

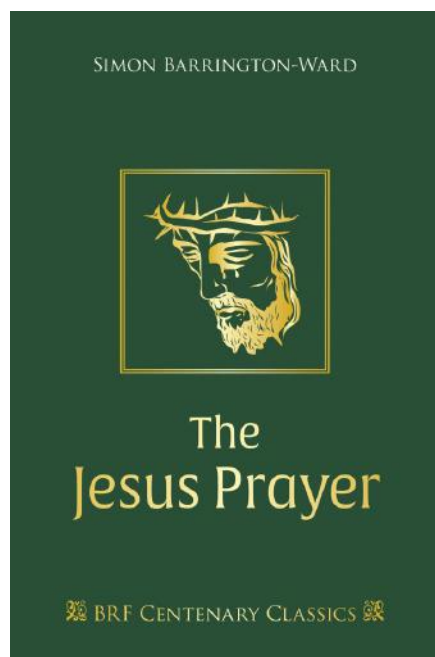


Title Information Pack

May-August 2022



May



BIC Category: Christian spirituality & religious experience

BRF category: Christian life and practice
9781800390874, 128 pp, Hardback,

£14.99

The Jesus Prayer

Simon Barrington-Ward

Luxury commemorative edition of a classic title

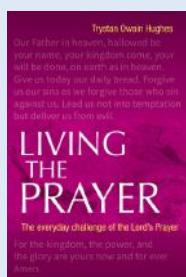
Key benefits

- Special 'BRF Centenary Classics' edition of a best-loved title
- Clear and practical introduction to praying the Jesus Prayer
- Stylish commemorative hardback edition with linen effect finish and foil blocking
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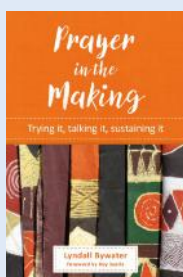
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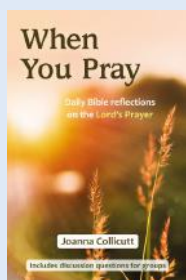
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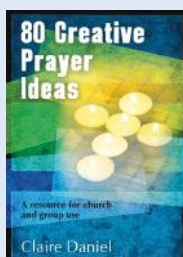
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When You Pray
9780857468673 £10.99



80 Creative Prayer Ideas
9781841016887 £8.99

Summary

'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.'

This ancient prayer has been known and loved by generations of Christians for hundreds of years. It is a way of entering into the river of prayer which flows from the heart of God: the prayer of God himself, as Jesus continually prays for his people and for the world he loves. Simon Barrington-Ward teaches us how to use the Jesus Prayer as a devotional practice, and opens up the Bible passages that are crucial to understanding it.

'Written out of long experience, Simon Barrington-Ward's book is one of the clearest, practical and most timely introductions available.'

David Runcorn, author of Spirituality Workbook: A guide for explorers, pilgrims and seekers

About the author

The Right Reverend Simon Barrington-Ward was General Secretary of CMS from 1975 to 1985, became Bishop of Coventry in 1985 and retired to Cambridge in 1997. He travelled widely, speaking on prayer and spirituality, and died in April 2020.

Territory: ROW

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SIMON BARRINGTON-WARD

|| The Jesus Prayer ||



The Jesus Prayer

SIMON BARRINGTON-WARD



BRF CENTENARY CLASSICS

'LORD JESUS CHRIST, Son of God, have mercy on me.'

This ancient prayer has been known and loved by generations of Christians for hundreds of years. It is a way of entering into the river of prayer which flows from the heart of God: the prayer of God himself, as Jesus continually prays for his people and for the world he loves. Simon Barrington-Ward teaches us how to use the Jesus Prayer as a devotional practice, and opens up the Bible passages that are crucial to understanding it.

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SIMON BARRINGTON-WARD

The Jesus Prayer



BRF CENTENARY CLASSICS

Contents

Introduction	x
1 A first encounter with the Jesus Prayer	xx
2 The corporate nature of the prayer.....	xx
3 Trinitarian prayer	xx
4 The prayer of the whole creation: now and not yet (Romans 8)	xx
5 Prayer in a brief phrase: its biblical roots	xx
6 What the Desert Fathers took from the New Testament	xx
7 The emergence of the distinctive nature of the Jesus Prayer	x
8 The Jesus Prayer from the 14th century to the present day	xx
9 What happens when you pray the Jesus Prayer	xx
10 Using the Jesus Prayer in a group	xx
Bibliography	xx

Introduction

After this book had first appeared – drawn out of me, to my own surprise, by that remarkable woman Shelagh Brown of BRF when she visited me in Coventry – I found myself being invited by a growing number of varied church groups to go and talk to them about the Jesus Prayer and help them to pray it. Since then, everywhere, the number of those using this way of prayer, sometimes taking a different phrase from the gospels or the Psalms to repeat with increasing depth of both joy and longing, has grown enormously. As I have gone round speaking at ‘Jesus Prayer’ retreats and gatherings, I have often been asked for a copy of this book, since it is shorter and more condensed than the one that Brother Ramon and I wrote together (*Praying the Jesus Prayer Together*, BRF, 2001), and gives, quite simply, more of the whole story of the prayer and how to pray it, in outline.

The World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM), founded by Fr John Main and using the word *Maranatha* (‘Come, Lord’), has itself been spreading enormously worldwide. I went to the biennial conference of their branch in Britain recently to talk about the Jesus Prayer. We met at Worth Abbey in Sussex and joined in some of the monks’ simple times of worship in their beautiful, modern chapel. But one feature of the conference, which impressed me particularly, was the simple discipline that all WCCM members practise in their daily life. People were there from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a wide variety of forms of employment, from youngish mothers to doctors, businessmen, manual workers and teachers, and ranging from the unemployed to the retired. All of them spend half an hour every morning and half an hour every evening, out of their often very busy and hard-pressed lives, praying in silence. It was quite humbling to share that half-hour period twice a day during our gathering there together, in complete stillness.

I still think that it would perhaps be best for people launching into such prayer for the first time to ‘start small’. You could begin with ten, then perhaps fifteen, minutes, morning and evening. But would the knowledge that there are so many people from Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, United Reformed and many other Christian groups and fellowships who are committed to this daily discipline of contemplative ‘practice of the presence’ for half an hour, morning and evening, then encourage and inspire you to do likewise.

Indeed, I hope the book will help many, many more Christians throughout a wide variety of churches and fellowships to be drawn into stillness, and in that stillness, perhaps through that most ancient Eastern Orthodox pattern of the Jesus Prayer – the prayer of the name, the invocation of the Lord’s presence, his forgiveness and empowering – to be drawn into a deeper communion with God, in Christ, through the Spirit. I hope it will lead a large number of new readers to the secret of unceasing prayer, to a whole way of praying that continues day and night, while we are working, eating, meeting with each other and even while we sleep (this last in the way that Brother Lawrence described in his little book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, as ‘letting the wind of the Spirit fill our sails even in sleep’).

In this way, it could meet the quest of members of a remarkable worldwide group, the ‘24–7 prayer movement’ (see *Red Moon Rising* by Pete Grieg and Dave Roberts, Kingsway, 2004), through which young people in a growing number of locations all over the world – in Western and Eastern Europe, South America, Asia and the USA – are drawing many others to faith in Christ and into joining in prayer, day and night, in little huts and prayer rooms. As with those praying the Jesus Prayer, they have been drawn into the quest for practising the presence and love of God in Christ night and day, and entering worship, adoration and yearning intercession in union with his ceaseless prayer for us.

All of us can learn from each other and pray with and for each other, in worship and intercession, in ‘joyful mourning’ as John Climacus called it, as we seek to grow ever more deeply into union with Christ and as

we reach out towards the day of his final coming. I hope that this book will continue its work of enabling many more people to discover the inexhaustible riches of grace opened up to us in him.

1

A first encounter with the Jesus Prayer

I came across the Jesus Prayer at a time when I was travelling in different parts of the world for the Church Missionary Society. It was those travels that made me hunger for a better way of praying, a way that would be more adequate to all that I was then encountering in Africa and Asia. Even on my return to this country I was becoming more aware than ever before of deep currents flowing in our own society.

