw in chapter 2 – God's people forgetting him, and turning to false gods. This

5. The King and the Kingdom

led to conquest and disaster, until the people cried out to God. When they did, he raised up a leader to rescue them.

The same pattern is repeated time and time through the book of Judges.

- Can you see this pattern in your own life?

- Why do we find it easy to forget the Lord when things are going well?

The book of Judges ends: *In those days Israel had no king, everyone did as they saw fit.* (Judges 21:25)

- Do you think that is an appropriate description of every society which has rejected God's rule?

WORK

We began by remembering all that God has given us, especially at harvest time. But the Fall means that while some are well fed, many are constantly hungry.

Is there anything your group could do to help those who go hungry? Could you agree to all give up something (a cup of coffee a day? Maybe lunch one day?) for the next couple of weeks, then give the money to TEAR fund or some similar organisation.

WELCOME

If you were Prime Minister for the day, what one new law would you like to pass?

WORSHIP

Psalm 92 says that God makes us glad by his deeds. Use the psalm together, then praise God for what he has done in your life that has made you glad.

WORD

At the end of our last study, God's people were in a mess. The end of the book of Judges is thoroughly depressing, with a complete breakdown in society – the chilling conclusion to the book was: *In those days Israel had no king, everyone did as they saw fit.* Judges 21:25.

It was a reminder of the tragedy of the Fall – when people reject God as their king, they tend to put themselves in God's place.

But even at this time, there were some who did what was right. The book of Ruth is set *In the days when the judges ruled.* Ruth 1:1, and tells of the faithfulness of a foreign

woman (Ruth, the Moabitess) and of a noble and generous man (Boaz, the Israelite landowner). After all the chaos of Judges, it is a relief to find something like domestic normality. But the book of Ruth isn't in the Bible just to give us a picture of family life – because this turned out to be a very important family. Boaz and Ruth married, and had a son called Obed. He had a son called Jesse. He had several sons, one of whom was David – who became Israel's greatest king.

At a time when God raised up judges, who for a short time would be able to lead his people in the right way, he was also working out his plan for the future – the great king David, and beyond that, David's great descendent, the Lord Jesus.

Read 1 Samuel 8:1-9

With the failure of the judges to bring lasting security, the people demand a king to lead them.

- Why did the people ask for a king?

- Why did the Lord say that in asking for a king they were rejecting him?

- In what ways can trying to be like the people around us bring us spiritual problems?

The Lord relents, and does give his people a king. Saul starts well, but as his story progresses he falls away,

Read 1 Samuel 13:1-15

What Saul did seems quite sensible – he needed to keep his army together, and they all knew that sacrifices of burnt offerings were important.

- So – why was this the thing which led God to reject Saul as king?

Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13

- Why was David chosen as king?

- Does this help to explain why Saul was rejected?

Read 2 Samuel 7:8-16

The Lord makes a covenant with David.

- What are the promises of this covenant, and why are they so significant?

Even David, the great king, falls into sin, and experiences serious family problems. He never abandons the Lord, but his story is not one of endless spiritual success.

- From what you know of David's life, how does his life act as an encouragement to you?

David's son Solomon succeeded him, and again he started out well. At the start of his reign, God appeared to him in a dream, and offered him whatever he wanted. Solomon's response

was: *Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong.* (1 Kings 3:9)

Read 1 Kings 11:1-13

- If God had given Solomon wisdom, how come he acted so foolishly?
- How does this relate to the gifts God gives us?
- Most of us are unlikely to have 700 wives! But in what ways might we make the same mistakes Solomon made?

WORK

Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. Colossians 4:5-6

Just as Solomon needed to ask the Lord for the wisdom he needed in order to do the work God had called him to, we all need wisdom in order to do the work of witnesses which we have been called to.

Pray that one another will have that wisdom this week. Pray especially for any who know they face challenges in speaking to others about the Lord.

6. Rebellion

WELCOME

Have you ever been lost? What happened to you?

WORSHIP

Psalm 32 is a reminder that when we sin, it spoils our relationship with the Lord and so spoils the whole of life. Take time to ask for God's forgiveness, then use the psalm to thank him for his goodness.

