



faith in the world

MANUAL FOR SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY
BY ICHTUS VLAANDEREN

ICH
TUS

ICH TUS

presents

Faith in the world

Manual for small group leaders in preparing their small group

2026-2027

Table of contents

Table of contents	3
Introduction	4
1 // Psalm 104	5
2 // Jeremiah 29:1-14	14
3 // Ecclesiastes 1-2 When Faith Moves Mountains, Francis Alÿs	21
4 // Acts 17:16-33	29
5 // Jozua 2 The Wall Behind the Windows, Chiharu Shiota	37
6 // Micah 6:1-8	46
7 // Matthew 5:1-16	53
8 // Revelation 7:1-17	61
9 // Psalm 148 Lectio Divina	72
10 // Thematic small group #NoFilter	76
Appendix 1: Making your own Bible Study	85
Appendix 2: Manuscriptstudie	86
Appendix 3: Image for the Joshua 2 study	89

Introduction

Ichtus' annual theme for 2026–2027 is *Faith in the World*. The studies in this small group guide are intended as a resource for small group leaders to use in their preparation. It is therefore not a ready-to-use Bible study guide, but a tool to help you prepare. It enables small group leaders to study the Bible passage responsibly for themselves and then prepare their own small group study. Of course, the material provided can also serve as a source of inspiration.

The theme *Faith in the World* has two sides, which recur throughout this guide.

On the one hand, it is about seeing *faith in the world*. We often unconsciously learn to think in terms of two worlds: the safe, Christian world of the church and the world outside it. But God is not absent beyond the boundaries of our bubble; He is already at work in the world. We want to invite you to develop this way of seeing: to discover God in everyday life, in your field of study, in a conversation with a non-Christian friend, or in a work of art that moves you. Studies in which this comes to the fore include Psalms 104 and 148, where all creation bears witness to God's greatness, and Acts 17, where Paul connects with what the Athenians already knew. On the other hand, it is about sharing *faith with the world*. One example is the study on Jeremiah 29, about the exiles whom God calls to seek the good of the city in which they live rather than separating themselves from it. Another is the study on Matthew 5 about salt and light. These studies help us reflect on what it means as a student to share your faith in your studies, your group of friends, or your student city.

In selecting the Bible passages, we looked for texts that reflect both sides of the theme, from both the Old and New Testaments. This guide contains eight Bible studies, two visual studies, a Lectio Divina, and a thematic small group study. All Bible texts are taken from the NBV21 unless otherwise indicated.

With thanks to Lieven Waelkens, Leonie Moreels, Warre Moors, Eline Biernaux, Estée Lindhout, Jasper Pepermans, Luk Brazle, Ken Alloing, Sem Thomas, Lara Creemers, and Carleen Struik.

*And to the authors of the small group guides *Er was eens...* (Once Upon a Time..., academic year 2012–2013) and *Geloof in de wereld* (Faith in the World, academic year 2013–2014).*

Editors: Carleen Struik, Inge Groeneveld

1 // Psalm 104

Biblepassage

104 ¹ Praise the Lord, my soul.

Lord my God, you are very great;
you are clothed with splendor and majesty.

² The Lord wraps himself in light as with a garment;

he stretches out the heavens like a tent

³ and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters.

He makes the clouds his chariot
and rides on the wings of the wind.

⁴ He makes winds his messengers,
flames of fire his servants.

⁵ He set the earth on its foundations;
it can never be moved.

⁶ You covered it with the watery depths as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.

⁷ But at your rebuke the waters fled,
at the sound of your thunder they took to flight;

⁸ they flowed over the mountains, they went down into the valleys,
to the place you assigned for them.

⁹ You set a boundary they cannot cross;
never again will they cover the earth.

¹⁰ He makes springs pour water into the ravines;
it flows between the mountains.

¹¹ They give water to all the beasts of the field;
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.

¹² The birds of the sky nest by the waters;
they sing among the branches.

¹³ He waters the mountains from his upper chambers;
the land is satisfied by the fruit of his work.

¹⁴ He makes grass grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to cultivate—

bringing forth food from the earth:

¹⁵ wine that gladdens human hearts,
oil to make their faces shine,
and bread that sustains their hearts.

¹⁶ The trees of the Lord are well watered,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.

¹⁷ There the birds make their nests;
 the stork has its home in the junipers.
¹⁸ The high mountains belong to the wild goats;
 the crags are a refuge for the hyrax.

¹⁹ He made the moon to mark the seasons,
 and the sun knows when to go down.
²⁰ You bring darkness, it becomes night,
 and all the beasts of the forest prowl.
²¹ The lions roar for their prey
 and seek their food from God.
²² The sun rises, and they steal away;
 they return and lie down in their dens.
²³ Then people go out to their work,
 to their labor until evening.

²⁴ How many are your works, Lord!
 In wisdom you made them all;
 the earth is full of your creatures.
²⁵ There is the sea, vast and spacious,
 teeming with creatures beyond number—
 living things both large and small.
²⁶ There the ships go to and fro,
 and Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.

²⁷ All creatures look to you
 to give them their food at the proper time.
²⁸ When you give it to them, they gather it up;
 when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things.

²⁹ When you hide your face, they are terrified;
 when you take away their breath,
 they die and return to the dust.
³⁰ When you send your Spirit, they are created,
 and you renew the face of the ground.

³¹ May the glory of the Lord endure forever;
 may the Lord rejoice in his works—
³² he who looks at the earth, and it trembles,
 who touches the mountains, and they smoke.

³³ I will sing to the Lord all my life;
 I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
³⁴ May my meditation be pleasing to him,
 as I rejoice in the Lord.
³⁵ But may sinners vanish from the earth
 and the wicked be no more.
 Praise the Lord, my soul. Praise the Lord.

Place in the annual theme

As human beings, we all live in the same world, but we do not all look at that world in the same way. The way we understand reality is connected to what we believe about where our world comes from, what it exists for, and what place we have in it.

Psalms 104 invites us to look at the world with God as its Creator and Sustainer. The psalm shows that creation is not a meaningless collection of things, but a reality shaped, sustained, and upheld by God's wisdom. By knowing God, we not only discover more about the world around us, but also about our own place within it: that our life is received, has purpose, and is part of God's good design.

Key Idea

The psalmist calls us to praise God because His greatness, majesty, glory, and wisdom are revealed in His creation. God is not distant from the world, but actively orders and sustains it, giving every creature what it needs: a place, food, rhythm, and purpose.

All creation lives by God's care and in doing so turns back to Him: animals wait for His hand, the earth is renewed by His Spirit, and human beings receive the task of working within God's created order. The ultimate purpose of creation is not merely its existence, but its joyful orientation towards God, in which both creation and its Creator rejoice. At the same time, the psalm shows that God's order is also a moral reality, in which evil and wickedness will ultimately have no place.

Questions and Activities for the Small-Group Leader

We have divided the activities and questions into introduction, observation, interpretation, and application. They are intended as a starting point for you as a small-group leader to study the passage independently first. Afterwards, you can go through the background information for further study, before preparing your small-group study.

1. Introduction

When we look at the world, we all see the same reality: the same mountains, seas, stars, people, and life. Yet that same world can be interpreted in very different ways.

Is the world ultimately nothing more than a random collection of processes without purpose? Are we human beings merely temporary appearances without any deeper meaning? Or is there a Creator who willed this reality into being, sustains it, and leads it towards a purpose?

Psalms 104 introduces us to a way of looking at the world in which God is at the centre. The psalmist looks at the world and sees not only beauty, but a testimony to God's character. The order in nature, the dependence of all living creatures, and the abundance of creation all point back to the God who sustains this world.

What may be most surprising is that the God who establishes the mountains, sets boundaries for the seas, and clothes the heavens with light is also involved in the smallest details of His creation. He gives animals their food, causes plants to grow, gives human beings work, and rejoices in His works.

Psalms 104 therefore invites us to learn to see differently: to look differently at the world, at our own lives, and ultimately at God Himself. For when we see the world as the psalmist sees it, we discover not only how great God is, but also how deeply our own lives are connected to His care, wisdom, and joy.

2. Reading (Observation)

- What are all the things God does for His creation according to this psalm?
- Where do you see in this psalm that God brings order and harmony to His creation?
- What images and examples does the psalmist use to describe God's greatness, majesty, and glory?
- Which different creatures or parts of creation are mentioned, and what place or task are they given?

3. Understanding (Interpretation)

- What characteristics of God do we see in the way He relates to His creation?
- What does Psalm 104 teach us about God's relationship with His creation?
- What place and responsibility does Psalm 104 give to human beings within God's creation?
- According to this psalm, why does seeing God's creation lead to praise?

4. Applying (Application)

- How does Psalm 104 change the way you look at God, the world around you, and your own place within it?
- Do you sometimes find it difficult to believe that God rejoices in His works, and therefore also in you personally as part of His creation? Which words from this psalm help you with this?
- How would your life change if you believed more deeply that every day you live out of God's care, wisdom, and joy?
- How does Psalm 104 help you to look at God again with wonder, gratitude, and praise?

5. Activities

- **Song of praise:** sing *Complete Mission Praise, No. 506: How great thou art* together.
- **Anecdote round:** tell one another about the most joyful situation(s) you have experienced with God so far.
- Take a walk in nature and thank God, or try to pause and notice the things in the world that we generally take for granted.

Explanation of the Bible Passage

1. Genre

The book of Psalms is a collection of sacred poems, largely liturgical in nature, which were intended to be sung and accompanied by instruments and dancing.¹ Psalm 104 is a psalm of praise. This can be seen in the call—in this case addressed to “my soul”—to praise God. God's deeds and attributes are then given as reasons for praising Him.²

¹ Cornfeld, Gaalyahu. *De Geïllustreerde Encyclopedie van de Bijbel*. Hoofddorp: ICOB, 1976, 576.

² Sabourin, Leopold. *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning*. New, Enlarged, Updated ed. New York: Alba House, 1974, 176-177.

2. Authorship and Date

Various Psalms are attributed to David, the Korahites, Asaph, and Ethan the Ezrahite. The author of Psalm 104, however, is unknown.³

The Psalms date from the earliest days of Jewish settlement in the Promised Land to shortly after the exile (5th century BC).⁴ There is, however, much debate and disagreement about when specific Psalms were written.⁵

3. Intended audience of the Bible passage

The Psalms were used, among other things, in the liturgy and worship of the temple.

4. Central themes in the book

■ *Worship*

The Psalms express a continual attitude of worship towards God. This admiration of God begins with recognising His activity in nature and in human lives.

■ *God's sovereignty as creator*

The Psalms also speak about God's creative power, visible in the intentional design that can be recognised in the created world. God establishing the earth and determining the boundaries of the waters show how the universe has been shaped by divine decree. This invites human beings to adopt an attitude of humility and praise towards God and to recognise their own intentional and purposeful place and value within creation, received from God.

■ *Gratitude*

The Psalms regularly express gratitude for God's blessing, provision, and steadfast love. Gratitude is seen here not merely as an emotion but as a discipline that fosters continual trust in God's goodness.

■ *God's justice*

The Psalms point towards God's ultimate justice. Even when the righteous suffer or sinners seem to prosper, God will honour the innocent and judge sinners at the time He has appointed. This assurance nourishes faith because temporary, visible injustices are overshadowed by God's eternal rule as Judge and King.

■ *Other topics*

Grief and trust during difficult times, the Word of God and divine decree, covenant and community, and messianic hope.⁶

³ Cornfeld, Gaalyahu. *De Geïllustreerde Encyclopedie van de Bijbel*. Hoofddorp: ICOB, 1976, 576.

⁴ Ibid., 578.

⁵ Ibid., 575-576.

⁶ "What Are the Key Themes of the Book of Psalms?," https://biblehub.com/q/key_themes_of_psalms.htm.