Sometimes I could sense, underlying so many casual meetings and conversations across the globe, so many glimpses of the way people were living and striving and suffering – glimpses snatched even as I cycled into London, even around our offices in Waterloo – some kind of universal struggle. There seemed to be so many contradictions at every level in my life and in the whole of human society. There seemed to be, underlying everything, some kind of vast, inchoate yearning, which I could also feel, more and more of the time, in my own heart and which seemed to be increasingly present in everything I was trying to do.

Gradually it focused on a longing for a real deepening of prayer – and of the whole of my ‘life in Christ’. I was thirsting for something that was more universal, deeper, wider than my previous attempts at prayer. I was thirsting for a way of praying that genuinely embraced all the people and situations that still cried out to me when I paused for a moment, and yet at the same time came to grips more realistically with the frustrations and longings of my own divided nature.

One day a friend took me down to a Russian Orthodox monastery in Essex. It was just a small monastery, with both monks and sisters. (This happened some years ago, and before that I had never had very much to do with the Orthodox Church.)

As soon as we arrived, we both went straight into the chapel, because the community and their guests were starting their evening Office. I imagined it was going to be like the Offices in most monasteries in the West, with some kind of traditional form like that of our own morning and evening prayer, which, after all, came out of the monastic tradition.

But instead they had something quite different. There was just one voice leading what has long been called the Jesus Prayer – a woman's voice – and the others were praying it silently with her. We stood there in the darkened chapel, with all the icons and screens around, and little lights burning. I was conscious of the shapes of the brothers and sisters around me and of their faces – faces as striking as that of Father Sophrony, a remarkable bearded countenance with a great quality of shrewdness and humour and also radiance about it, absorbed in the gentle flow of the prayer.

It was as if the faces of the brothers and sisters around me were somehow merging into the faces on the icons all round the walls, and I was conscious of how very easily you could find yourself one with them as the generations slipped back and back.

There was an icon of St Silouan, the person from whom Father Sophrony had learned about the Jesus Prayer. I had seen Silouan's face in a photograph on the back of Father Sophrony's book about him; and now, there he was, in an icon – which Father Sophrony told me later was a much better likeness of him than the photograph. The photograph was too sombre, with his heavy eyebrows, dark gaze and massive beard dominating. The icon showed the real lightness and the gleam of response which were also always there.

Through the rows of smaller icons we went back to the next generation, and back through the years to St Seraphim of Sarov, with his white hair and beard and his white robe, bowed with frailty but shining and alive with joy and risen life; then to all the great Russian saints before him and, before them, reaching back to the Byzantine and Eastern Fathers and Mothers, to the desert saints, and, at the heart of all, the apostles and John the Baptist, after whom the monastery was named – back to the evangelists, to St John and to the virgin Mary and to the whole gospel story. Beyond us and over us was the last supper and above us the vision of God in heaven. It all seemed of a piece, as if we were all going forward together in this one great community in time and space and eternity.

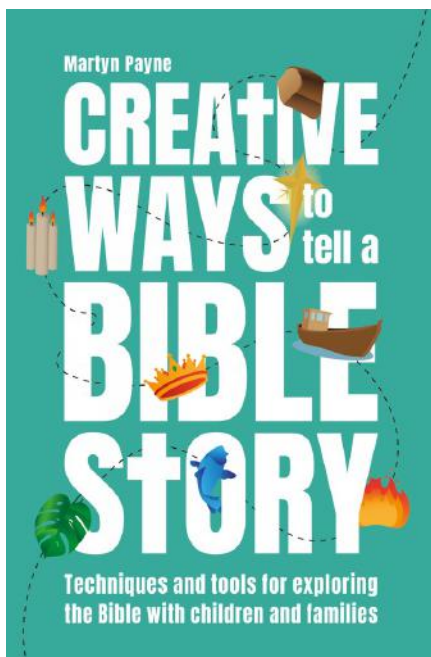
That was the setting in which I first met the Jesus Prayer, and that whole setting was very important, because the prayer was already being said when we went into the chapel. The prayer was spoken mostly in English, because much of their liturgy is in English, but there were short stretches of time in which it was spoken in Greek and also in Russian. A sister who was leading at first handed over to a monk after a while, simply praying:

'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.'

There was a pause. Then the prayer was repeated. We were lifted up into the steady wingbeat of the prayer. As we settled into it and began to be drawn into it, we felt that it became the focal theme of the whole community and of our own being.



June



BIC Category: Christian ministry & pastoral activity
9781800390928, 176 pp, Paperback,
£8.99

Creative Ways to Tell a Bible Story

Techniques and tools for exploring the Bible with children and families

Martyn Payne

New edition of a tried-and-tested resource for Bible storytellers

Key benefits

- Special 'Centenary Classics' edition of a best-loved title
- Contains a wealth of tried and tested ideas designed to lift any Bible story off the page
- Includes a keyword index and a chronological index together with a suggested one-year programme to follow
- Invaluable resource for churches and schools

Target readership

- Church leaders
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- Primary RE teachers and church personnel leading assemblies in schools

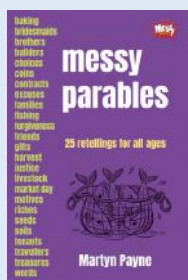
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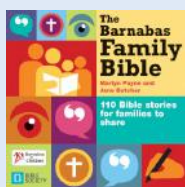
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Messy Parables
9780857465504 £9.99



The Barnabas Family Bible
9781841017136 £9.99

Summary

This resource offers a treasure trove of ideas for opening up a Bible story (the way in), telling the story (the way through) and exploring the meaning of the story (the way out), including suggestions for reflecting on how to apply the story to our lives today. Also included are over 30 key words and phrases providing ways in which connecting threads might be explored, and a suggested year's programme using the Bible stories explored in the book. A chronological index makes it easy to find material for a particular children's session, special event, workshop or all-age church service

'Engaging, interactive and reflective methods and ideas to bring Christianity to life with children and young people.' Jane Butcher, former Barnabas in Schools team leader

About the author

Formerly part of BRF's Barnabas Children's Ministry and Messy Church teams, Martyn Payne has a background in teaching, Bible storytelling and leading all-age worship, and is passionate about the blessing that comes when generations explore faith together. Currently pastor of a church in Essex, he's still telling stories!

Territory: WORLD

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Jane Butcher, former Barnabas in Schools team leader

BRF CENTENARY CLASSICS



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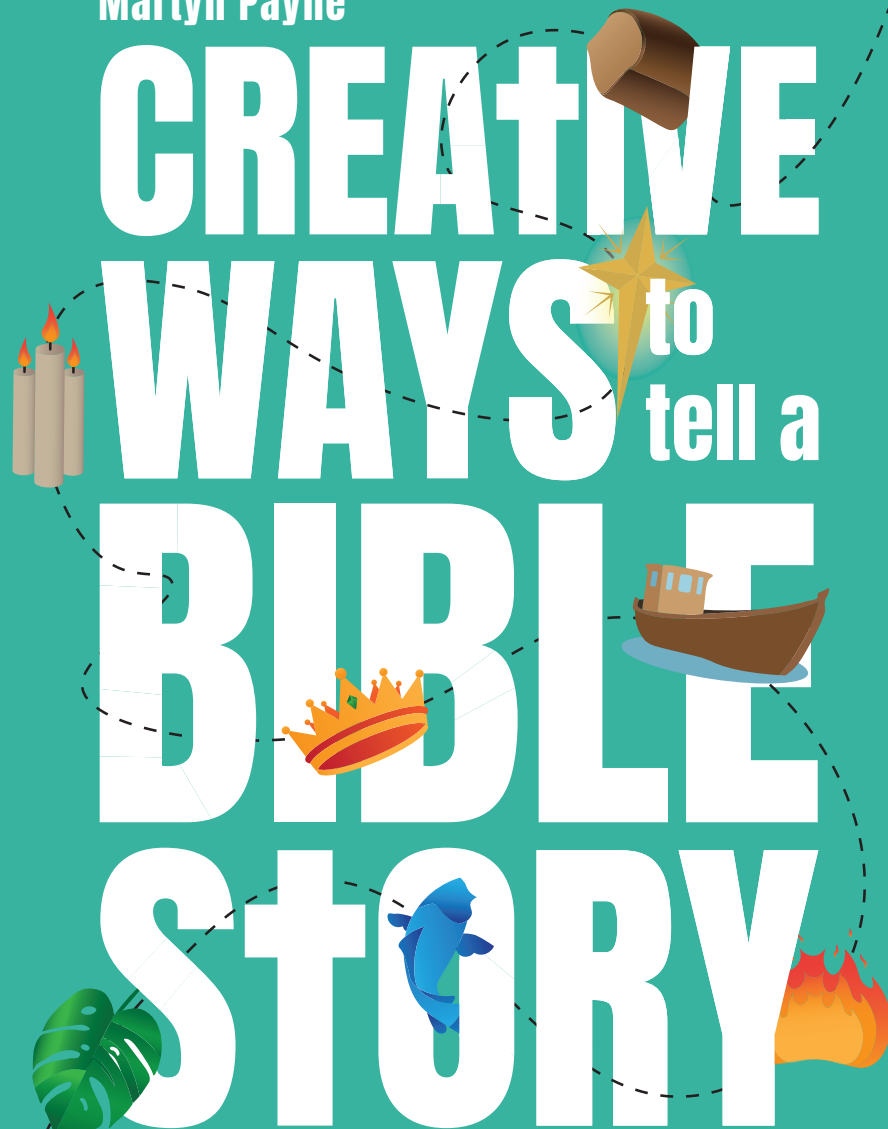
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Martyn Payne