WORD

One of the great high points of the Old Testament was the building and dedication of the temple in Jerusalem.

When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled it.
(2 Chronicles 7:1-2).

It must have been a glorious experience! But despite all that, as we saw last time, Solomon later turned away from the Lord. The story which the Old Testament repeats time and again is of God blessing his people, but then of those same people being unable to faithfully follow him. It happened in Eden, it happened at the flood, it happened after the Exodus, it

happened throughout Judges, and it continued to happen, even after Israel had a king.

We saw last time that God warned Solomon that he would tear the kingdom from his son (1 Kings 11:11-13). And that is what happened. Solomon's son Rehoboam was very foolish, and the majority of Israel rejected him as king. Only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, in the south of the country, stayed true to him. The other tribes made a man called Jeroboam their king, and became a separate country. (Confusingly they kept the name Israel, so from here on when you see Israel referred to, it is talking about the Northern kingdom, as opposed to Judah, the Southern kingdom.)

Read 1 Kings 12:25-33

According to 1 Kings 11:29-39, God appointed Jeroboam to be king of the Northern kingdom.

- But – what is the first thing Jeroboam does as king?

- Why was this such a problem?

- Are you aware of situations where someone has done what seemed to be sensible, but was actually opposed to what God says?

- Why do we do these things?

From here on, the story of the Northern kingdom Israel is one of decline. Jeroboam's son Nadab was assassinated, and his killer Baasha became king. Baasha's son Elah became king, and was himself assassinated. And so it went on. Politically, some of the kings were good, some were weak, but all of them get the same analysis in 1 & 2 Kings – they all did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

One of the worst was Ahab, the 7th king of Israel.

Read 1 Kings 18:16-40

It is a long passage, and well known, but it highlights the situation in Israel, with a king who was leading the people astray, and a people who were happy to follow.

- Why do you think Ahab agreed to Elijah's demand for a contest?

Elijah then challenges the people (verse 21).

- What does their refusal to answer him indicate?

- In what ways might we be tempted to waver between 2 gods?

The Lord revealed his power, and the prophets of Baal were wiped out. Israel once again returned to the Lord, but only half-heartedly. They still worshipped the golden calves Jeroboam had set up, and soon they were worshipping Baal again.

Around 100 years later, after several more bad kings, God spoke to Israel through the prophet Amos.

Read Amos 3

- The Israelites were confident that the Lord was their God and they were his chosen people. But how had they misunderstood that call?

- What do verses 9-10 say about Israel's morality and lifestyle in comparison with the pagan nations?

- How would the Lord's judgment against Israel fit their crimes (vv. 10-11, 15)?

- What does this chapter teach us about God's character?

- And about what he expects from his people?

In 721, around 190 years after Israel had broken away from Judah, the end came.

Read 2 Kings 17:1-8

Israel ceased to exist. The rest of the chapter explains why, and how the Assyrian invasion meant that the northern tribes disappeared, and were replaced in Israel by pagan people and priests.

- What does the story of Israel (the Northern kingdom), tell you about God?

- And what does it tell you about yourself?

WORK

The story of Israel is a reminder that when leaders are bad, that influences those they lead. Pray for those who are leaders at Christ Church, and for Bishops Peter & Keith in Chester diocese.

How can you encourage those who are leaders at Christ Church to stay faithful to the Lord, and to lead the church with godly wisdom?

7. The long winding road

WELCOME

Of all the jobs you have to do, either at work, at home or in church, which is your least favourite?

WORSHIP

Psalms 23 is the best loved of the psalms. It talks about God's presence with us in good times and in bad as we journey through life.

Use Psalm 23 to help you praise God for times in your life when you have been aware of his presence, either good times or bad times.

WORD

Last time we saw that after the kingdom of Israel split in two, the Northern kingdom (which kept the name Israel) consistently rebelled, not only against David's heirs as kings, but against the Lord as well. Time after time God called them to return – sometimes through great acts of power, like Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel, and sometimes through the words of the prophets, like Amos and Hosea.