Structure of the book + place of the passage within in

The book of Psalms consists of five books, each of which ends with a doxology. This structure is thought to have resulted from the merging of several original collections based on the use of the divine name (Yahweh and Elohim), derived from the way in which the Pentateuch was also divided according to its different literary traditions. Psalm 104 is found towards the end of the fourth book (Psalms 90–106).⁷

Words from the text

- 104:3 - *‘and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters’*

As in Genesis 1:6–7 and Amos 9:6, the waters above the firmament can be understood as the floor of God’s upper chambers in heaven.⁸

- 104:4 - *‘He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants.’*

In line with Hebrews 1:7, this refers to angels.⁹

- 104:5 - *‘He set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved.’*

Together with Psalm 102:19, this seems to indicate that the order established by God will endure, even though the earth itself can be moved.¹⁰

- 104:6 - *‘You covered it with the watery depths as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains.’*

Some argue that this corresponds to the creation account in Genesis 1,¹¹ while others argue that it refers to the flood (see Genesis 7:19 and 2 Peter 3:5–6).¹²

⁷ Ibid., 576.

⁸ T. E. Bird, “The Psalms,” in *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. Bernard Orchard and Edmund F. Sutcliffe (Toronto; New York; Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1953), 467.

⁹ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 376.

¹⁰ George Leo Haydock, *Haydock’s Catholic Bible Commentary* (New York: Edward Dunigan and Brother, 1859), Ps 103:5.

¹¹ Ibid., Ps 103:6.

¹² Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 376.

■ 104:26 - *'There the ships go to and fro, and Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.'*

Leviathan can be understood as a mythical sea monster or as referring to all (large) fish that play in the oceans God created¹³ (see also Job 40:20).¹⁴

Together with Proverbs 8:31, this text also reflects God's joyful attitude towards creation.¹⁵

■ 104:29 - *'When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.'*

In line with Ecclesiastes 12:7, this describes how God takes back to Himself the breath of life that He gives to creatures.¹⁶

■ 104:35 - *'But may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more.'* Sin must come to a complete end so that God can fully enjoy His creation.¹⁷

¹³ George Leo Haydock, Haydock's Catholic Bible Commentary (New York: Edward Dunigan and Brother, 1859), Ps 103:26.

¹⁴ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 377.

¹⁵ George Leo Haydock, Haydock's Catholic Bible Commentary (New York: Edward Dunigan and Brother, 1859), Ps 103:26.

¹⁶ A. H. McNeile, "The Psalms," in A New Commentary on Holy Scripture: Including the Apocrypha, ed. Charles Gore, Henry Leighton Goudge, and Alfred Guillaume, vol. 1 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942), 367.

¹⁷ Ibid., 367

Preparing the small-group meeting

To lead a small-group study, you first and foremost need to study the Bible passage yourself. Work through the three steps yourself: observation, interpretation, and application. Do not immediately turn to the background information in the small group guide or to external sources. Use general observation questions, as described in the introduction to the small group guide, as well as the specific questions under Reading and Understanding for this passage.

After you have worked through the Reading and Understanding stages, try to formulate a key idea. Compare it with the key idea given for this small-group study. If you arrive at something very different, it may be wise to discuss it with another small-group leader, small-group coordinator, or student worker.

The question you now need to answer is how you will help the members of your small group arrive at that central message. Use the activities suggested for the different sections, or come up with a new one yourself. Feel free to be creative. What matters is that the three steps—Reading, Understanding, and Applying—come through clearly during the small group, so that group members learn to study the Bible responsibly.

Resources for further study

Genesis 1

2 // Jeremiah 29:1-14

Bible passage

29 ¹ This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ² (This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) ³ He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said:

⁴ This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷ Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

⁸ Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. ⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the Lord.

¹⁰ This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. ^[b] I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

Place in the annual theme

Living out our faith in the world happens through believers who live in that world. For centuries, Christians have compared themselves to exiles. We are not at home in this world; we expect one day to return to our true home, with God. The Bible promises that God's followers will one day live together with Him. The separation between God and human beings that we experience now will no longer exist. God will always be visible and always be near. That is what we long for.

Students often find themselves in a similar situation. The place they experience as 'home' is often not the student accommodation or campus where they spend much of their week. No one promises that this will change any time soon—not even God Himself. We are called to invest in the world, the country, and the particular city where we find ourselves now. We must live and work in society and contribute to the well-being of our planet, Belgium, and our (student) city.

We must prepare ourselves to spend our lives being present wherever we are. God has placed us there, and it is there that He wants us to pray and work for Him and for those around us, so that we do not decrease in number but instead grow.

Key idea

God calls us to pray and work for the well-being of the communities around us, in which we participate fully.

Questions and activities for the small-group leader

We have divided the activities and questions into 'introduction', 'observation', 'interpretation', and 'application'. They are intended as a starting point for you as a small-group leader to study the passage independently first. Afterwards, you can go through the background information for further study, before preparing your small-group study.

1. Introduction

In Jeremiah 29:7, the people of Judah are called to be a blessing to the city to which God has exiled them. As an introduction, you can explore your own surroundings to discover the place where God has put you. Gather photos and video material that tell the story of your city. Present these to your small group.

2. Reading (Observation)

- Who led the people of Judah into exile?
- Who were taken into exile?
- Which places are mentioned?

3. Understanding (interpretation)

- What is 'the letter'?
- What genre is this?
- What are the exiles called to do?
- What are the exiles warned against?
- Why might Jeremiah have written the letter?
- How does the prosperity of the city also mean prosperity for the exiles?
- What did the exiles long for?
- Why must the exiles increase in number rather than decrease?

4. Applying (application)

- What do this genre (usually) and this text call us to do?
- What parallels can be drawn between exiles and students?
- What parallels can be drawn between exiles and Christians?
- How does this letter relate to the saying 'Christians are not of this world, but in this world'?
- If you were to adapt this letter to make it relevant to your Ichthus group or church, what would it look like?
- How can your Ichthus group pray for the city and contribute to its flourishing?
- How can your Ichthus group benefit from the flourishing of the city?
- How does your Ichthus group ensure that it does not decrease in number, but instead grows?

5. Activities

- *City walk*: Organise a walk through the city. Divide your small group into two to four groups and choose the same number of different locations in the city. This allows you to do part of the study in different places. For example, choose locations that are important to the city and/or students (a town hall, a park, a university building, etc.). Create a prayer map of the city. Take a map and use a marker or sticky notes to identify locations that are important to the city and the small-group members. Then pray for these locations.
- *Volunteering project*: Put your small group into action. Arrange for the group members to participate together in a volunteering project.
- *Current affairs*: Gather information about current affairs from different media (newspapers, blogs, television and radio news). Important events, popular music and films, etc., can all be included. These topics can be discussed and debated, or you can create a quiz. The current affairs can cover different areas, such as educational institutions, the city, the country, or the whole world.

Explanation of the Bible passage

1. Genre

The book of Jeremiah emerged from a long editorial process that is difficult to trace. Biblical scholars debate which sources were brought together to form the final work as we know it today.

The text we are studying was probably originally a separate letter that was given its place within the larger work, together with several other letters by Jeremiah. The book is therefore difficult to classify under one particular genre, as it contains many different genres. Our text is a letter, introduced by an explanation that provides context.

2. Authorship and date

Jeremiah (645–580 BC) was a prophet in the kingdom of Judah (also called the Southern Kingdom or the Kingdom of the Two Tribes). He lived at a time of major shifts in international power structures. The Assyrian Empire was collapsing, and the Babylonian Empire was becoming the dominant power. Meanwhile, Egypt was also trying to maintain and strengthen its position. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah were caught in the middle of all this. Israel had already experienced exile under the Assyrians, while Judah was a satellite state of the Babylonian Empire (comparable to East Germany and Poland under the Soviet Union). When a pro-Egyptian government came to power in Judah, Babylon took precautionary measures, and Judah was fully incorporated as a province within the vast empire. A group of people, mainly prominent Judeans from Jerusalem, were deported to other parts of the empire. This is known as the Babylonian exile.

As a prophet, Jeremiah's task in all this was to communicate God's message to His people. The primary task of a prophet is not to predict the future or promote social justice. A prophet communicates what God wants to say, and this can result in a wide variety of messages. Jeremiah addresses several themes in his messages. One of the main themes in the book of Jeremiah is God's supreme authority over His creation. He is the one who ultimately rules. Moreover, God is deeply concerned with events on earth. For example, He is disappointed in His people because they rebel against Him. All this takes place within the tension between going into exile and longing to return home.

3. Intended audience of the Bible passage

This is a letter written to the surviving elders among the exiles, the priests, the prophets, and all the others whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem to Babylon.

4. Central themes of the book

Jeremiah is a prophetic book whose central theme is Israel's past, the sinful things the people have done, and the consequences of their actions. However, the book is not entirely negative; it also offers a glimpse of a better future.

5. Structure of the book + place of the passage within it

Jeremiah 1	The calling of Jeremiah
Jeremiah 2-20	Prophecies during the reign of Josiah, containing powerful testimonies against the people concerning their unfaithfulness, interwoven with expressions of the prophet's anguish and a warning about an enemy
Jeremiah 21-45	Prophecies without clear dates concerning judgement and false prophets, as well as events that happened to Jeremiah
Jeremiah 46-51	Prophecies concerning ten pagan nations
Jeremiah 52	The fate of those who were taken captive to Babylon and those who remained in Jerusalem with Zedekiah

Our passage is part of the prophecies without clear dates. It contains a warning against false prophets and a call to continue living ordinary lives. It makes clear that the exile will last another 70 years. At the same time, God wants to make clear that this is not the end. God will help.¹⁸

6. Words from the Bible passage

■ 29:1-3 - *'Elasah and Gemariah'*

Elasah and Gemariah were ambassadors sent to Babylon, to King Nebuchadnezzar, by King Zedekiah of Judah shortly after the beginning of the exile. Jeremiah entrusted his letter to the exiles to these two ambassadors. The letter is addressed to the remaining elders, the priests, the prophets, and all the other people who had been taken away. The elders were probably leaders of villages and towns who had survived Nebuchadnezzar's attack. These people were presumably living in great fear and confusion.

■ 29:4 - *'God of Israel'*

God is the God of Israel (Jacob, after his name was changed). The readers of the letter come from Judah. After the division of the kingdom of David and Solomon, the two kingdoms developed their own histories. Nevertheless, a certain connection remained between them. The term Israel was therefore also used to refer to both kingdoms, pointing back to the covenant between God and the patriarchs. This God is the one behind the exile.

■ 29:7 - *'seek the peace and prosperity of the city'*

Exile is not imprisonment; the exiles must rebuild ordinary lives. They must not live in isolation in Babylon, focusing only on the place they came from (and to which they hope to return). They must build their own houses and plant their own gardens in Babylon, according to their own customs. Their greatest punishment was separation from Jerusalem and the temple. The marriages they enter into are marriages within their own community, because they were not permitted to marry people from other nations (Ezra 9:12–15 and Nehemiah 13:23–28). In Jeremiah 28, a prophet promises that the exiles will return within two years. This prophet soon dies, and his prophecy is therefore shown to be false. The letter itself already speaks of three generations, so the exiles must settle for a long period of time. The rest of the letter (up to and including verse 15) also contains a warning against prophets who claim otherwise. By settling in the city, the exiles contribute to its well-being. This well-being will be a blessing both to themselves and to those around them.

¹⁸De Koning, G. (2022). *Jeremia – Toegelicht & Toegepast 24: De verheven God* (3e druk).

Preparing the small-group meeting

To lead a small-group study, you first and foremost need to study the Bible passage yourself. Work through the three steps yourself: observation, interpretation, and application. Do not immediately turn to the background information in the small group guide or to external sources. Use general observation questions, as described in the introduction to the small group guide, as well as the specific questions under Reading and Understanding for this passage.

After you have worked through the Reading and Understanding stages, try to formulate a key idea. Compare it with the key idea given for this small-group study. If you arrive at something very different, it may be wise to discuss it with another small-group leader, small-group coordinator, or student worker.