Martyn Payne

CREATIVE WAYS to tell a BIBLE STORY



Techniques and tools for exploring
the Bible with children and families

Martyn Payne

CREATIVE WAYS to tell a BIBLE STORY

**Techniques and tools for exploring
the Bible with children and families**



CONTENTS

Foreword	XX
Introduction	XX
How to use this book	XX

SECTION 1: WAY IN: INTRODUCING THE STORY

Getting into the theme: Cross the circle.....	XX
Getting into the content: Fruit salad	XX
Getting into the context: Group machines.....	XX
Getting into the scene: Group statues.....	XX
Getting into character: Clues to the people involved	XX
Getting into the feelings: An in-and-out game.....	XX
Getting into sounds: What would you have heard?.....	XX
Getting into ideas: Out-of-the-box mimes	XX
Getting into props: Using objects	XX
Getting into mystery: A box Bible	XX
Getting into acting: Sculpting.....	XX
Getting into the facts: A puzzle square.....	XX
Getting talking: Building bridges into the story.....	XX
Getting crafty: Making objects for the story	XX

Getting moving: Moving with the story	xx
Getting thinking: Unravelling riddles	xx
Getting going: Using games	xx

SECTION 2: WAY THROUGH: TELLING THE STORY

Response stories with sounds	xx
Response stories with actions	xx
Response stories moving on key words	xx
Walk the story	xx
Feel the story	xx
Using story circles	xx
Using rhyme and rhythm	xx
Working from freeze-frames	xx
Using colours and beads.....	xx
Drawing the story	xx
Sculpting the story	xx
Sounding the story	xx
Bringing a picture to life.....	xx
Reflective storytelling	xx
Acting out the story together.....	xx
Storytelling with simple visuals	xx
Creating your own version of the story	xx
Reading stories aloud	xx

SECTION 3: WAY OUT: EXPLORING AND REFLECTING ON THE STORY

Talking about the story	xx
Puzzling out the story	xx
Stepping into the story	xx
Experiencing a dilemma from the story.....	xx
What happened next?	xx
Imagining the story from another point of view.....	xx
Putting the story in your own words.....	xx
Crafting the story.....	xx
Personalising the story	xx
Comparing interpretations of the story	xx
Asking questions about the story.....	xx
Updating the story	xx
Debating the story.....	xx
Analysing the story.....	xx
Interpreting the story	xx
Praying the story	xx
Using silence.....	xx

APPENDICES

Making connections	xx
A year of Bible stories.....	xx
Bible index	xx

Introduction

Why tell Bible stories? The Bible comes to us out of a storytelling culture. It is how Jesus taught. His stories got people thinking, asking questions and then trying to work it all out for themselves. It is arguably the best way to learn, and we see this happening in the way children suddenly understand something deep and personal for the first time. Stories allow just this sort of discovering to happen.

Each week, most of us who work with children and families through church groups use a Bible story. As Christians, we believe that the Bible is our special book and its stories can help us learn more about God, more about ourselves and more about what we are meant to do with our lives. However, the Bible raises as many questions as it answers and Christians have different attitudes towards it, depending on their tradition and the teaching they have received.

So what sort of book are we talking about and how do we want children and families to fall in love with its stories? A key verse comes in Paul's letter to his young apprentice apostle, Timothy. Paul wants Timothy to be fired up with a love for the scriptures, so he writes, 'Everything in the Scriptures is God's word. All of it is useful for teaching and helping people and for correcting them and showing them how to live' (2 Timothy 3:16, CEV). The RSV says, 'All scripture is inspired by God.' I wonder what 'inspired by God' means and what we want our children and their families to understand by this all-important word.

God works to make us the very best people we can be, with all our gloriously different personalities (see John 10:10). In this way, together

we might just begin to reflect the unfathomable richness that is the likeness of God. So this must also be true of the many writers of the story of the Bible. They weren't taken over to become robot secretaries; every word wasn't dictated to them; rather, their own personalities, family backgrounds, perspectives and idiosyncrasies are also there as they express, to the best of their abilities, God's story as they saw it and God's words as they heard them. By God's Holy Spirit they wrote far more than they knew they were writing, while still remaining true to themselves.

When we open up the Bible with children and families, we need to recognise how the characters of the writers had an influence on what was written. These writers were fallible human beings who wrote down what happened to themselves, their families and their nation. They were limited human beings, trying to make sense of what God was doing, what God was like and what God was saying to them in their generation. It is therefore no surprise to find that they were influenced by their culture, by tribalism, nationalism and even paganism. Their view of God was not complete but, remarkably, although trapped within their own time in history and their own particular mindset, they were again and again gifted to see greater truths than they could have imagined on their own. Their history and geography meant that they often wrote about a God who was exclusively on their side – a God who delighted in the destruction of their enemies, whose nature they described with the military and triumphant metaphors of their day. Yet their writing was nonetheless inspired because, mixed in with this, there is something more: a movement towards a truer picture of a God of infinite mercy, who forgives his enemies, who is for the whole world and not just for a small collection of tribes – a God who is wonderfully inclusive, not merely nationalistic.

The Bible's stories are recorded by writers who, like you and me, were growing up into the knowledge of God. We are joining them on a journey to discover more of who God is, who we are and what we may become. This is what makes this precious story inspired. It inspires us to search for the truth of God and our own true self, fulfilled in

God. The inspiration of scripture often lies in between the words of the story, drawing us ever onward into the likeness of Christ, who is the true direction and fulfilment of all scripture.

Bible stories can inspire us to seek after God, to learn from others' recorded experiences of God, to try to step out of our own cultural and historical limitations and enter more fully into the mystery that is God, and to become all that we are created to be, renewed and restored by the love of God to us in Jesus.

Most of us need just one good idea to get us started, and this book has ideas in abundance. My prayer is that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, the following wealth of creative ways to tell any Bible story will become tools for you to use as you open up the Bible with the children and adults with whom you work.

How to use this book

This book proposes a tried and tested approach to telling Bible stories, which BRF's Barnabas Children's Ministry team has been developing for many years.

There are three main sections:

- The way in: ideas for opening up a Bible story.
- The way through: suggested methods for telling the story.
- The way out: a collection of techniques for exploring the meaning of that story, including space for reflection about how to apply the story to our lives today.

In addition, in the appendices you will find:

- a selection of over 30 key words or phrases offering ways in which connecting threads might be explored.
- a suggested year's programme of Bible stories explored with ideas taken from the book.
- a chronological index of all the Bible stories in the text, which will enable users to find material for a particular session with children and families or for an all-age church service.