But the people would not listen. Still they worshipped false gods, still their society was riddled with injustice. And in the end God allowed them to be conquered by the Assyrians, the

people were deported and replaced with other people the Assyrians had conquered. Israel – the 10 northern tribes – ceased to exist.

It is a warning that salvation can only be found in the Lord, and not in any other gods. But, the Lord had promised Abraham that all nations on earth would be blessed through him; he had promised David that one of his descendants would sit on his throne for ever. And although the northern tribes had walked away from that promise, God's promise still stood. And that brings us back to the Southern kingdom – Judah – who remained faithful to David's descendants. But even here, things did not look good.

Read 1 Kings 14:21-31

- What did Judah do wrong?
- Why did it matter?
- What was the main difference between the sins of Judah and those of Israel?

After Jeroboam came Abijah (bad king, then Asa (good king), and so on. Good kings followed by bad kings – God's people still so easily turning away from him.

Read Isaiah 1:1-15

Isaiah's long ministry as a prophet lasted through the reigns of several kings of Judah – some good, some bad.

- What things are Judah doing wrong?

- What is God's response?

The worst of the kings was Manasseh (just after Isaiah's time) – *Manasseh also shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end – besides the sin that he had caused Judah to commit, so that they did evil in the eyes of the LORD.* (2 Kings 21:16)

Read 2 Kings 22:1-13

Josiah was Manasseh's grandson – his father Amon had been so bad that after 2 years on the throne he had been assassinated.

- How is Josiah described?

It seems amazing that God's people had drifted so far from him that they no longer possessed the Book of the Law – God's word.

- What was Josiah's response to finding the Law?

- Have there ever been times when God's word has had that effect on you?

The revival under Josiah was too little, too late. God once again spoke to his people, this time through the prophet Jeremiah.

Read Jeremiah 7:1-15

- What did the people need to do in order to remain in the land God had given them?

- What would happen if they didn't do it?

- Do you think God treats us in the same way if we don't obey him?

- The people thought that because they had the temple, they were safe. What sort of things are we tempted to put our trust in, which ultimately can't save us?

The Apostle Paul wrote that the Old Testament Scriptures both encourage us (Romans 15:4) and rebuke us (2 Timothy 3:16)

- How does the story of Judah encourage you?

- And rebuke you?

WORK

The story of Judah is the story of God's faithfulness, but so often his people lost sight of that.

Is there anyone you know (maybe part of your group), who is struggling at the moment to trust God's faithfulness? What can you do to encourage them?

8. The broken dream

WELCOME

What one luxury item would you find it hardest to do without?

WORSHIP

Psalm 130 reminds us that with the Lord there is forgiveness, which is one of the reasons we worship him.

Starting with Psalm 130, praise God for his love, his mercy, and his forgiveness. Take some time to remember that no matter what we might have done, with him is unfailing love and full redemption

WORD

The German philosopher Friedrich Hegel wrote: 'The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.' And that was certainly true for God's people in the Old Testament. God had placed the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden, to be his people in his land under his rule. But they rebelled against his rule, and were thrown out of Eden.

Centuries God freed the Hebrew slaves from Egypt and took them to be his people. He brought them into the Promised Land, but soon they forgot him and rejected his rule. Disaster followed, but they didn't learn, and the Northern kingdom

Israel ended up being conquered, its people were deported, never to return.

And still what remained of God's people didn't learn. Despite God's repeated warnings, Judah would not listen. And in the end, like the Northern kingdom, they were conquered.

Read 2 Chronicles 36:15-23

- In what ways is this similar to what happened to Israel?
- And what is the big difference?
- Why did God treat Judah differently from Israel?

Read Lamentations 1:1-17

- How does the writer describe Jerusalem's misery?
- What do you think 'My sins have been bound into a yoke' (v.14) means?
- Do you think that our sin can literally trap us so we can't escape?

The people felt that they had been abandoned by God (v.17)

- Have you ever felt that way?

- Do you think that God had abandoned you?