The question you now need to answer is how you will help the members of your small group arrive at that central message. Use the activities suggested for the different sections, or come up with a new one yourself. Feel free to be creative. What matters is that the three steps—Reading, Understanding, and Applying—come through clearly during the small group, so that group members learn to study the Bible responsibly.

Resources for further study

- Paul, M. J., G. van den Brink, en C. Bette. *Bijbelcommentaar Jeremia | Klaagliederen*. Studiebijbel Oude Testament. Veenendaal: Centrum voor Bijbelonderzoek, 2013.
- Bracke, John M. Jeremiah 1–29. Westminster Bible Companion. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999.

3 // Ecclesiastes 1-2

When Faith Moves Mountains, Francis Alÿs

This is a visual Bible study and has a different structure from the other studies. Instead of using the OIA method to study a Bible passage, we look at examples from art and connect them to a Bible passage, so that we can learn more about God and learn from Him in the world around us. The OIA method can also be used when looking at the artwork.

Artwork

Watch together: [‘When Faith Moves Mountains- Francis Alÿs’](#)



Bible passage

1 ² “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” ³What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? ⁴Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. ⁵The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.

2 ⁴ Ook I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ⁵I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. ⁷I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. ⁸I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem^[a] as well—the delights of a man’s heart. ⁹I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me. ¹⁰I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil. ¹¹Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

Place in the annual them

The performance *When Faith Moves Mountains* and Ecclesiastes 1–2 help us explore *Faith in the World*: Does our faith have meaning and purpose? And what about community and engagement? In addition, this study invites us to discover more about our faith through art.

Key idea

For the performance *When Faith Moves Mountains* in 2002, artist Francis Alÿs joined forces with more than 800 volunteers, including many students from the university in Lima, Peru. The aim of the action? To move an enormous sand dune approximately ten centimetres.

In this work, Alÿs responds to the abuses of the administration of President Fujimori, who left office in 2000. He does not do so through direct confrontation, but by organising a collective, seemingly pointless artistic intervention that brings people together around a new, positive story. Afterwards, many students speak enthusiastically about their remarkable experience.

This work raises questions: What injustices do students see in their immediate surroundings, and how do they respond? How do they feel they should address these situations as young people and believers, and how ‘useful’ do their actions need to be? How do students deal with feelings of despair when a prayer or an action seems, at first sight, to have had little ‘use’? And is ‘usefulness’ really that important?

Questions and activities for the small-group leader

1. Introduction

For the performance *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002) by Antwerp-born artist Francis Alÿs, more than 800 volunteers moved a sand dune in the city of Lima, Peru, approximately ten centimetres. The collective action was recorded in a film lasting more than four hours. In numerous shorter video edits, the volunteers—mainly students—also talk about their experience.

Alÿs worked closely with residents of Lima's impoverished outskirts and saw the action as a response to the consequences of the mismanagement of President Alberto Fujimori, who remained in power until 2000 and was later accused of numerous offences, including bribery. By bringing people together around a humorous, new, and positive story, he hoped to strengthen the community.

"Demonstrating a ridiculous disproportion between an effort and its effect, the work is a metaphor for Latin American society, in which minimal reforms are achieved through massive collective efforts." — MoMA

"One of the other objectives of this piece was to incite the multiple subjects included in the project to become storytellers to create one communal event that would help strengthen the Lima community and prove to them that faith can indeed move mountains." — Public Delivery

Artists were not the only ones responding to the poverty and abuses that were widespread in Latin American countries from the 1960s onwards. Theologians also responded to these circumstances. Liberation theology emerged strongly in this context. Liberation theologians understand the concept of 'sin' not so much as particular wrongful actions by an individual believer (such as lying, fraud, adultery, and murder), but as a structural social phenomenon in the form of social oppression, slavery, inequality, and economic injustice. They were critical of the established order and the South American dictatorships. In recent decades, this theology has faded somewhat into the background, but it is making a comeback in new forms. One example is Palestinian Christianity, within which a distinct liberation theology has developed in recent years.

2. Looking (observation and interpretation of the performance)

- What do you see? What happens in the performance? What catches your attention?
- Who takes part in the performance?
- What effect does the performance have on the participants?
- What meaning would you give to it?
- What do the participants say about doing things in community?
- What is the relationship between the role of individual participants and the role of the group?
- What do liberation theologians say?
- Does Alÿs have faith in the world?

3. Reading (observation and interpretation of the Bible passage)

- What stands out to you in the passages from Ecclesiastes?
- What conclusion does the Teacher draw from his observations?
- What things does the Teacher describe as 'meaningless'? What do you think he means by this?
- The Teacher examines everything. What does this mean? Is it permissible to examine everything?
- According to the Teacher, what do human beings ultimately gain from their efforts?
- Does the Teacher have faith in the world?

4. Appying (application)

- What should we, as Ichthus or as the church, do with this performance?
- How would you connect Alÿs's performance with the text from Ecclesiastes?
- At first sight, Alÿs's performance seems to have little direct 'use'. How important is usefulness in your life? How bad is 'meaninglessness', really?
- Do you sometimes question things such as the 'meaning' or 'usefulness' of life, yourself, what you do or study, or what you pray for? How do you deal with this?
- Is being able to be useful not also a privilege? What about people who only have room to do useful things because, for example, they would otherwise struggle to make ends meet? How do you relate to this idea? How does it relate to the ideas of liberation theologians?
- How do you experience this performance in 2026/2027, when many forms of protest or direct action are considered forms of engagement (for example, protest marches and climate marches)? Are these useful? Do you think this is a sufficiently direct way of addressing a problem?
- A statement that appears several times in the Gospels is Jesus saying that faith can move mountains. For example, in Matthew 17:20: 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, "Move from here to there," and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.' How does this performance make you reflect on this statement by Jesus?

5. Activities

- Listen to the song Dust in the wind by Kansas.
How does the song relate to Alÿs and Ecclesiastes, and to usefulness?
- There are numerous works in the history of theatre and film that explore 'usefulness' and 'uselessness'. Watch and listen to the performance PNEUMA – Wärmezeitmaschine. Is there any usefulness in this performance? What is its purpose? How can you connect this work with the text from Ecclesiastes?
- [Pneuma – Wärmezeitmaschine \[Documentation\]](#)
- Go and do something together! It can be something useful or something seemingly useless. Afterwards, reflect together on how it made you feel.

Explanation of the Bible passage

1. Genre

The book of Ecclesiastes belongs to wisdom literature, just like Job and Proverbs. The generally accepted view of wisdom was that someone who lived a good life would prosper, while someone who lived a bad life would be punished by God during their lifetime. This view is partly reflected in Proverbs, but in Job and Ecclesiastes it is questioned or contradicted.¹⁹

2. Authorship and date

The Teacher himself did not write the book. His words are presented by a narrator. This is evident, among other things, from Ecclesiastes 1:1–2, Ecclesiastes 7:27, and the epilogue in Ecclesiastes 12:8–14.²⁰ *‘The son of David, king in Jerusalem.’ This opening is intended to draw the reader’s attention to Solomon. Traditionally, Solomon has been regarded as the author of Ecclesiastes, but Luther had already begun to question this attribution.*²¹ Arguments against Solomon’s authorship include the suggestion that the language indicates that the book was written later than Solomon’s lifetime. For example, it contains later Aramaic influences.²² Furthermore, Solomon is not explicitly named in Ecclesiastes, unlike in Proverbs and the Song of Songs.²³ The title ‘the Teacher’ is often understood as a way for the writer to associate himself with Solomon while still maintaining some distance. The association with Solomon served literary and communicative purposes.²⁴ Moreover, the background of the book does not fit the time of Solomon. It describes a time of misery and vanity (1:2–11); the splendour of Solomon’s time had passed (1:12–2:26). A time of death had begun for Israel (3:1–15); there was injustice and violence (4:1–3); there was pagan tyranny (5:7; 9:19); death was preferred over life (7:1); and ‘there is a time when one person rules over another to their own harm’ (8:9). A date after the exile fits better. Ecclesiastes was probably written in the third century BC.²⁵

3. Intended audience of the Bible passage

If we accept this dating, the intended audience probably consisted of Jews living in the period after the Babylonian exile. They lived in a changing society in which foreign rulers held influence and social inequality and injustice were present.

Ecclesiastes probably addressed people who wondered how they should live in these uncertain circumstances and how they could find meaning in life amid them.

4. Central themes of the book

¹⁹ Bartholomew, C. G. & O'Dowd, R. P., *Old Testament Wisdom Literature. A Theological Introduction*. (InterVarsity Press), 189.

²⁰ Bartholomew, C. G. & O'Dowd, R. P., *Old Testament Wisdom Literature. A Theological Introduction*. (InterVarsity Press), 190.

²¹ Greidanus, S., *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes. Foundations for Expository Sermons*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 7.

²² Arnold, B. T. & Beyer, B. E., *In ontmoeting met het Oude Testament*, 328.

²³ Kidner, D., *The Message of Ecclesiastes*. (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 21.

²⁴ Greidanus, S., *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes. Foundations for Expository Sermons*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

- *The Fear of the Lord*: One theme that also emerges in Ecclesiastes is that ‘the fear of the Lord’ is the only reliable foundation on which to build (cf. Job 28:28; Proverbs 1:7).
- *The Meaning (or Meaninglessness) of Life*: Ecclesiastes gets straight to the point with a rather shocking statement: ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’ (‘vanity’ in an older translation). The Teacher describes his search for the meaning—or meaninglessness—of life. He tells us what he has examined and what conclusion he has reached.²⁶
- *Different Ways of Understanding Ecclesiastes*: The book of Ecclesiastes can be understood in different ways. Some believe that it is extremely pessimistic. In this reading, the Teacher is someone who claims to possess the truth, partly through his association with Solomon, but whose method of investigation is actually foolish. In his attempt to discover the meaning of life, he relies solely on reason, observation, and experience.²⁷

²⁶ Ibid., 194.

²⁷ Ibid., 199.

Preparing the Small-Group Meeting

To lead a small-group study, you first and foremost need to study both the artwork and the Bible passage yourself. Work through the three steps—observation, interpretation, and application—for both the artwork and the Bible passage.

Do not immediately turn to the background information in the small group guide or to external sources. Use general observation questions, as described in the introduction to the small group guide, as well as the specific questions under Reading and Understanding for this passage.

After you have worked through the Reading and Understanding stages, try to formulate a key idea. Compare it with the key idea given for this small-group study. If you arrive at something very different, it may be wise to discuss it with another small-group leader, small-group coordinator, or student worker.

The question you now need to answer is how you will help the members of your small group arrive at that central message. Use the activities suggested for the different sections, or come up with a new one yourself. Feel free to be creative. What matters is that the three steps—Reading, Understanding, and Applying—come through clearly during the small group, so that group members learn to study the Bible responsibly.

Sources for further study

- Cafferky, M. (2013). Toward a Biblical Theology of Efficiency. *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, 16(2), 41-60.
- Hautala, V. and Roser, D. (2023) Utilitarianism and Christian Theology. In: B. N. Wolfe et al., eds. *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. University of St Andrews.
- Kaaden, E. (2025). Structureel onrecht en zonde. *Bevrijdingstheologie en de oproep tot verantwoordelijkheid*. *Radix. Tijdschrift over geloof, wetenschap en samenleving*, 51(1), 58-65.
- Kester, G. (2009). Lessons in Futility: Francis Alÿs and the Legacy of May '68. *Third Text*, 23(4), 407–420.
- Steegman, J. (2017). *Alles moet anders! Bevrijdingstheologie voor witte Nederlanders*. Utrecht: Kok Boekencentrum.

4 // Acts 17:16–33

Bible passage

17 ¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” ²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. ²⁴ “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ ²⁹ “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

³² When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” ³³ At that, Paul left the Council. ³⁴ Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

Place in the annual theme

This passage is recognisable to us when we look at society and certain trends. Many people around us say that they believe in something, just as the people in Athens had an altar to the unknown god. We live in a world where God no longer comes first, but where many other false gods, also called idols, take His place.