With each generic idea in the first three sections, there are linked examples using particular Bible stories so that the suggestions can be worked out in practice. The aim of each idea is always to offer a

way to lift the Bible story off the page and into the hearts and minds of children and adults.

The pattern of introducing, telling, exploring and reflecting on a Bible story gives the story space to breathe so that everyone can hear God for themselves speaking from the Bible. It does not, on the whole, need a lot of props; nor is it dependent on craft activities, with all the preparation that they usually entail. The main preparation for this approach lies, rather, in getting to know the Bible story well.

The book can be explored in several ways.

- The Bible passages presented in the text as examples of ways to introduce, tell, explore or reflect on a story can be used as they are or as templates to help you create your own examples.
- You could select one idea from each of the first three sections to put together a tailor-made way to introduce, tell, explore and reflect on any Bible story of your choosing.
- When sharing Bible stories in church or in school, you could vary the way the story is presented by trying out new approaches drawn from the three sections.

By trying out different styles of introducing, telling, exploring and reflecting on the Bible, you will be developing your own gifts as a storyteller. In addition, by making sure that you always use one idea from each of the first three sections of the book, you will be keeping a check on the balance of your storytelling and helping your audience to reflect on the story for themselves and draw their own conclusions about applying it to their lives. By always including the key elements of introducing, telling, exploring and reflecting, we equip people with a framework that will help them to grow in their faith and to delight in the Bible throughout their lives.

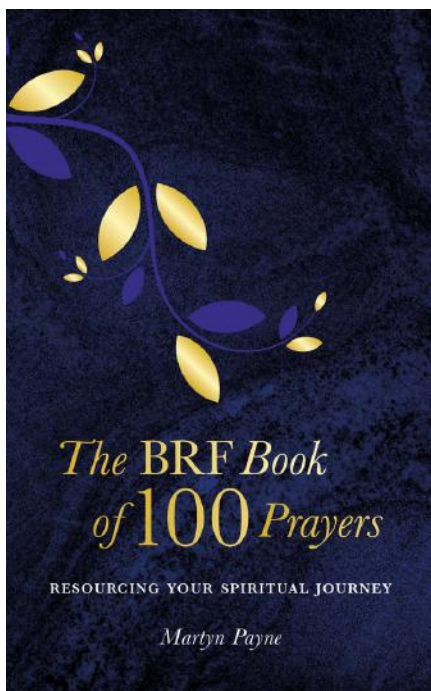
Once you become more confident as a Bible storyteller, you may wish to develop this gift further, and the key words and phrases in appendix 1 are designed to facilitate this. They offer connected themes across

the Bible that you can use to shape new and exciting stories of your own.

Finally, this book offers a programme of Bible stories for a whole year. This is designed to help people to see the big story of the Bible as a coherent whole. Each week's Bible story is unpacked in line with the principles found in the book – offering a way in, a way through and a way out of the story. Each of these in turn draws on ideas taken from the first three sections.



August



BIC Category: Bible readings, selections and meditations
9781800391475, 144 pp, Hardback,
£12.99

The BRF Book of 100 Prayers

Martyn Payne

An illustrated collection of prayers by Martyn Payne

Key benefits

- Compilation of 100 original prayers for a wide range of occasions
- Includes thoughts about prayer by Martyn Payne alongside selected quotations on prayer from other BRF writers
- Beautifully illustrated with pen and ink line drawing cameos by artist Martin Beek
- A-format, flexible resource that can be used daily or for particular seasons and situations
- Companion volume to The BRF Book of 365 Bible Reflections
- Luxury self-purchase or gift

Target readership

- Those seeking prayer resources for daily devotions
- Church leaders and home group leaders looking for prayer material
- New Daylight and other Bible reading notes subscribers
- BRF supporters looking to support BRF in its centenary year
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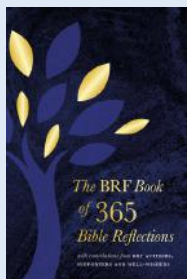
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9781800390683 £8.99



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9780857467508 £9.99



The BRF Book of 365 Bible Reflections
9781800391000 £14.99



Quiet Spaces Prayer Journal
9780857465245 £9.99

Summary

Prayer is at the heart of BRF's work, and this special illustrated anniversary collection is a celebration of prayer for BRF's centenary year.

It can be used in a range of different settings, from individual devotions to corporate worship. Including sections on prayers of preparation, seasonal prayers, and themed prayers for special times and hard times, it is the perfect daily companion to resource your spiritual journey.

- Part 1: Approaching God
Part 2: Prayers for the journey
Part 3: Seasons of the Christian year
Part 4: Together through the generations
Part 5: How should we live?

About the author

Formerly part of BRF's Messy Church team, Martyn Payne is BRF's prayer advocate and a gifted storyteller whose previous books *The Big Story* (2011) and *Creative Ways to Tell a Bible Story* (2012) demonstrate the variety of approaches he uses to bring the Bible alive for children and adults alike.

Territory: WORLD

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Prayer is at the heart of BRF's work, and this special illustrated anniversary collection is a celebration of prayer for BRF's centenary year. It can be used in a range of different settings, from individual devotions to corporate worship. Including sections on prayers of preparation, seasonal prayers, and themed prayers for special times and hard times, it is the perfect daily companion to resource your spiritual journey.

Part 1: Approaching God

Part 2: Prayers for the journey

Part 3: Seasons of the Christian year

Part 4: Together through the generations

Part 5: How should we live?

Formerly part of BRF's Messy Church team, **Martyn Payne** is BRF's prayer advocate and a gifted storyteller whose previous books *The Big Story* (2011) and *Creative Ways to Tell a Bible Story* (2012) demonstrate the variety of approaches he uses to bring the Bible alive for children and adults alike.

The BRF Book of 100 Prayers

Martyn Payne

The BRF Book of 100 Prayers

RESOURCING YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Martyn Payne




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The BRF Book of 100 Prayers

RESOURCING YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Martyn Payne



Contents

Introduction, 00

PART 1: Approaching God

Prayers of preparation and thanksgiving, 00

PART 2: Prayers for the journey

Special times – hard times – times of transition, 00

PART 3: Seasons of the Christian year

*Harvest – Remembrance – Advent – Christmas
– New Year – Lent – Holy Week – Easter –
Ascension – Pentecost, 00*

PART 4: Together through the generations

*Prayers for intergenerational ministry
and for all ages, 00*

PART 5: How should we live?

*Prayers about caring for creation, caring for
other people, justice, discipleship, sharing the
gospel, Bible reading, service and peace, 00*

Introduction

‘I cling to you; your right hand upholds me.’

PSALM 63:8 (NIV)

One hundred years ago the western world was emerging from a pandemic known as Spanish flu. It has been estimated that up to 50 million people died; in fact, it's often forgotten that this represents many more deaths than occurred throughout the whole of the 1914–18 war which had only come to an end four years previously. Almost everyone in the UK at that time could name a family member who had been killed in conflict or as a result of the contagion. And yet it was at such a time as this that the Bible Reading Fellowship was born in a church in Brixton in south London, attracting people to join Bible study and prayer groups supported by published daily notes. It was in such groups that people began to find faith and hope again in the God of peace who sent Jesus Christ to break down the dividing walls of hostility between us, offering to all a life beyond death that starts here and now.

That post-war and post-pandemic year of 1922 was a moment of opportunity that God used a century ago to give birth to an organisation that is still with us today. And one hundred years later, in 2022, BRF is once again being used by God, in the wake of our own global pandemic,

to resource and encourage churches and individuals ‘to get a move on’ spiritually – to borrow the words of BRF’s founding father, Revd Leslie Mannering. The call to study the Bible as God’s word and to deepen our life of prayer has never been more urgent now as it was then.

Almost all the BRF prayers collected in this book were written over the two years of our present pandemic. They were inspired as a response to a crisis in a time of need, and indeed prayer often works like this. Of course, as Christians we know that regular times of prayer, whether extemporary or liturgical, are vital for healthy, Christian discipleship. However, the truth is we often forget to pray until a crisis comes and we are brought to our knees. While God does not cause the pain and the sadness that are part and parcel of life, he can use it to wake us up to what matters and bring us home to a safe place of love and grace.