Read Daniel 1

- When Nebuchadnezzar conquers Jerusalem, what does he take away with him (v.2)?
- What does he do with these things?
- Why would this have seemed so serious to the Jews?
- What does Daniel and his friends resolve not to do?
- Why does this cause a problem?

Look again at verses 2, 9 and 17. In each verse, God 'gives' (or causes) someone something.

- For each, what did he give, and to whom?

The Jews thought that if they were taken away from Jerusalem, they were being taken away from the Lord.

- How would this chapter help them to realise that even in exile, they had not been taken away from the Lord?

The Lord had sent his people into exile, but he had not given up on them. His promise to Abraham, and then to David, still stood.

- How does knowing that in the past God has been faithful to his promises help when you are going through a difficult experience, or when God seems to be far away?

WORK

So often God's people made a great start, but then fell away. That can sometimes be a picture of what happens in the lives of Christians today – they enthusiastically start following the Lord, but then for one reason or another they lose their passion for him, and gradually drift away.

Israel's story is a reminder that God does not write people off. Are there people you know who have drifted away who you could do something to encourage back?

9. The Return

WELCOME

Where in the world would you most like to go? Why?

WORSHIP

Psalm 107 reminds us that God's love endures for ever. It tells of times when God's people had been in trouble, and yet God rescued them. You might like to pick part of the psalm, or else think of times in your own life when God has acted to rescue you from difficult situations, and praise him for that.

WORD

Once again, God's people had turned from him. They refused to live under his rule, and as a result, they were driven out of his place – taken into exile. It was a disaster, not only because of their defeat, but also because the temple, God's house, had been destroyed. It must have seemed as if all hope had gone. Psalm 137 captures the mood of God's people in exile: *'By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?*

They were not only away from their home, they felt as if they had been torn away from the Lord.

But God had not abandoned his people.

Read Isaiah 40:1-31

- What words of hope does God have for his people?

- Why would it be important for them to be reminded of how great God is?

- Why might the people have thought that they had been forgotten by God (v.27)? How would these words reassure them?

Read Ezra 1:1-5

The exiles were freed to go back home. When the first party of exiles returned they made an enthusiastic start of rebuilding the temple. Once again, it looked as though God's people would be living in God's place under God's rule.

But after the initial burst of enthusiasm from the people, things once again began to go wrong.

Read Haggai 1:1-11

- What were the people doing wrong?

- What did the Lord challenge them to do?

- Are there parallels with us today? Not in terms of actual buildings, after all, we no longer have a temple in that sense. But if in the New Testament sense, the temple has become 'the body of Christ', the church', how might we fall into the same mistake as the people Haggai was writing to?

Read Malachi 2:17-3:5

Again, these are words addressed to God's people after they had returned from exile.

- What were they doing wrong?

- Can you see any parallels with how God's people acted earlier?

The Old Testament period ends somewhere around 400 BC. It ends with Malachi's prophecy that God will send the prophet Elijah to be the forerunner of 'the day of the Lord.'

And then – silence. No more prophets. For over 400 years God’s people waited. Israel was conquered again by Greece, then by Rome. But God remained silent.

And then, the angel Gabriel appeared to an elderly man named Zechariah, in the temple, and told him that he and his wife were to have a son. When that son, John, is finally born, Luke tells us that *‘His father Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied’* – and the 400 year silence was at an end.

Read Luke 1:67-79

How does Zechariah’s prophecy pick up on some of the Old Testament themes we have seen over the past few weeks?

WORK

Ultimately the coming of Jesus was the only hope for people. The whole of the Old Testament shows that without him people are unable to live the lives God created them for – even those who had seen God at work in wonderful ways soon turned from him.

As we approach Christmas, what can you do to make the most of the opportunities it presents to share the good news of Jesus with others?

CHRIST CHURCH, MORETON

We want to be a **W**elcoming Church

Because Jesus welcomed all who came to him

an **E**vangelising Church

*Because we believe that everyone has the right to
hear the Good News of Jesus*

a **L**oving Church

*Because Jesus commanded his followers to love one
another*

a **L**earning Church

*Because we are in the business of making disciples,
and disciples must always be learners*