In today's society, absolute truth is no longer widely accepted, while different faiths and religions are accepted. As Christians, we need to take this context into account. We cannot simply go out and proclaim that everyone else is wrong. We need to listen to other opinions, and we can tell others about Jesus with respect.

Key idea

Paul goes to Athens, a city full of idols, and delivers a speech about God before the Areopagus. He does so with respect for the Athenians, even though he believes they are mistaken.

Questions and activities for the small-group leader

We have divided the activities and questions into 'introduction', 'observation', 'interpretation', and 'application'. They are intended as a starting point for you as a small-group leader to study the passage independently first. Afterwards, you can go through the background information for further study, before preparing your small-group study.

1. Introduction

As an introduction, you can explore the values of your own student city and university or university of applied sciences. Look online to find out what the city spends most of its money or time on. Where the money goes will reveal the priorities of your student city. What does the university give the most recognition to? Which fields of study enjoy prestige, and which projects receive the most research funding? Share some of your findings with your small group as an introduction, to illustrate which modern-day idols Paul might notice if he were walking around your city today.

2. Reading (observation)

- Who are the Epicureans and Stoics, and what do they believe?
- What is the Areopagus?
- What did the poets mean by 'We are his offspring'?
- What is Paul's tone?
- Mark the words 'you', 'I', and 'we', and notice how and when they are used.

3. Understanding (Interpretation)

- How do the listeners respond? Does their response change during Paul's speech?
- How does Paul structure his speech? What arguments does he use?
- Why does Paul say 'a man' rather than 'Jesus'?
- Try to summarise this passage in one sentence. Try to reach a consensus within your small group. Check your sentence against the text.
- Why is this passage included here? What was the author's intention? Keep checking your answers against the text.
- How do you think the first listeners responded to this passage? Why? Keep checking your answers against the wider context of Acts.

4. Applying (application)

- What are today's idols?
- Does this passage call you to do anything?
- What techniques and/or attitudes can we learn from Paul's speech about sharing the gospel with people of other faiths and people with no religious faith?
- From Paul's speech, we can conclude that he knew his listeners' culture well. In light of this, in what areas would you like to grow, and how will you go about it?

5. Activities

- *Greek and Roman texts:* Paul quotes several Greek and Roman texts, such as the ‘Hymn to Zeus by Epimenides of Crete’. Find the hymn online and compare it with Paul’s speech. Do we have texts, media, or art today that also say something about God?
- *Video:*
As an introduction, you as small-group leader(s) can show the following video: [‘What is religious pluralism?’](#) The speaker in this video clearly explains what pluralism is. He shows how a pluralist thinks about Jesus and how we, as Christians, think about Him. This can help introduce the theme of this study, or you can use it to broaden the discussion during the application stage.
- *Group discussion:* First, have everyone read the passage individually. Ask them to make notes about its content and any difficult words. Then divide the small group into pairs so that participants can reflect on their findings together and help one another find answers to their questions. Afterwards, all the pairs can share their findings with the whole group. This may lead to a discussion about how to interpret the passage. As a small-group leader, pay attention to how your group responds to different opinions, and regularly refer back to the text.
- *Inscription:* We ourselves are often our greatest idol: my happiness, my career, my appearance, my achievements, and so on. Ask your small-group members to come up with an inscription for a statue of themselves as an idol. Discuss these inscriptions together. This can lead to prayer and confession.
- *Prayer:* You can end in prayer, praying about the things you have learned from this passage as a small group. Pray for the context in which you live, study, and reside as students, and for the culture of which you are a part.

Explanation of the Bible passage

1. Genre

Acts follows the narrative structure of Luke. Literary craftsmanship is evident in its intertextual echoes, structural and stylistic elements, and the different literary forms used to shape the story and emphasise its message. In Acts, we find not only echoes of Luke’s account of Jesus, particularly in the stories of Peter and Paul, but also parallels between Peter and Paul themselves: healing (3:1–10; 14:8–10), miracles (5:14–16; 19:11–12), and the Holy Spirit (8:14–17; 19:1–7).²⁸

²⁸ Hamilton, Mark W., ed. 2009. *The Transforming Word*. 1648 Campus Court, Abilene, Tx 79601 USA: Abilene Christian University Press.

2. Authorship and date

Nowhere in Acts is the author explicitly identified, but it is often assumed to be Luke,²⁹ and that Acts and the Gospel of Luke form a single work.³⁰ If this is indeed the case, the book dates from the second half of the first century.³¹ Acts deals primarily with the spread of the gospel to non-Jewish regions, while also giving considerable attention to the first churches.

3. Intended audience of the Bible passage

The author addresses Theophilus directly. From what he writes, it is clear that he also implicitly writes his book for all the children of Abraham—whether Jewish or Gentile—to lead them to repentance and faith in the risen Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. Jews and Gentiles together form a ‘secondary audience’. In other words, true Jews are not those who are Jewish only outwardly, on the basis of ancestry, but those who are Jewish inwardly, with a circumcised heart (Romans 2:28–29). True Jews are those who repent and believe in Jesus the Messiah. And God is able, if He wishes, to raise up such children for Abraham from stones (Luke 3:7–8).³²

4. Central themes of the book

In the introduction to the book, Luke says: ‘In my first book (the Gospel of Luke), I gave an account of all that Jesus began to do and teach’ (Acts 1:1). With this opening sentence, Luke gives us a clue about what the book of Acts will be about. In the first part, Jesus began ‘to do and teach’; logically, the second part is about what Jesus continued to do and teach. This brings us to an interesting point about the traditional—but not original—title of the book: The Acts of the Apostles. Although various apostles appear in most of the stories, Jesus is the only character who connects the narrative from beginning to end. He appears personally or works through the Holy Spirit. The book could therefore more appropriately be called The Acts of Jesus and the Spirit.³³

²⁹ R. R. Hausoul, *Handelingen*, 17.

³⁰ *Het Boek*. (Zevenhuizen: Stichting Living Bibles International), 927.

³¹ R. R. Hausoul, *Handelingen*, 21.

³² Krol, Peter. 27 september 2019. <https://www.knowableword.com/2019/09/27/luke-secondary-audience/>

³³ <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-acts/>

5. Structure of the book + place of the passage within it

The book of Acts can broadly be divided into three parts. The first part (chapter 1) begins with the risen and glorified Lord Jesus and His ascension. Here, the disciples are also given the commission to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. The second part (chapters 2–12) mainly describes Peter's ministry and the spread of the gospel among the Jews.

The third part (chapters 13–28) focuses on Paul's missionary journeys and ministry. Our passage (chapter 17) falls within this third part. Here we see that Paul is imprisoned because of his proclamation of the gospel. He has to defend himself before those in authority several times, but remains faithful to his calling.

The structure can be outlined as follows:³⁴

- The ascension and the apostles receiving the Holy Spirit
- The church in Jerusalem
- The spread of the gospel to Samaria
- Paul's ministry and the first persecutions
- Paul's missionary work among the Gentiles, including his first, second, and third missionary journeys
- Paul travels to Rome

Acts 16 is part of Paul's missionary work among the Gentiles. In verse 15, we see that Paul was waiting in Athens for Silas and Timothy to arrive. Athens was especially known for its universities at that time. Many people travelled to Athens to learn about different philosophies, such as those of Plato and Zeno. It was the intellectual centre of Greco-Roman civilisation.³⁵

³⁴ *Het Boek*. (Zevenhuizen: Stichting Living Bibles International), 927.

³⁵ P. Cuijpers, *Paulus in Athene*. (2008), 1.

6. Words from the Bible passage

- 17:16 - *'the city was full of idols'*

According to the Roman writer Pliny, there were more than 3,000 idols in Athens.³⁶

- 17:17 - *'he reasoned... in the marketplace day by day'*

Paul first went to the synagogue to meet the Jews. Afterwards, he went to the marketplace to engage in discussion. In doing so, he was actually following the example of Socrates, who made debating in the marketplace his daily occupation.³⁷

- 17:18 - *'Epicureans'*

These are followers of Epicurus, who primarily seek pleasure and happiness in life. A person should enjoy life while they still can. The Stoics, on the other hand, are followers of Zeno. They place reason above emotion and live in complete harmony with nature.³⁸

Both groups also think that Paul is speaking about two new, foreign gods: Jesus and a goddess called Resurrection.³⁹

- 17:19 - *'De Areopagus'*

This is the western hill of the Acropolis. At the time, a court was located there that dealt with serious crimes and religious and moral matters. The court was later moved, but the name Areopagus remained.⁴⁰

- 17:28 - *'For in him we live and move and have our being...'*

Here Paul quotes several Greek poets who said, 'wij zijn van zijn geslacht'. The poets were often referring to Zeus rather than God.⁴¹ Among other things, Paul quotes a hymn about Zeus by Epimenides of Crete, applying the text of a hymn about a Greco-Roman god to YHWH.⁴²

- 17:31 - *'...by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this'*

Paul refers indirectly to Jesus here by using the expression 'a man'.⁴³

- 17:32-33 - *'the resurrection of the dead'*

For some members of the Council, the idea of resurrection was unthinkable. Many Athenians believed in an immortal soul that existed after death, entirely separate from the human body. According to this belief, the soul was freed from the body at death, as though it had been imprisoned within it. The idea that someone could rise from the dead was therefore repugnant to them.⁴⁴

³⁶ R. R. Hausoul, *Handelingen*, 282.

³⁷ Ibid., 282.

³⁸ P. Cuijpers, *Paulus in Athene*. (2008), 1.

³⁹ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁴¹ P. Cuijpers, *Paulus in Athene*. (2008), 2.

⁴² <https://bibleq.net/answer/9574/>

⁴³ Ibid., 286.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 286.

Preparing the small-group meeting

To lead a small-group study, you first and foremost need to study the Bible passage yourself. Work through the three steps yourself: observation, interpretation, and application. Do not immediately turn to the background information in the small group guide or to external sources. Use general observation questions, as described in the introduction to the small group guide, as well as the specific questions under Reading and Understanding for this passage.

After you have worked through the Reading and Understanding stages, try to formulate a key idea. Compare it with the key idea given for this small-group study. If you arrive at something very different, it may be wise to discuss it with another small-group leader, small-group coordinator, or student worker.

The question you now need to answer is how you will help the members of your small group arrive at that central message. Use the activities suggested for the different sections, or come up with a new one yourself. Feel free to be creative. What matters is that the three steps—Reading, Understanding, and Applying—come through clearly during the small group, so that group members learn to study the Bible responsibly.

Resources for further study

- Bock, Darrell L. *Acts*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.
- Bruce, F. F. *The Book of the Acts*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988.
- Wright, Tom. *Paulus: Een Biografie*. Franeker: Uitgeverij Van Wijnen, 2019.

5 // Jozua 2

The Wall Behind the Windows, Chiharu Shiota

Chiharu Shiota – *The Wall Behind the Windows* (2023)



Chiharu Shiota is a Japanese artist who often works with thread, windows, doors, and everyday objects. In *The Wall Behind the Windows*, she uses windows and red wool to create a spatial installation. The windows literally form boundaries, while the thread connects the different elements.

The artwork is initially viewed **without** any explanation of Joshua 2. Make sure you have printed the image above. (A larger version may also be available in the appendices.)

- Give participants some time to look at the artwork before asking questions.
- Let participants first give their own interpretation of the artwork.

Bible passage

2

¹ Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. “Go, look over the land,” he said, “especially Jericho.” So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there. ² The king of Jericho was told, “Look, some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land.” ³ So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: “Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land.” ⁴ But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, “Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. ⁵ At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, they left. I don’t know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them.” ⁶ (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.) ⁷ So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

⁸ Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof ⁹ and said to them, “I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. ¹⁰ We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea ^[a] for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. ^[b] ¹¹ When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. ¹² “Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign ¹³ that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them—and that you will save us from death.” ¹⁴ “Our lives for your lives!” the men assured her. “If you don’t tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the Lord gives us the land.”