The prayers in this book are a selection from a larger number that were posted on social media or published in the four-monthly BRF Prayer Diaries between March 2020 and the end of 2021 – throughout those Covid months and whose long shadow is still with us. Although they come from that moment in time, they have also proved to be a prophetic and timeless source of comfort and inspiration to those who have used them. And the positive feedback to these prayers has encouraged us at BRF to make them available in this centenary book.

The book opens its collection with a new prayer written for the BRF centenary. In a few short, memorable phrases, it offers us words to express our thankfulness and wonder at the way in which the Lord has used BRF to grow God’s kingdom, both in this country and overseas, since 1922. BRF’s publications, Bible reading notes and online resources, along with new ministries that encourage God’s

work among children, families, the elderly and those who are hearing the gospel for the first time, are all referenced in this prayer of celebration and praise.

For convenience of use, the 100 new prayers that follow are divided into five sections, offering individuals and churches words to use in prayer:

- to help us come close to God
- to call out to God when we face the challenges of our Christian pilgrimage
- to support mission and ministry across the generations
- to praise God at festival times and on special occasions
- to use as we open up God's word and apply its truths to particular issues facing us today.

It is our hope that these prayers will be widely used, in both private and public worship. And finally, conscious that we often need encouragement to pray, we have included a selection of original thoughts on prayer at intervals throughout the book along with quotations from recent BRF publications.

Prayer has always been at the heart of the movement of God's Spirit that has sustained the work of BRF over the past 100 years. Many of you will perhaps have only come across BRF through its Bible notes and books, but none of these would be possible without the faithful prayers of those who 'pray with us' for this ministry. And so in recent years, we have nurtured a growing re-emphasis on this ministry of prayer. With this in mind, we hope that this

collection will both enrich your own prayer life and help you to 'pray with us' for all that God has in store for BRF in the future. And, adapting words from the centenary prayer, we pray that the prayers will encourage you 'to be ambitious for God's glory'.

Martyn Payne

— Part 1 —

Approaching God



Come near to God and he will come near to you.

JAMES 4:8 (NIRV)

1.

Thank you, Lord, for the gift of another day
in which you call us:
to bless our neighbour,
to welcome the stranger,
to pray for our enemies,
to look after your world,
to share the good news of your love,
and to become more like Jesus,
through the power of your Holy Spirit in us
Amen

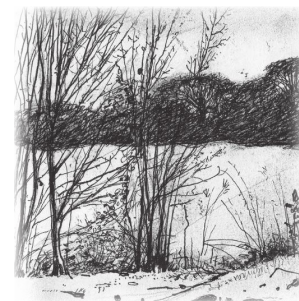
2.

Thank you for welcoming us
into your kingdom through the cross of Christ:
a kingdom where
the unforgivable are forgiven,
the undeserving rewarded
the unloveable loved
the wayward rescued
the poor are rich
the last are first
and the least are honoured,
because in each one of these
we can meet with you, Christ Jesus.

Christian prayer is... a face-to-face, heart-to-heart, Spirit-to-spirit connection with him who is the first and the last, the beginning and the end, the king of kings, and the lover of your soul.

Lyndall Bywater

Prayer isn't a silver bullet to solve our problems, nor a magic wand to make everything turn out well, it is our lifeline to God so that whatever happens we and God are in it together.



— Part 3 —

Seasons of the Christian year



Seek the Lord and the strength God gives.

PSALM 105:4 (NIRV)

Harvest

1.

Hope-giving God,
thank you for creating a world full of seeds
that testify to your loving investment
in the land and in our lives.
Just as you rejoice to see those seeds bear fruit,
we come to you at this festival time
with the fruit of praise and thanksgiving
for your goodness and faithful love.
Amen

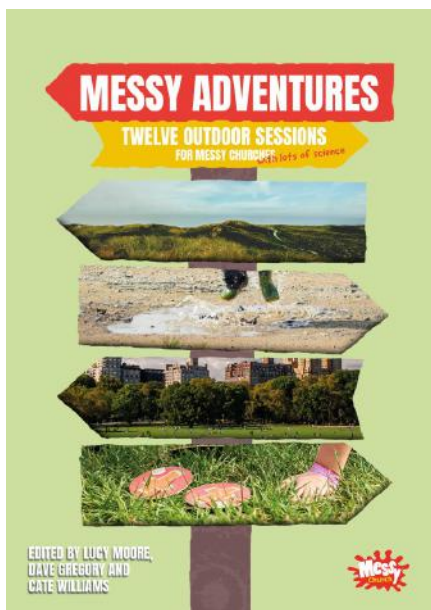
2.

Lord, as tenants of your kingdom,
you have committed to us
the harvesting of our fields and of our faith.
Forgive us for the failed harvests that are our
responsibility,
and help us to respond better to your cultivation
and care
by bringing forth the fruits of faith, hope and love,
that alone can transform this world and bring joy
in heaven.
Amen

*As we turn in prayer to God, the great Creator,
we become vessels of creative energy and desire.
We long to give expression to the gift we have
received, and as we do so, the act of creation
becomes a prayer in itself.*

Daniel Wolpert

*In prayer we bow before:
The love that can't stop loving
The gift that can't stop giving
The light that can't stop enlightening
The blessing that can't stop blessing
We kneel before our God who never changes.*



BIC Category: Christian ministry and pastoral activity
9781800391499, 64 pp, Paperback, A5-Henkei size
£6.99

Messy Adventures

Lucy Moore, Dave Gregory, Cate Williams

Session material for running Messy Church outdoors

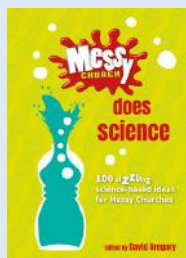
Key benefits

- Provides twelve easy-to-use, road-tested outdoor sessions on a variety of themes including water, plants, birds, animals and fish, human beings, and change, growth and the seasons
- Encourages Messy and non-Messy churches alike to increase their use of the great outdoors all year round
- Promotes increased awareness of God through nature, increased awareness of science and understanding of scientific approaches, and increased willingness to appreciate the interplay of faith and science
- Offers opportunities for local churches to connect with local scientists
- Support material includes films and photos from writers and consulting scientist team

Target readership

- Messy Church leadership teams
- Children's and family ministry leaders looking to run outdoor sessions for families
- Church leaders seeking to promote creation care
- Those interested in the relationship between science and faith

Related books from BRF



Messy Church Does Science
9780857465795 £9.99



Messy Church Goes Wild
9781800390096 £9.99



Changing the Climate
9781800390225 £9.99



Outdoor Church
9780857464163 £8.99

Summary

Twelve sessions for Messy Churches to do outdoors, created by a Messy Church Goes Wild writer team, enhanced by additions from scientists, and piloted in urban and rural Messy Churches.

Session titles: Wild and wilderness!, Wet and wild!, Wild and rocky!, Wild and weedy!, Wild woods!, Wild weather!, Wild on the wing!, Wild and wiggly!, Wild safari!, Wild me!, Wild on the move!, Wild life!

Unit writers: Aaron Jenkyn, Helen Laird, Dawn Savidge, Rachel Gotobed, Becky May, Lydia Harrison, Jane Leadbetter, Lucy Moore

Scientists: Dave Gregory, John Sibley, Karen Fisher, Martin Hodson, Mike Morecroft, Graham Hartland, Andy Gosler, Mavis Crispin/Tom Hartman, David Clough, Richard Clarkson, Margot Hodson

About the authors

Lucy Moore is the founder of Messy Church. She promotes Messy Church nationally and internationally through training and speaking events, and is the author of a number of books for BRF.

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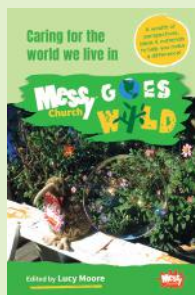
MESSY ADVENTURES

Twelve sessions for Messy Churches to do outdoors, created by a Messy Church Goes Wild writer team, enhanced by additions from scientists, and piloted in urban and rural Messy Churches.

Session titles: Wild and wilderness!, Wet and wild!, Wild and rocky!, Wild and weedy!, Wild woods!, Wild weather!, Wild on the wing!, Wild and wiggly!, Wild safari!, Wild me!, Wild on the move!, Wild life!

Find out more at messychurch.org.uk/goeswild

MESSY CHURCH GOES WILD is the movement within Messy Church which aims to encourage Messy Churches to meet God outdoors, love the natural world, experience a sense of awe and wonder there and to be more eco-aware in all we do, both inside and out, as gathered and dispersed church, for the good of the planet.



Messy Adventures is a recipient of a 2021 Scientists in Congregations grant from Equipping Christian Leadership in an Age of Science (ECLAS). The ECLAS project is led from St John's College, Durham University in partnership with the University of York and the Church of England. ECLAS and the Scientists in Congregations grants are funded by the Templeton Religion Trust.



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MESSY ADVENTURES

Edited by Lucy Moore, Dave Gregory and Gate Williams



MESSY ADVENTURES

TWELVE OUTDOOR SESSIONS
FOR MESSY CHURCHES

with lots of science



EDITED BY LUCY MOORE,
DAVE GREGORY AND
GATE WILLIAMS



Messy Adventures

Session material for running
Messy Church outdoors

Edited by Lucy Moore



1

Wild and wilderness!

Aaron Jenkyn

Aim: to explore different ways to enter into the wilderness to encounter God, and the ways in which a time of wilderness helps us cultivate the wildness within.

1 Wilderness pilgrimage – a very simple walk to one place

In an indoor and familiar space

(You might start at your church or in a home) Introduce the idea of the wilderness with your own version of these thoughts: being in the wilderness gives us the opportunity to see things in a new way. It can help us find closure for major events in our lives or help us build courage to enter into the next big thing. A time in the wilderness can create space – space to wonder and ponder and pray, without the baggage of everyday life weighing us down.

Being in the wilderness is a bit different from just being outside in nature. There is an intentionality to being in the wilderness – being in the wilderness means stepping away from our everyday lives for a time, it could be for just ten minutes or an hour, a day or a week or longer. When you enter the wilderness, you leave everything behind, the distractions of daily life, the responsibilities for the people and animals and buildings and things you care for every day, your own thoughts and doubts and ideas of how things are supposed to stay behind too.

By taking nothing, we create a space where we can encounter the Holy Spirit and find a sense of courage and resilience for the journey ahead. We're going to explore that idea today.

As you spend time in nature, whether on a local hiking trail, in the woods, along a community path or a walk around your neighbourhood, these activities and discussion questions will help you draw closer to God. If you think that you don't have any wilderness around you, then think again. Are there bits of grass sneaking up through the pavement? Are there birds nesting on the roof tops? Or a park bench on a quiet street? The wilderness is a place in which plants and animals and beings grow and survive on their own, completely dependent on God and nature.

Pack your bag

To begin – provide bags, stash of soup cans, rocks or wooden blocks (objects should be heavy, but manageable in size – something you can write on or adhere masking tape to) and a supply of masking tape. Have participants tag the objects with the things that they are carrying with them – they're going to represent the burdens we carry every day, the messages we receive from ourselves, the world around us, and the things that are getting in the way of connecting with God more deeply. For example: worries, heartaches, responsibilities, appointments, lessons and classes, jobs, school, budget and money concerns, wants, needs, pop culture messages, being different from everyone else, bossy parents, naughty siblings, nosy neighbours, bullies, schools too hard, etc.

Let people be honest and let them be private if they want to be; it is their burden. You can pre-tag some items to help people get started. Everybody should have a minimum of three to five items, more if they get into it. Give everybody a bag or box to carry the items on, it's okay (good even) if the bags are heavy, burdensome, or unruly. You can laugh about it, people can even share their burdens with others, but make sure everybody takes all their burdens with them as you set out on your wilderness pilgrimage.

An obvious threshold place

Walk together to a starting point, preferably the start of a hiking trail, park entrance, garden, woods, or other natural setting. Enjoy each other's company, notice the world around you as much as you can, but continue to carry

the bags.

Once you arrive, pause at the threshold and talk about the ways that Jesus found time to connect with God the Father through spending time in the wilderness. Ask people if they remember any stories of Jesus out in the wilderness, on land or on the water. Jesus' encounters with nature often preceded or followed times in his ministry that were really challenging – healings, miracles, intense periods of teaching, as he waits for his death on the cross. At some of the most intense moments of Jesus' story we see him retreat to the wilderness again and again. Jesus is modelling for us how we need to restore, rejuvenate and refresh our bodies and minds from time to time, especially when we find ourselves facing hard challenges or significant losses.

Into the wilderness

You might have a line, sign, arch or hula-hoop to represent entering into a time and place of wilderness. Just before participants cross the threshold, have participants lay down their burdens, literally leaving them on the ground or a table, as they take nothing and set off to explore the wilderness area alone. Describe the boundaries, if you need to. Let them know how long they have and invite them simply to explore and notice.

It might be that participants need a piece of paper and/or pen to draw or write down what they experience, or they might just wonder and pray, or explore this new area. Trust that whatever they are doing is what they need to be doing in that moment. Encourage people to enter into this exploration solo or in small groupings. There may be people who complain of being bored, or who might finish before the rest of the group; you might suggest they focus smaller, look down, closer to the ground to see what mysterious and wonderful things lie at their feet.

If your group is less comfortable outdoors, you could offer a scavenger hunt of noticing:

- How many colours can you see in the sky?
- How many colours can you see on the ground?
- What is the smallest living thing you see?
- What is the largest living thing you see?
- Can you hear the wind? What are three words that describe what it sounds like?

- Can you find:
- Something soft
- Something that feels rough
- Something with stripes
- Something strange/curious
- Something old
- Something new
- Something that gives you hope

After a set amount of time, or when you feel the group is ready, call everyone back together using a bell or call.

Celebration

Talk about the experience – you might use the prompts below:

- What was it like to put down your burdens?
- What was it like to step into the wilderness alone?
- Is there anything from your scavenger hunt that you want to share?
- What were some of the things you did to help you notice the wilderness around you?
- As you return, are there burdens, objects that you can leave behind?
- Are there objects that don't carry the same weight as they did when you first started?

You might set goals for yourself to find ways to set down your burdens and visit the wilderness more often. You might check in with Messy Church families between sessions to see how they are doing with this challenge or begin your next session by checking in with each other.

Prayer

In Mark 1, Mark writes that straight after Jesus was baptised, the Holy Spirit sent him out into the wilderness. Jesus went to listen to God without any burdens. Let's name the ways we've heard or seen God today in our wilderness. Whoever has this (stick... flower... stone or other object) gets to speak – either silently or out loud. Then pass it on to the next person. So... how have we seen or heard God today in our wilderness?



BIC Category: Christian life & practice
9781800391062, 144 pp, Paperback, B-format paperback
£8.99

Sharing the Christmas Story

From reading to living the gospel

Sally Welch

The BRF Advent book for 2022 - readings and reflections for Advent

Key benefits

- Themed reflections drawn from across the Bible narrative, sensitively brought together by former New Daylight editor Sally Welch
- Offers a process for how we might move from simply understanding the facts of the Christmas story, through reflection, to living it out and sharing the story with others
- Each week examines a different aspect of sharing the story and builds on the one before
- Includes questions and suggestions for group study

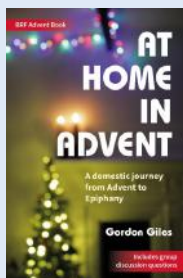
Target readership

- Advent book purchasers
- Advent study groups
- Those who study the Bible regularly
- Those who prefer to commit only to a specific programme of study
- New Daylight and other Bible reading notes subscribers
- Church leaders and home group leaders

Related books from BRF



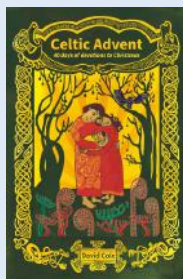
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9780857469410 £8.99



At Home in Advent
9780857469809 £8.99



Celebrating Christmas
9781800390515 £8.99



Celtic Advent
9780857467447 £8.99

Summary

In this year's BRF Advent book Sally Welch explores two questions: What is the Christmas story really about, and how do we share it?