¹⁵ So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall. ¹⁶ She said to them, “Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return, and then go on your way.” ¹⁷ Now the men had said to her, “This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us ¹⁸ unless, when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and all your family into your house. ¹⁹ If any of them go outside your house into the street, their blood will be on their own heads; we will not be responsible. As for those who are in the house with you, their blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on them. ²⁰ But if you tell what we are doing, we will be released from the oath you made us swear.” ²¹ “Agreed,” she replied. “Let it be as you say.” So she sent them away, and they departed. And she tied the scarlet cord in the window. ²² When they left, they went into the hills and stayed there three days, until the pursuers had searched all along the road and returned without finding them. ²³ Then the two men started back. They went down out of the hills, forded the river and came to Joshua son of Nun and told him everything that had happened to them. ²⁴ They said to Joshua, “The Lord has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us.”

Place in the annual them

Rahab shows us that faith is not separate from the world in which we live. It is precisely when our faith confronts us with difficult choices, and those around us expect something different from us, that it becomes clear where our trust lies.

Key idea

What people see on the outside does not determine who someone is in God's plan. Rahab's story shows that God includes people whom we—or mainstream society—see as outsiders in His plans, and even saves them through extraordinary grace. If we are willing to try to recognise this, wonderfully unexpected things can happen.

Questions and activities for the small-group leader

We have divided the activities and questions into 'introduction', 'observation', 'interpretation', and 'application'. They are intended as a starting point for you as a small-group leader to study the passage independently first. Afterwards, you can go through the background information for further study, before preparing your small-group study.

1. Introduction: Looking at the artwork

Show *The Wall Behind the Windows* by Chiharu Shiota.
First, give participants time simply to look.

2. Questions (observation of the artwork)

- What do you see? What catches your attention?
- What meaning would you give to the thread?
- What do you think the windows represent?
- Are they a boundary or rather a passageway?
- What might be on the other side?
- Does the installation feel more safe or threatening?
- What connections do you see?
- What separations do you see?

3. Reading (observation of the Bible passage)

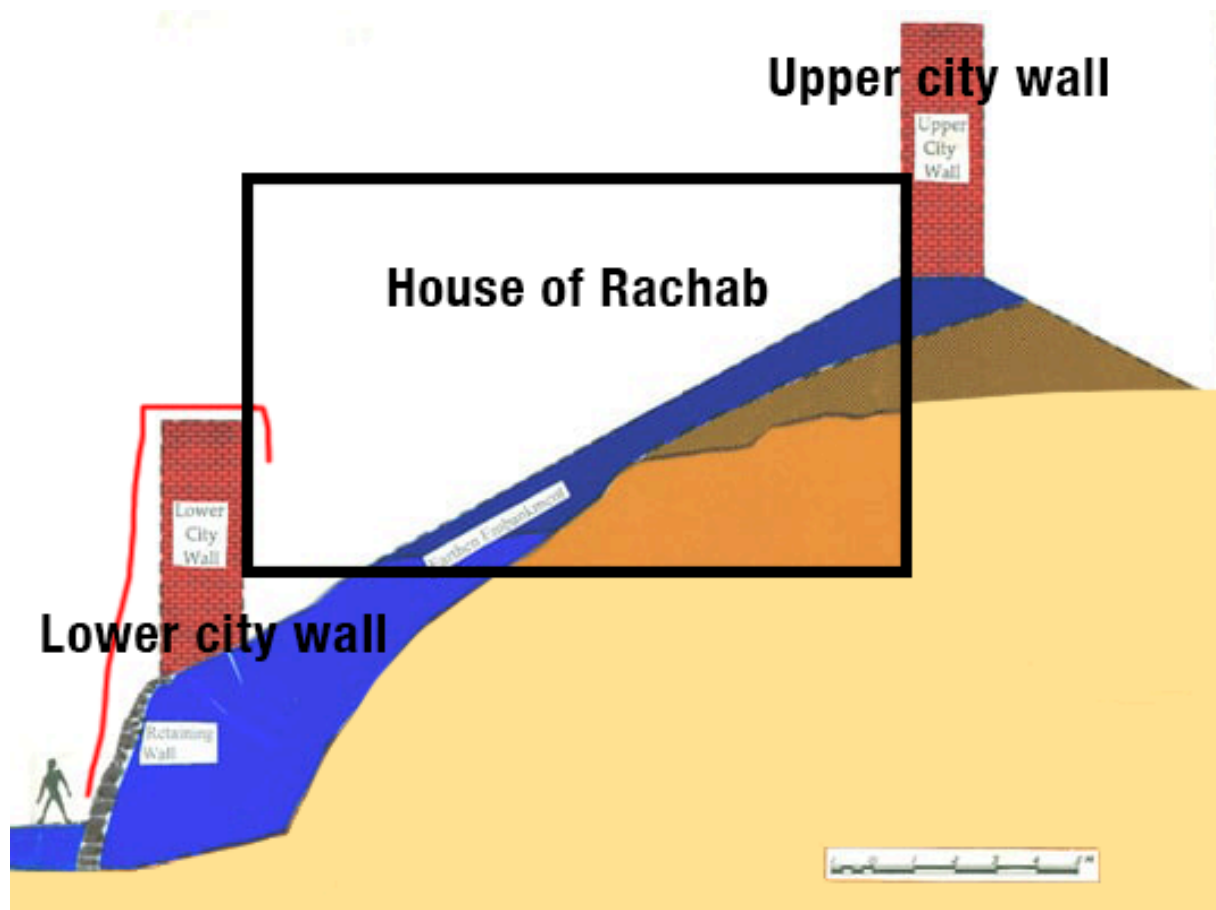
- Who are the main characters?
- What does Rahab do with the spies?
- Why does she do this?
- What does Rahab know about the LORD?
- What does Rahab ask of the spies?
- What is the significance of the scarlet cord?
- How does the story end?
- **Pay particular attention to Joshua 2:9–11.**
Rahab has heard what God has done and concludes from this that the LORD is God in heaven and on earth.

4. Understanding (interpretation)

- Why do you think Rahab, a Canaanite woman from Jericho, is given such an important role in this story? What does this say about whom God can use in His plan?
- Rahab lies to the king to protect the spies. What do you think of her decision? Which values or loyalties come into conflict here?
- In verses 9–11, Rahab says that she has heard what the LORD has done and draws a conclusion about who He is. What do you think is the difference between hearing about God and actually trusting Him? Where do you see this difference in Rahab?
- Compare Rahab with Achan in Joshua 7. Both hide something. Why does Rahab's act of hiding lead to salvation, while Achan's leads to destruction? What do you think the author wants to show us through this contrast?

Rahab	Achan (Joshua 7: 17-26)
Outsider	Israelite
Canaanite	Belongs to Israel
Helps Israel	Puts Israel in danger
Hides the spies	Hides what he has taken
Acts out of trust	Acts out of greed
Becomes part of Israel's story	Is removed from the community
Wordt opgenomen in Israëls verhaal	Wordt uit de gemeenschap verwijderd

- Who is actually 'inside' and who is 'outside' in these stories? Rahab is outside Israel, while Achan belongs to Israel. What do these stories say about how God sees people whom we consider 'insiders' or 'outsiders'?
- Who would we have identified beforehand as someone who belongs to God's people?



■ At the Edge of the System: Rahab and Her Choice Between Inside and Outside

Rahab literally lived on the boundary of the city. Her house in Jericho's outer city wall marked the dividing line between 'inside' (the safe and civilised, but corrupt city) and 'outside' (the untamed wilderness). It was precisely this position on the edge that made her a perfect link between the two. Because she lived on the margins of society, she was less blinded by the false sense of security and the propaganda of Jericho's inhabitants (although they too feared the Israelites). She was able to look at her own culture with a clear head. Her perhaps marginal position—we can assume this because her house was literally in the most dangerous part of the entire city, namely the city wall, where cheap, small rooms were often inhabited by society's outcasts and served as accommodation for travellers—did not necessarily make it easier for her to betray her city. Rather, it enabled her to break away from a doomed system and choose the God of the future.

- This Raises a Question for Us as Christians: Where Should We Position Ourselves?

In the middle of the city? If we become completely absorbed in the centre of the culture, economy, and success of modern-day 'Jericho', we risk becoming blinded by its walls. We begin to believe that the system is invincible and lose our critical awareness.

Far away in the wilderness? Comfortably watching from a safe Christian bubble, perhaps with the complacent assumption that God will provide for His people anyway? Is that an option? God sent His spies into the city. A faith that withdraws completely is irrelevant and unloving.

At the edge, like Rahab? Perhaps that is our calling: with our feet in the city, but our hearts and eyes fixed on God's kingdom beyond it. At the edge, we are accessible to seekers, travellers, and outcasts. From the edge, we can throw out a lifeline.

- Do We Help People Only to Betray Them Afterwards?

Rahab did not betray the people of the city out of malice; she refused to go along with the collective blindness and inevitable downfall of a godless system. Moreover, her salvation was inclusive: she opened her home to her entire family. As Christians, we are not called to 'betray' culture with hostility, but to be more loyal to God's truth than to the status quo. We do not help the people of the city by helping to build walls that will eventually collapse anyway. Instead, like Rahab, we invite them into the house with the scarlet cord, just before the walls come tumbling down.

5. Applying (application)

- When has your faith influenced a decision you made?
- Are there situations in which you notice a conflict between what you believe and what those around you expect of you?
- Are there many people you would assume are far from God, even though you do not actually know what their relationship with Him is like?
- What can Rahab's story teach us about how we look at such people?
- What things do we not know about other people but nevertheless fill in ourselves?
- What changes when we realise that God sees beyond what we can see on the outside?
- What does that mean for the way we look at others?
- Which position in life would you prefer: living as a Christian with the almost complacent assumption that God will provide (like the average Israelite), or living as an outsider in an excluding environment, surrounded by different influences, where you have to hope for God's presence (like Rahab)?

6. Activities

- *The Scarlet Cord*: Give each group member a piece of red cord. Connect it to Rahab's scarlet cord in Joshua 2 and to the question: 'Where do you want to bring your faith into the world?' Ask everyone to choose a person, place, or situation they want to pray for over the coming weeks. This could be someone who is going through a difficult time, a friend who does not believe, a situation at school or work, a social issue, or something in their own surroundings. Ask everyone to take the cord home and attach it somewhere visible: in their home, to an everyday object, to a piece of clothing, etc., as a kind of lifeline. Every time they notice the cord, it can serve as a reminder to pray for that person or situation, or even to take action for that person (sending a kind message, visiting them, etc.). In this way, the scarlet cord becomes a small daily sign of the connection between faith and the world in which we live. You can end the evening by praying together for the situations that group members wish to share.
- *Inside and outside*: 'Inside' and 'outside' are terms that often come up within our faith culture. What do you let into your heart? The outside world... But Rahab actually brings what is outside in, and what is inside out again. Write the words inside and outside on a sheet of paper and reflect together on what these words mean for us personally, in terms of faith, and for Rahab. Think, for example, of safety versus danger, familiar versus unfamiliar, private versus public, protection versus exposure, belonging versus exclusion, home versus stranger, church versus world, faith versus unbelief, and hidden versus visible. Then discuss which of these contrasts are absolute and which can overlap. Can something be both inside and outside at the same time? Can something that initially seems to be outside eventually come inside?
- *Song*: Listen to '[I am who you say I am](#)' - Hillsong worship

Explanation of the Bible passage

1. Genre

The book of Joshua is a historical account of the conquest of the land of Canaan by the Israelites. The events in the book take place around 1400–1200 BC, during Israel's entry into the land of Canaan after the exodus from Egypt and many years of wandering in the wilderness.