Through each week of Advent, a different aspect of the Christmas story is examined: light, promise, mystery, love, peace and hope. Within each week, the days are focused on the ways in which the Christmas story is shared: prophecies, journeys, new life, signs, poems, stories and conversations. Each day offers a Bible passage, followed by a reflection and prayer activity. Suggestions for group study and group study questions are also included.

'Imbued with biblical insight, this book delves into the failings, the forgivings and the foibles of the way we are and the way we behave. Into the glorious muddle of our lives, we search for God and find God. In Sally Welch we have a delightful, experienced pastoral guide.' Gordon Giles, author of *At Home in Advent*

'Sally has woven a beautiful golden cord, binding together scriptural truth and wisdom, profound contemporary relevance and insightful personal experience. Written with warmth, love and understanding, this is a genuine treasure.' Margaret Silf, author of *Lighted Windows*

About the author

Sally Welch is a parish priest of 20 years' standing, having ministered in both rural and urban contexts within the Diocese of Oxford. She is currently the diocesan spirituality adviser and co-director of the Centre for Christian Pilgrimage. Sally is a committed pilgrim and has walked many pilgrim routes in the UK and Europe, with plans for many more.

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Join Sally Welch in exploring two questions:
what is the Christmas story really about,
and how do we share it?

Through each week of Advent, a different aspect of the Christmas story is examined: **light**, **promise**, **mystery**, **love**, **peace** and **hope**. Within each week, the days are focused on the ways in which the Christmas story is shared: **prophecies**, **journeys**, **new life**, **signs**, **poems**, **stories** and **conversations**. Each day offers a Bible passage, followed by a reflection, questions and a prayer. Suggestions for group study and creative prayer activities are also included.



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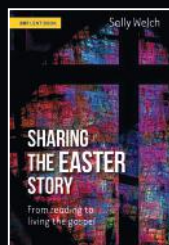
Praise for *Sharing the Easter Story*:

'Imbued with biblical insight, this book delves into the failings, the forgivings and the foibles of the way we are and the way we behave. Into the glorious muddle of our lives, we search for God and find God. In Sally Welch we have a delightful, experienced pastoral guide.'

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Margaret Silf, author of *Lighted Windows*



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SHARING THE CHRISTMAS STORY

Sally Welch



SHARING THE CHRISTMAS STORY

Sally Welch

From reading to
living the gospel

BRF ADVENT BOOK

SHARING THE CHRISTMAS STORY

From reading to
living the gospel

Sally Welch



Contents

Introduction	
Sharing the Story as an individual	
Sharing the Story as a group	
Suggestions for group meetings	
Week 1 1–5 December – Promise	
Week 2 6–11 December – Light	
Week 3 12–18 December – Mystery	
Week 4 19–25 December – Love	
Week 5 26 December–1 January – Peace	
Week 6 2–6 January – Hope	

Introduction

One hundred years ago, in 1922, at a church in south London, the Fellowship of St Matthew was begun in response to a congregation's eagerness for informed and helpful support in building a habit of daily Bible reading. In 1926, it became known as the Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) as its influence spread and more and more church communities subscribed to the notes and prayers which were offered.

Today, BRF resources people and groups as they grow in faith, encouraging them to deepen their relationship with God and to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others.

These Advent reflections are written in response to BRF's vision of 'Sharing the Story', by looking at the events surrounding the birth of the Messiah. They will take you on a journey through familiar and unfamiliar parts of the Bible, reading and reflecting on our Christian faith.

This journey does not involve a traditional, chronological approach but rather explores each week one of the themes of Advent and Christmas. Beginning with God's promises, shared with us by the prophets throughout the Old Testament, we see how the incarnation is the fulfilment of all those promises. The 'light of the world' has descended from heaven to live among us, and we explore the nature of that light and of all that it has brought to those who live in the darkness of fear, sickness or mourning. Our explorations will not take us far, however, before we engage in the mystery of the overshadowing of Mary by the Holy Spirit, and the wonderful complexity of Jesus Christ, fully divine and fully human. However, the love which surrounds us, offering us healing and comfort, support and encouragement is made real at the moment of birth – something we can trust in and depend upon when the challenges of life threaten to overwhelm us.

In week 5, the issues which surround the nature of peace are engaged with as we both recognise the gap between the 'now and the not yet' but also celebrate the gift of peace which Christ's life, death and resurrection makes available to us. Finally, we look forward in hope to all that Christ's birth brings to humanity and the final reconciliation which will take place in heaven and on earth.

Each of these themes is explored through a daily focal point, beginning with a closer look at some the prophecies made by both Old and New Testament prophets. The nativity story is one of journeys – to and from towns and cities, friends and relatives, distant lands, hostile powers. Often these journeys are triggered by signs of change, announcements of the birth of the Messiah, and these too are explored. Although obviously the birth of Christ is the fulcrum around which the narratives are centred, there are other births of babies both named such as John, and also unnamed such as those who were slaughtered by Herod. Thousands of untold hymns, poems and stories have been woven around Christ's birth, and on Fridays and Saturdays we take a look at Biblical examples of these. Finally, at the end of each week, we look at conversations which take place – with friends, with relatives, with God and with our innermost hearts.

The birth of Christ is a golden point in the overarching narrative of God's relationship with his children. By looking both back and forward as we move towards this point we can truly appreciate the anticipation with which this event was greeted, the nature of its happening and the transformation which was its result. Then we can turn and share with our neighbour our joy and hope in the future of God's kingdom.

Sharing the Christmas story as an individual

Every week in Advent you will be introduced to a different component of the nativity, gradually building a picture of all that the birth of Christ means to humanity and the world. A short Bible passage is followed by a reflection, a prayer and some questions to help you reflect for

yourself on the passage.

You might like to read the passage out loud, slowly and carefully, allowing time to let the words sink in, pausing at the end of each sentence. You might take one sentence or word which stands out for you and learn it by heart, holding it in your thoughts throughout the day, perhaps journalling what it has come to mean for you by the evening. At the end of each week there is a suggestion for a creative prayer and further questions, which can be used by both groups and individuals.

Sharing the Christmas story as a group

The readings and reflections in this book have been set out so that a rhythm of daily study and prayer can be established. In this way, a habit of daily encounter with God, which will build us up in our faith and encourage us on our journey, can be formed, renewed or reinforced. I have also tried to encourage the habit of theological reflection by including questions to think about at the end of each day's reflection. These questions can be used by individuals, but also as a group to reflect on the theme of the week.

The readings and reflections in this book can be used in different ways by all sorts of groups. They can form the basis for a weekly Advent group or provide topics of discussion at Advent lunches or suppers. They can be used as conversation-starters for groups that already meet, such as midweek fellowship groups, Mothers' Union meetings or men's breakfasts. If a new group is beginning and is meeting in person, it is a good idea to include refreshments with each meeting – some groups find an evening meal with discussion round the table very popular, while others feel that drinks and biscuits or cake are more appropriate. This kind of hospitality can break down barriers and introduce people to each other in a relaxed way, which in turn will lead to a livelier, more fruitful discussion. If you are leading or joining a group, remember that everyone will need their own copy of the book well before the beginning of Advent.

Suggestions for group meetings

The group leader may or may not also be the group host. Either or both of these roles may be fixed for the whole of Advent or rotate among the group. If the group leader and host are different people, they should liaise beforehand to ensure arrangements are in place, the time and date are fixed and refreshments are available.

Introduction

Make sure each person has a copy of the booklet and that spares are available for those who do not. Introduce newcomers to the group and make them feel welcome. Remind everyone that they do not have to contribute to the discussion if they don't want to, but that conversation will be livelier if they do!

Opening prayer

Use a prayer within the traditions of the group; this will help put people at ease, and those who are familiar with the traditions will lend confidence to those who are not. A song or hymn can be sung.

Discussion

If the group is large, split into twos or threes to discuss reactions to the week's reflections. Allow time for each person to share, if they wish. If discussion is slow to start, suggest that each member offers one word or sentence that sums up their reaction.

Forum

As one group, try to discern some themes that are common to most members. If it helps, write these down and circulate them among the group.

Reflection

Study the group questions and spend some time in silence so that individuals can reflect on the theme personally. Come together to discuss the questions. Again, if the group is large, it is helpful to split into smaller groups.

Plenary

The leader draws together the themes arising from the discussion and sees whether they mirror those from the week's reflections. Again, these can be noted for later distribution.

Prayer

It can be helpful to begin your prayer time with silence, in order to meditate on the results of the discussion. Suggestions for creative prayer can be found at the end of every week – these can be used in a group or as an individual. This can be followed by open prayer. Be flexible, allowing time for each person to contribute if they wish.

Closing prayer



Week 1 | Thursday 1 December–Sunday 5 December

Promise

Introduction

In these first few days of Advent, we look at the promises of the season. Promises are powerful things – they take looking forward seriously and make claims for the future that can be depended upon. Human promises might be more fragile, but those made by God to human beings are certain – lives can be built upon the foundation of God's promises. Some of those that are explored are reminders of promises made long ago by God which have almost faded from the human memory – but are still being honoured by God. Others are minted new for this season, so that we are able to join in with Mary to celebrate the imminent arrival of the Messiah as we prepare ourselves for the transformation of the world.

| Thursday 1 December

Signs

Isaiah 11:1–5

**A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord —
and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.**

**He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.**



Reflection

For forty years the Assyrian armies had ravaged the cities and lands of the people of Israel. They captured the inhabitants of the plains and hills of the fertile northern kingdoms and transported them back to their own territories as slaves. Others had their farms and settlements ransacked, their means of livelihood destroyed. It seemed as if God had forsaken his chosen people. Alone and abandoned, they were

left to suffer at the hands of harsh rulers, their own kings defeated and scattered.

Living through the midst of these tragic events, surrounded by pain and suffering, it would not be surprising if the prophet Isaiah was loud in his lamentation. How hard it is to peer out into the night and see anything but darkness, devoid of hope or light! Isaiah presents us with the image of a mighty tree, grown tall and strong through years of sunlight and rain, enduring storms and gales, but now defeated not by the actions of nature but by a greedy and rapacious humanity, which seeks only to exploit everything it can and destroy that which remains. Nothing is left of seasons of growth but the stump, bare and useless, a symbol of all that has been lost. All that can be done is gaze at the tree rings, tale bearers of winds and sunshine, markers of the events of many years. All that can be done is remember and grieve for lost times.

But the story is not told; the tale is not complete. As the prophet looks in mourning at the sad remains of a mighty nation, he sees signs of hope. 'A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse.' Barely visible amongst the wreckage, a sapling is slowly emerging. It is fragile and thin, a direct contrast to the mighty tree from which it comes, but still, it is gaining in strength. The roots of the tree were not destroyed when it was felled; they remain deep underground, providing nutrients and support for new growth. This Branch will be filled with the Spirit of God, we are promised. A new way of living and being will be demonstrated in the life of this small, humble product of a former mighty age.

For those of us who live in the western hemisphere, the season of Advent does indeed take place in darkness. The days are short and cold; summer is a distant memory and spring is many months away. It can be hard indeed to look forward in hope – easier to settle ourselves disconsolately on the tree stumps of our hopes and dreams and look back in regret at golden seasons long past. But this is not the work of Advent; this is not the task which we are set by the prophet as he accompanies us on our journey to the birth of the redeemer. Not for us to linger in a place of nostalgia and sadness. The past is not for

inhabiting but learning from, not for seeking to reconstruct but for use as foundation stones for the new and the better. Isaiah reminds us of the promises of God to his children that he will never forsake us and holds out to us the hope of a redeemer, one who will see with the eyes of God and not of a corrupt and broken humanity; one who will hear those who speak truth and not be confounded by the lies of the false. We are offered righteousness and justice, strength and support, a hope and a future.

And so, we turn to embrace this season of watching and waiting, of quiet preparation. We look again at our roots and reassure ourselves of their sturdiness. We hold fast to the promises of God and wait for signs of a new beginning. We trust that beneath the cold dark soil of today there hides the green shoot of tomorrow, still tender and frail but offering new life to all who will accept it.



Questions

What are the 'stumps' of your life – the good things which perhaps happen no more, the new ventures which failed to materialise? Give them space by naming them, then put them aside in thanks for what they have brought you, but in recognition that their place in your life has ended.

What are the 'shoots' of your life – the early beginnings of adventures in mind or body? How might you nurture them?



Prayer

'Advent is patience it's how God has made us a people of promise, in a world of impatience.' Stanley Hauerwas

Lord, give me patience in times of darkness. Help me to remember that although it seems as if nothing is happening, beneath the surface of the earth a new shoot is growing. Release me from expectation this Advent, so that I may experience this watching and waiting with my whole heart as I look for your coming. Amen

| Friday 2 December

Poems

Luke 1:46–55

And Mary said:

‘My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me –
holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost
thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.’

in her religious and domestic life, but although this has brought the reward of stability, love and the satisfaction of knowing she has done her duty to God, her husband and her community, she still lacks that most precious gift of all – a child, and she suffers for this. For her and her husband, the time of hope is past and she must live with her dearest longing unfulfilled. But then extraordinary things happens: her husband is struck dumb and she is with child. What a swirl of disbelief, of joy, of hardly dared hoped-for happiness she must be living in! How many times a day must her feelings change – from excitement to anxiety and then once again to pure joy at her changed circumstances. Then in the sixth month of this emotional rollercoaster she has a visitor – her cousin Mary. Mary, another ordinary person, but young, very young. She is not yet married, but she is pregnant, and overwhelmed by this news has hurried to share it with her older, wiser cousin. An angel has visited her and told her she will be the God-bearer – and her life will never be the same again.

And as Mary hurries over the hills and plains to give and receive comfort and company, in her head is a song. It is not a song of fear or anxiety. It is not a song of self-concerned preoccupation about how changed her life has been. It is not the song of an oppressed people, suffering under the reign of their conquerors, forced to live under Roman occupation. It is not a song which will be sung to the mighty and the powerful. Mary sings a song of praise for her creator, the one who loves her and her people so much that he has come down to live among them, to show them how to live. Mary sings a song of thanksgiving for her life and for the life of the one she carries. Mary sings a song of prophecy, looking forward to a time when wrongs will be righted, when the good will triumph, the poor will suffer no more and mercy will flow down from the hills to flood the plains with righteousness.

Prior to Mary’s visit, Elizabeth had shut herself away: ‘After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. “The Lord has done this for me”, she said. “In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.”’



Reflection

So here they are, two ordinary women in extraordinary situations. One of them has lived a long life and a good one. She has been faithful

(Luke 1:24–25, NIV). She recognises that God has done a wonderful thing and perhaps she needs time to reflect on this and prepare for the birth. But Mary breaks in on her isolation, just as her song breaks into the perceived status quo of occupied Israel. Things will forever after be different. The news of God breaking into the world is broken between two women in a nondescript town in an occupied country. The established order is turned upside down. But this does not happen in one time or place. Mary speaks in the aorist tense, the past tense. She is acknowledging the action of God through the ages, the God who has been on the side of the oppressed and downtrodden since the time of their slavery in Egypt, the one who has been making and keeping promises since the time of Abraham. What has happened in the past will become the template for the future, and Mary is part of the path which leads towards the redemption of all people.

When we sing this song – whether it is a frozen few gathered in the chilly pews of a tiny rural church on a cold winter's evening, or whether the sound of the words drifts up into the golden rafters of a magnificent cathedral as hundreds of people join together in glorious praise – when we sing this song, we echo Mary's prayer of thanksgiving and rejoicing in the first stage of God's plan for his children. We celebrate all that has been achieved and look forward to all that will come, and we wait for the redemption of the world.



Questions

Which part of Mary's song resonates with you most? Which part do you find most challenging?



Prayer

Heavenly Father, help me to join in with Mary's song. Give me the courage to hope in a better future and the strength to work for it.