2. Authorship and date

The author of the book of Joshua is anonymous. The Talmud assumed that Joshua was the author, but further research has indicated that the book was probably written after Joshua's death, during the Babylonian exile.

During this period, the writer(s) were concerned with the question of how the Israelites had originally come to live in the land of Canaan and how they had subsequently been driven out of it.

3. Intended audience of the Bible passage

The book served to educate the early Israelites and legitimise their ownership of the land. Later, during the exile, the story probably held a more sentimental value for the people, who had lost their beloved, hard-won land through their unfaithfulness.

4. Central themes of the book

■ *God's Provision and Protection*

Not only are the spies, out of all the possible places to stay within the city walls, brought to the only God-fearing person (in this context, quite literally), but Rahab also lies to the authorities at the risk of her own life and that of her entire family. They could hardly have found a better place to stay.

■ *Grace*

There is grace in sincere faith, without many requirements. Rahab's story changes from a historical account of war into a powerful example of salvation through faith alone. It can even be connected to Passover, when blood had to be smeared on the doorposts of the Israelite houses so that they would be saved. In the same way, this story also serves as a prophetic symbol of the blood of Christ that would later be shed.

5. Structure of the book + place of the passage within it

The book of Joshua has a clear chronological structure that can traditionally be divided into several sections. The opening chapters describe the entry into the Promised Land and the preparations the people of Israel make for the conquests. Joshua 2 belongs to this section. This is followed by accounts of the military campaigns, the division of the conquered territory among the twelve tribes, and, finally, the conclusion of Joshua's leadership.

Preparing the small-group meeting

To lead a small-group study, you first and foremost need to study the Bible passage yourself. Work through the three steps yourself: observation, interpretation, and application. Do not immediately turn to the background information in the small group guide or to external sources. Use general observation questions, as described in the introduction to the small group guide, as well as the specific questions under Reading and Understanding for this passage.

After you have worked through the Reading and Understanding stages, try to formulate a key idea. Compare it with the key idea given for this small-group study. If you arrive at something very different, it may be wise to discuss it with another small-group leader, small-group coordinator, or student worker.

The question you now need to answer is how you will help the members of your small group arrive at that central message. Use the activities suggested for the different sections, or come up with a new one yourself. Feel free to be creative. What matters is that the three steps—Reading, Understanding, and Applying—come through clearly during the small group, so that group members learn to study the Bible responsibly.

Resources for further study

- <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/bijbelfiche-jozua/>
- <https://biblearchaeology.org/research-articles/the-walls-of-jericho/>

6 // Micah 6:1-8

Bible passage

1 ¹ Listen to what the Lord says:
“Stand up, plead my case before the mountains;
let the hills hear what you have to say.
² “Hear, you mountains, the Lord’s accusation;
listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth.
For the Lord has a case against his people;
he is lodging a charge against Israel.
³ “My people, what have I done to you?
How have I burdened you? Answer me.
⁴ I brought you up out of Egypt
and redeemed you from the land of slavery.
I sent Moses to lead you,
also Aaron and Miriam.
⁵ My people, remember
what Balak king of Moab plotted
and what Balaam son of Beor answered.
Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the righteous acts of the Lord.”
⁶ With what shall I come before the Lord
and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
⁸ He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

Place in the annual theme

Faith in the World means bringing faith into the world in which we live, but also believing that the world itself is good and that we can contribute to that goodness by acting according to God's will: *"niets anders dan recht te doen, trouw te betrachten en nederig de weg te gaan van je God"*. In order to do this, we also need to look at the good things God has done for His people.

Key idea

God's expectations are different from ours. We often think that we need to do all kinds of things to 'gain His favour', but He asks for much less: *"niets anders dan recht te doen, trouw te betrachten en nederig de weg te gaan van je God"*. Besides making things more complicated for ourselves than necessary, we also have a tendency to treat others unjustly.

Questions and activities for the small-group leader

We have divided the activities and questions into 'introduction', 'observation', 'interpretation', and 'application'. They are intended as a starting point for you as a small-group leader to study the passage independently first. Afterwards, you can go through the background information for further study, before preparing your small-group study.

1. Introduction

Read the passage once before you start preparing the study.

2. Reading (observation)

- What stands out when you read the passage? Are there contrasts? Can you divide the passage into sections? Can you give the different sections a title? Is there a turning point in the passage?
- Who is speaking in this chapter?
- What does this passage say about God?
- What does this passage say about human beings?
- Which other Bible passages are referred to? What do you know about them?
- Is there anything that particularly stands out to you? Something you find difficult? Something you find especially beautiful? Something that raises questions for you?

3. Understanding (interpretation)

- What genre is this passage?
- For whom was the passage written?
- Why did it need to be written?
- According to the passage, how should we live?
- Which concrete biblical examples can you give of this?
- What does it mean to 'act justly'?
- What does it mean to 'love mercy'?
- What does it mean to 'walk humbly with your God'?
- Is it enough to fulfil what is mentioned in the final verse?
- What are the contradictions between what God asks and what human beings do?
- The passage speaks about sacrificing bulls, oil, and a firstborn child. Would these sacrifices please God?

4. Applying (application)

- What does this passage call us to do?
- Where do you see the contradiction between what God asks and what people do reflected in our world today? What specific examples can you think of?
- The passage mentions people who went before God's people (Moses, Aaron, and Miriam). Who are such people in your life?
- Which aspects of this passage do you recognise in your own life? What could still be improved or changed? Choose one aspect and work out concretely how you will work on

it over the coming months. Check in with one another about your progress.

- How would you apply this passage in practice? Within your group of friends? Your Ichthus group? Your family? Your school? Your local community?
- What needs do you see in your own surroundings? How are you trying to respond to them? What is holding you back?
- How should we look at this passage as a community?
- What action(s) should we take as a community?

5. Activities

- *Song*: Listen to [Brood van het Leven door Trinity](#). The verse is based on our Bible passage. Ask your group what they think of the song in light of the passage from Micah. Is it a good interpretation, both in terms of the lyrics and the music/feeling of the song?
- *Collage*: Bring several newspapers and hand them out to the group. Ask everyone to find articles about needs and injustices in the world. Together, create a collage on a large sheet of paper. Divide it into three categories: the world, Belgium, and your own city. Afterwards, ask questions about how the group members are involved in each of these areas.
- *Court case*: The Bible passage is explicitly presented as a court case between God and human beings. Act out this court case in two groups. One group represents God, the other represents humanity. What good things can you present to God??
- *Missing words*: Print the passage and hand it out, but leave out several words. For example, you could remove sensory verbs such as *listen*, *hear*, *see*, etc. Divide the small group into groups and have them work together to fill in the missing words. The purpose of this activity is to observe the choice of words carefully. Sometimes we assume that we know what a passage says because we have read it so many times. But do we really? Do we know what is actually written? This activity can be used as an introduction.
- *Associations*: Draw a circle on a large sheet of paper (A3) and write one of the following phrases in the centre: 'act justly', 'love mercy', or 'walk humbly with your God'. Ask the small-group members to write down their associations around it. Which words are connected to it? What do you think about when you hear it? What do you feel?
- *Video*: Watch [this video-summary of the book of Micha by The Bible Project](#). Noteer tijdens het kijken de zaken die het volk doet die onrechtvaardig zijn. While watching, write down the things the people do that are unjust. Also write down the picture of the future that God gives.

Explanation of the Bible passage

1. Genre

Prophecy: Micah uses various forms of prophecy. They are often vivid and rich in imagery. Some of the prophecies take the form of debates.

2. Authorship and date

Micah was a prophet in Judah between approximately 742 and 696 BC. He was a prophet during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Around 722 BC, the Assyrians conquered Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. This kingdom consisted of the ten northern tribes. This also brought the northern kingdom to an end. Although the Assyrians posed a threat to the southern kingdom of Judah, Judah itself was not conquered.

This is predicted in Micah's first oracle (1:2–7). Micah warned Judah that the same fate would befall them if they did not return to God. He prophesied mainly outside Jerusalem, addressing ordinary people.

The book of Micah is traditionally attributed to Micah of Moresheth. Micah 6–7, however, appear to contain the words of another prophet. This is suggested by the differences in language between the two sections, by the fact that chapters 1–5 frequently speak about Zion while chapters 6–7 frequently refer to the exodus from Egypt, and because the geographical and historical details clearly point to a prophet from the northern kingdom.

3. Intended audience of the Bible passage

The inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem

4. Central themes of the book

- *Social justice*: Micah strongly focuses on social justice and speaks out against the exploitation of the people by corrupt rulers and priests. He calls the people to return to God's justice.
- *Messiah/restoration of Israel*: Micah also focuses on announcing the coming kingdom of the Messiah. We see this particularly in Micah 4–5, which vividly describe the coming of Jesus, the restoration of Israel, and the future kingdom. This theme and the theme of social justice come together in Micah's accusation against rulers who abuse the authority God has given them, and in his anticipation of the Messiah as the ruler who will rightly fulfil His role.

5. Structure of the book + place of the passage within it

Micah is divided into three oracles (prophetic messages), each of which begins with a call to listen: 1:2–2:13; 3:1–5:14; 6:1–7:20. All three consist of a section about judgement followed by a section about restoration. Our passage belongs to a section about judgement, presented as a court case in which God brings charges against Israel.

Micah can probably also be divided into two books. Micah 1–5 contains Micah's own words: the things he himself prophesied. Micah 6–7 contains the words of an unknown prophet from the northern kingdom of Israel.

6. Words from the Bible passage

- 6:1-2 - *'listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth.'*
The whole of creation is called upon to act as witnesses in a court case between God and His people, who have broken the covenant. This literary form occurs in several of the prophets.⁴⁵
- 6:5 - *'...what Balak king of Moab plotted and what Balaam son of Beor answered.'*
Balak tried to persuade Balaam to curse Israel, but through God's intervention Balaam blessed them instead (Numbers 22–24)
- 6:5 - *'Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal.'*
Shittim was the last place where the Israelites stayed before crossing the Jordan with God's help; Gilgal was the first place where they stayed afterwards (Joshua 3–4).
- 6:6-7 - *'with calves a year old ..., thousands of rams ..., ten thousand rivers of olive oil ..., my firstborn'*
A one-year-old calf would have represented a greater financial sacrifice than a newborn calf and was therefore a more costly offering.⁴⁶ The sacrifices become increasingly extravagant, far beyond what anyone could possibly offer, until they culminate in the sacrifice of a child, which was an abomination. The emphasis is that no sacrifice could ever be great enough.⁴⁷
- 6:8 - *'He has shown you, O mortal, what is good'*
Addressing the listener as 'O mortal' makes it clear to Micah's audience that this applies to everyone, not only to the leaders of the people. Moreover, it emphasises humanity's submission to God.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Chavalas, M.W., Matthews, V.H. & Walton, J.H., *The IVP Bible Background Commentary. Old Testament*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 785.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 786.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 786.

⁴⁸ Constable, *Dr. Constable's Notes on Micah*, 34.

Preparing the small-group meeting

To lead a small-group study, you first and foremost need to study the Bible passage yourself. Work through the three steps yourself: observation, interpretation, and application. Do not immediately turn to the background information in the small group guide or to external sources. Use general observation questions, as described in the introduction to the small group guide, as well as the specific questions under Reading and Understanding for this passage.

After you have worked through the Reading and Understanding stages, try to formulate a key idea. Compare it with the key idea given for this small-group study. If you arrive at something very different, it may be wise to discuss it with another small-group leader, small-group coordinator, or student worker.

The question you now need to answer is how you will help the members of your small group arrive at that central message. Use the activities suggested for the different sections, or come up with a new one yourself. Feel free to be creative. What matters is that the three steps—Reading, Understanding, and Applying—come through clearly during the small group. Make sure you allow enough time to work through each of these steps, so that group members learn to study the Bible responsibly.

You may be tempted to focus mainly on the things the people were doing wrong in this passage, but try to consider it in the context of our own time as well. What are we doing wrong as a people? What might God accuse us of today? What do you see in the news or media? Keep this in mind when thinking about activities for your small-group meeting.

Resources for further study

- www.debijbel.nl/wereld-van-de-bijbel/inleidingen-bijbelboeken-nbv/oude-testament/micha-bijbelboek
- www.gotquestions.org/Nederlands/het-boek-Micha.html
- www.debijbel.nl/wereld-van-de-bijbel/met-andere-woorden/maw/vraagt-god-in-micha-68-nederigheid-ootmoed-of-iets-anders

7 // Matthew 5:1-16

Bible passage

5¹ Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them. He said:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

⁵ Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Place in the annual theme

This passage shows us what *Faith in the World* means. The Beatitudes show us which people Jesus considers blessed and whom He welcomes into His Kingdom. Sometimes Jesus' statements about who is blessed go against our expectations.

The passage also challenges us to think about how we can live on earth in such a way that we contribute to what is good, strengthen it, and shine a light on it.

Key idea

The Kingdom of Heaven turns everything upside down. The insignificant, the humble, and the despised are welcome. Jesus calls us to bring flavour to the world and to show God's light to the people around us.

Questions and activities for the small-group leader

We have divided the activities and questions into 'introduction', 'observation', 'interpretation', and 'application'. They are intended as a starting point for you as a small-group leader to study the passage independently first. Afterwards, you can go through the **Explanation of the Bible Passage** for further study before preparing your small-group study.

1. Introduction

Matthew 5 marks the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, perhaps Jesus' best-known teaching, which Matthew describes over three chapters (5–7).

Read the passage once before you start preparing the study. It may be helpful to print the passage for everyone and use pens, coloured pens and/or highlighters to mark connections, contrasts, and other things that stand out. This will help you study the passage carefully and make it easier to discuss what the group has observed.

2. Reading (observation)

- What stands out when you read the passage? Are there contrasts, connections, or repetitions? Can you divide the passage into sections? Can you give the different sections a title? Try not to rely too heavily on the existing divisions made by Bible translators.
- Are there passages that stand out or speak to you personally?
- Can you identify the different Beatitudes in the passage? Which people do you find in the text?
- What is God's reward for each of these Beatitudes?
- What does Jesus compare us to in this Bible passage?
- What does Jesus say here specifically about how Christians should live?

3. Understanding (interpretation)

- What does it mean in practical terms to be poor in spirit, meek, merciful, and pure in heart?
- Why are those who mourn included in the Beatitudes?
- What exactly is meant by peacemakers?
- Are there connections between the Beatitudes and their corresponding rewards?
- Why is verse 11 not phrased in the same way as the Beatitudes in verses 3–10?
- What does it mean to be 'the salt of the earth'? What does Jesus say about how salt works, and what does that mean?
- What does it mean to be 'the light of the world'? Why do we have light that we can shine? Why are we called to be the light of the world?
- Is it enough to display only some of the characteristics listed? Why or why not?
- Can you summarise this passage in one or two sentences? What do you consider most important?

4. Applying (application)

- Are there tensions between the Beatitudes and contemporary norms and values? What are those tensions, and what can we learn from them?
- Are there Christians who are not particularly 'salty', or non-Christians who do bring a great deal of 'flavour' to the world? How do you relate to this?
- How would you apply this passage in your own environment, school, friendships, and family? How can you very practically embody the characteristics of the Beatitudes in your everyday life?
- Which aspects of the passage could still be developed in your own life?
- What would you like to pray for after reading this passage?

5. Activities

- *Adding flavour to your city:* Before reading the passage, take some time to think together about initiatives that add 'flavour' to your (student) city. What are some things that bring colour and beauty to the city? Cultural projects, community initiatives, buildings, sports clubs or other organisations?
- *Association:* Take a large sheet of paper and write down one or more of the Beatitudes from the passage. Ask the group to write on the paper all the words they associate with it. Later, you can compare these associations with what the words mean in the passage. This can be done after the observation stage, as an introduction to the interpretation questions.
- *Reconstruction:* Divide the group into two. Give one half the Bible passage with the Beatitudes removed. Give the other half the passage with the rewards removed. Is the group able to reconstruct this well-known passage? (See appendix.)
- *Group work:* Divide the small group into groups of two or three. Ask each group to prepare answers to the observation questions separately. Afterwards, share the answers with the rest of the small group, compare them, and discuss them. You can also do this with the interpretation and application questions. This gives group members the time to answer the questions in depth and at their own pace.
- *Creative:* Divide the different Beatitudes among the members of the small group. Ask each person to creatively express their interpretation of their Beatitude—for example, through acting, drawing, singing, etc
- *Brainstorm:* Take a large sheet of paper when discussing the question: 'How would you apply this passage in your own environment, school, friendships, and family?' Brainstorm together about how these applications could become reality. Keep the sheet afterwards. During one of your next small-group meetings, you can return to it and see how everyone is progressing in putting these ideas into practice.

Explanation of the Bible passage

1. Genre

The Gospels correspond to the ancient literary genre of *bios*, an ancient form of biography. Unlike modern biographies, *bios* is less concerned with chronology and completeness and focuses more on a person's character and significance. A description of someone's childhood, for example, is often absent, with the account focusing only on their public life.

The Gospels therefore tell true stories about Jesus, but often arrange them thematically rather than strictly chronologically in order to make Jesus' identity and mission clear. Each Gospel emphasises different aspects of Jesus because each was written by a different person, for a different purpose and audience.⁴⁹

Here is a brief overview of the differences between the Gospels:

	Author	Audience	Jesus is ...	Writing style
Matthew	Jewish (strong emphasis on the Law and the Prophets), tax collector	Jews + Jewish Christians	...King (Son of David)	Most structured (Jewish influences)
Mark	Connected to Peter	(Persecuted) churches	...the suffering servant (Messiah)	Most dramatic (less grammatically polished)
Luke	Highly educated, Gentile; connected to Paul	Theophilus + Gentile readers	...Saviour of the world	Most thematic (high literary quality)
John	Jewish background, disciple of Jesus	Gentile Christians	...God, the Logos	Most theological

2. Authorship and date

Matthew probably wrote his Gospel using the framework and content of Mark's Gospel. As a result, there are strong similarities between the two Gospels, and even identical wording is sometimes used. Unlike Mark, who wrote his Gospel for unbelievers, Matthew wrote his Gospel for newly converted Jews. He therefore portrays Jesus more as the King of the Jews rather than as the Son of Man, as Mark does in his Gospel.

Matthew was a Jewish tax collector in Capernaum. As a result, his Gospel is the most complete

⁴⁹ Studiebijbel, HSV, 1593.

and systematic account of Jesus' life. Matthew adapted and expanded Mark's Gospel, using Mark, other sources, and his own observations. In this way, he gave his Gospel its own form and purpose. Matteüs was een Joodse tollenaar in Kapernaüm. Hierdoor is zijn evangelie het meest complete en het meest systematische verslag van Jezus' leven. Matteüs heeft het evangelie van Marcus aangepast en aangevuld door gebruik te maken van Marcus' evangelie, andere bronnen en zijn eigen waarneming. Op deze manier heeft hij een eigen vorm en doel gegeven aan zijn evangelie.⁵⁰

3. Intended audience of the Bible passage

Matthew's intended audience consisted of his fellow Jews. This can be seen in the many quotations from Jewish Scriptures and in the respect he shows for Jewish law. The genealogy with which the author opens the book goes all the way back to Abraham, a key figure for the Jewish people. Matthew uses the expression 'Kingdom of Heaven' 31 times instead of 'Kingdom of God' because he knows that using God's name is a sensitive matter for Jews.

4. Central themes of the book

The early Christian church was looking for ways to take Jesus' message to other peoples and make disciples of them. Alongside the accounts of Jesus' birth, baptism, temptation, death, and resurrection, the Gospel contains five major discourses. In these teachings, Jesus teaches His disciples how people are to live in the Kingdom. Two other fundamental themes run throughout the book: faith and righteousness/justice.⁵¹

- *Faith*

In his Gospel, Matthew makes it clear that faith is extremely important. Throughout the book, Jesus repeatedly asks questions such as: 'Do you believe what I have told you?' and 'Do you believe that I can do this?' Jesus is looking for an enduring trust in Him and in His Word.⁵²

- *Righteousness / justice*

Jesus says that we are saved for righteousness. This means that after coming to faith and receiving forgiveness for your sins, you are expected to demonstrate righteousness in your life by doing good and living well. The Gospel of Matthew describes what this can look like.

⁵⁰ Pawson, D. Sleutels tot de Bijbel, (Putten: Opwekkingslectuur, 2007), 945-947.

⁵¹ Ibid., 967-970

⁵² Ibid., 967

5. Structure of the book + place of the passage within it

As mentioned earlier, the Gospel of Matthew has a very clear and well-organised structure. Matthew begins with an introduction whose main themes include Jesus' birth, baptism, and temptation. This is followed by the various discourses (chapters 5–25). These are repeatedly alternated with accounts of Jesus' actions, which provide practical support for His teaching. Through this structure, Matthew wanted to make clear to the reader that Jesus did not merely speak, but also left us His actions as an example. Finally, the Gospel concludes with an account of Jesus' death and resurrection.⁵³ The Bible passage we are studying is found in Jesus' first discourse, better known as the Sermon on the Mount.

6. Words from the Bible passage

■ 5:3 - *'the poor in spirit'*

In Dutch translations, verse 3 reads: 'Gelukkig wie nederig van hart zijn, ...'. 'Humble at heart' can be interpreted in several ways. It can be understood as being 'poor in spirit'. In this spiritual interpretation, it means approaching God like a beggar: hungry for God's Word and grace, and continually grateful whenever we receive something from Him. Another interpretation is that it refers to people with limited intellectual abilities. Alternatively, it can be understood as referring to people who are financially poor. The Greek word used here is *ptōchoi*, which means 'beggar' or 'poor person'.

■ 5:3-12 - *'Blessed are ...'*

Earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near (Matthew 4:17). Many people who heard this therefore wanted to know what they had to do to enter God's Kingdom. These verses provide an answer and also make clear that God's Kingdom is very different from earthly kingdoms.⁵⁴ The Greek word translated as 'blessed' or 'happy' is not a particularly spiritual or religious word, but was a commonly used expression of good fortune at the time. The English expressions 'happy are the...' or 'lucky are the...' come closer to this sense.

■ 5:11-12 - *'Rejoice and be glad'*

Jesus says 'rejoice and be glad' when you are insulted and persecuted because of Him. Although this may initially seem contradictory, persecution can also produce something good, partly because perseverance strengthens your faith. In this way, we can become an example and encouragement to others. The fact that we are persecuted can be seen as a sign that we truly believe and continue to trust God despite everything. For this, we will later be rewarded in God's Kingdom.

⁵³ Ibid., 949-950

⁵⁴ *The life Application Study Bible*. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers/Youth for Christ, 1993), 1096.

Preparing the small-group meeting

A small-group meeting can be led in many different ways, depending on how you, as the small-group leader, prepare it and how you want the evening to unfold. Broadly speaking, there are two approaches: prepared and unprepared. Of course, as the small-group leader, you yourself should always be prepared.

Prepared means asking the members of your small group to read the Bible passages beforehand. This means they already know what you will be discussing and can begin thinking about the questions the passages raise for them. Be sure to challenge your group to look at the context of the Bible passage as well. You can also give them an assignment to complete beforehand. This gives you more room to guide the conversation in a structured way during the evening.

Unprepared means that your small-group members do not yet know exactly what to expect that evening. As the small-group leader, you then guide them through the entire process of Bible study using the inductive Bible study method (observation, interpretation, application). This creates room for spontaneous conversations during the small group. Make sure, however, that you know which themes you definitely want to address, otherwise the conversation can drift too far from the passage.

Resources for further study

bibleproject.com/videos/matthew-1-13/

8 // Revelation 7:1-17

Bible passage

1 ¹ After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. ² Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: ³ “Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.”

⁴ Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. ⁵ From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000, ⁶ from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000, ⁷ from the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000, ⁸ from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

⁹ After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” ¹¹ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying: “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”

¹³ Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” ¹⁴ I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ Therefore, “they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. ¹⁶ ‘Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,’ nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷ For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; ‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’

Place in the annual theme

Within the annual theme **Faith in the World**, we also want to pay attention to the diversity of God's people. This passage in Revelation describes them as a multitude 'uit alle landen en volken, van elke stam en taal' (v. 9).

Key idea

This passage explains the role of the saints in the events of Revelation. In the midst of visions of judgement, Revelation 7 contains a passage about the sealing of God's people, a great multitude protected by the Lamb (v. 17). They are called to overcome, not by killing their enemies, but by suffering and bearing witness, just as the Lamb did.

Questions and activities for the small-group leader

We have divided the activities and questions into 'introduction', 'observation', 'interpretation', and 'application'. They are intended as a starting point for you as a small-group leader to study the passage independently first. Afterwards, you can go through the background information for further study before preparing your small-group study.

1. Introduction

- The book of Revelation was written to seven early Christian churches in the Roman Empire. Imagine that you are a Christian at that time: what is the Christian response to the empire? What attitude should God's people adopt towards the evil, injustice, and rampant idolatry they see in the world around them? These are central questions in the book of Revelation, and the book gives us a clear and compelling—and, above all, paradigm-shifting—answer.
- As a small-group leader, read 'How Should We Interpret Revelation?' later in this study beforehand and explore the different ways in which Revelation can be interpreted. Begin the evening with a conversation about how everyone views Revelation and how they interpret the book. Then give a brief explanation, naming the different approaches: preterist, futurist, and idealist.

2. Reading (observation)

We want to begin the small group by observing the passage, without moving on to interpretation yet—for example, what this says about the end times or about 'our' future.

- Who is speaking in this passage, and to whom?
- What events follow one another? Try to summarise the passage in a number of steps.
- Which words or concepts are repeated several times? What stands out?
- What are the four angels doing in verses 1–3? What are they allowed to do, and what are they not allowed to do?
- What task is given to the fifth angel in verses 2–3?
- Who are 'sealed', and for what purpose? What does the text itself say about this?
- Which numbers occur in the passage? Which quantities are explicitly mentioned?
- Verse 4 first gives the number 144,000. How is this group subsequently described?
- What differences and similarities do you see between verses 4–8 and verses 9–10?
- What changes in the vision from verse 9 onwards?
- What descriptions are used for the great multitude in verse 9? Write down as many details as possible.
- What question does one of the elders ask John in verse 13? How does John answer?
- Which contrast(s) stand out in the passage? For example: tribulation ↔ rest, hunger ↔ satisfaction, tears ↔ comfort.

3. Understanding (interpretation)

- Revelation was written to seven churches in Asia Minor in the first century. They experienced much tribulation within the Roman Empire. Imagine that you are attending a gathering of one of those churches and this passage is read aloud to you. What would speak to you? What would encourage you? Or what might discourage you?
- Why do you think John places this vision specifically between the sixth and seventh seals? What effect does this have?
- Why is it important that the great multitude comes from every people, tribe, nation, and language?
- Why are they wearing white robes and holding palm branches? What might this image communicate?
- What role does the Lamb play in this passage? Pay attention to what the Lamb does and what is said about Him. What does the image of the Lamb who 'will shepherd them' tell us about Jesus' identity and role?
- To conclude the interpretation section, try to summarise in one sentence what Revelation 7 would have meant to its first readers - the early Christians in the churches of Asia minor.

4. Applying (application)

- Revelation 7 describes people who come **through** tribulation, not people who are necessarily spared from it. What does this mean for the way we deal with difficult circumstances?
- The multitude comes from every people, tribe, nation, and language. What does this mean for the way we view Christians who are culturally, ethnically, or socially very different from us?
- What would it mean in practical terms to live this week out of the hope of verse 17: 'God will wipe away every tear from their eyes'?

5. Activities

- *The great multitude*: Reflect together on the diversity of the 'great multitude'. Are there Christians or Christian communities who are going through difficult circumstances today? Take time to pray for them! Tip: [check de website van IFES and pray for another student movement](#).
- *Two realities*: Create something in two parts—for example, a drawing—showing: (1) the reality experienced by the first Christians to whom Revelation was written: persecution, the empire, false teaching, etc.; and (2) what John is shown in heaven.

Explanation of the Bible passage

1. Genre

The book presents itself as an apocalypse, or revelation, of Jesus Christ Himself (1:1)—given by God to Jesus to communicate to His servants through an angel. What John communicates, therefore, is 'the testimony of Jesus' (1:2). We see this again at the end of the book: 'Hij die van deze dingen getuigt, zegt: "Zeker, Ik kom spoedig"' (22:20). Jesus is

therefore the one who bears witness to His people in the form of an apocalypse.

2. Authorship and date

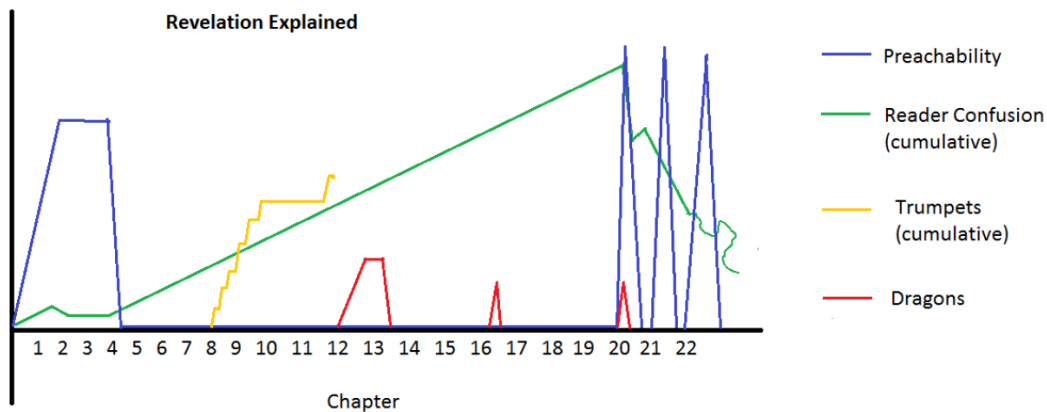
In the book itself, John is named as the person who receives the visions. Several early Church Fathers identify him as John, the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve disciples and the author of, among other things, the Gospel of John. 'John the Elder', an otherwise unknown elder from the early church, has also been suggested as a possible author. This is because another Church Father identifies him as the author and because the style of Greek in Revelation differs considerably from that of, for example, the Gospel of John.

One early Church Father states that John wrote Revelation 'towards the end of Domitian's reign'. Since Domitian's reign ended in AD 96, most scholars date Revelation to the mid-90s. Others date it earlier, during the reign of Emperor Nero (AD 54–68) and before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. They read Revelation 11:1–2 as a prophecy concerning the Roman siege and destruction of earthly Jerusalem during the Jewish War. The circumstances in the churches (Revelation 2–3) seem to point more towards a date around AD 95–96, while 'the holy city' (11:1–2) does not necessarily have to refer to earthly Jerusalem. If we assume this later date, it makes sense to view Nero's reign and the destruction of Jerusalem—which would then have been events of the past—as a prototype of the oppression of the church described by John in Revelation.

3. Intended audience of the Bible passage

Revelation is addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor (2:1–3:22). These churches faced false teaching, such as that of the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15), persecution (2:10, 13), compromise with the idolatry and immorality of their surroundings (2:14, 20–21), and spiritual complacency (3:1–3, 15–17). Jesus gives John a vision to pass on to these churches in order to encourage them in their suffering by showing how all these things have meaning within the context of Jesus' sacrifice.

4. Central themes of the book



The image included here is intended as a joke. :)

■ *Cosmic Conflict Between God and Evil*

Revelation gives words and images to the conflict between God and Christ on the one hand and the devil on the other. It does this by using images that place persecution and suffering—the evil faced by the church—within the context of the victory of the Lamb (Jesus). This Lamb conquered precisely through suffering.

■ *Bearing Witness under Oppression*

John says that he is living in exile on Patmos because of his testimony about Jesus (1:9), and he identifies with his readers as those who share in his persecution. Bearing witness to Jesus leads to persecution. John receives a vision of Jesus—radiant and glorified—walking among seven lampstands (1:12), which we are told symbolise the seven churches under John's care (1:20). In other words, when we identify ourselves with Jesus by faithfully bearing witness to Him, even in the face of persecution, He identifies Himself with us and stands among us.

5. Structure of the book + place of the passage within it

There is debate about the structure of Revelation, particularly about the visions in chapters 6–19. The discussion centres on whether the visions involving seals, trumpets, and bowls should be understood as a linear timeline or rather as a series of repetitions.

1:1–1:16 – Introduction	Introduction, Jesus reveals Himself to John on Patmos
2:1–3:22 – Seven letters	Seven letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor
4:1–5:14 – Heavenly vision	John is taken up into heaven and sees God's throne room and a scroll with seven seals
6:1–8:5 – Seven seals	The seven seals are opened; the final seal introduces the seven trumpets (8:1)
8:6–11:19 – Seven trumpets	The seven trumpets, with the opening of the scroll at the final trumpet—God's judgement. The seven bowls of God's wrath now follow...
12:1–15:4 – Vision of the beast	First, the context of the cosmic conflict is outlined: God's people (the woman) and Satan (the dragon). The dragon calls up the beast from the sea (13:1)—probably Rome's military power in John's original context—and then the beast from the land—probably the leaders in Asia Minor who enforced the imperial cult. Together these three form an unholy Trinity, a parody of the Godhead.
15:5–16:21 – The seven bowls	The bowls of God's wrath are poured out
17:1–19:10 – Babylon the prostitute	Following the seven bowls, images of the final judgement are presented
19:11–21:8 – Open heaven and the New Jerusalem	Jerusalem, God's great city, comes down and is renewed.
21:9–22:9 – The bride of the lamb	
22:10–22:19 – Epilogue	

Our passage is an interlude about the people of God—the sealing of the 144,000—within the section about the seven seals (chapters 6–7). This interlude explains the role of God’s people amidst all these judgements. The section about the seven seals builds in intensity. As each seal is opened in succession, the earth is struck by increasing turmoil: war, conflict, famine, and plague. This is not yet the final judgement—the scroll has not yet been fully opened. ‘When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.’ (Mark 13:7–8)

- There is a pattern in the opening of the seven seals: The first four seals are opened in rapid succession and show the disruption of society through war, famine, and so on.
- Two more seals follow (numbers 5 and 6), and before the seventh seal there is an interlude about the people of God—the sealing of the 144,000 in chapter 7.
- Then comes the seventh seal (8:1), which essentially introduces the seven trumpets.

The book of Revelation can become rather confusing at this point with all its scrolls, seals, bowls, and trumpets, so here is a brief reminder: John sees a scroll in heaven representing God’s plan to bring justice and salvation to the whole world. Jesus—the Lamb who was slain—is God’s representative who carries out this plan through His sacrificial death, and Jesus reveals this plan to His servant John.

6. Words from the Bible passage

- *7:1 - ‘four angels standing at the four corners of the earth’*
John sees four angels holding back the winds of God’s judgement (6:12–17) until all the saints have received God’s seal.
- *7:3 - ‘seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God’*
John sees an angel with a signet ring who comes to place a protective mark on God’s servants as they endure all kinds of hardship. This seal is like a royal signet ring, which kings used to mark documents and possessions as their property. This seal is commonly interpreted under the old covenant (with Israel) as circumcision, and under the new covenant as baptism and being filled with the Holy Spirit. This filling with the Spirit marks us as God’s possession.
- *7:4 / 7:9 - ‘144,000 from all the tribes of Israel’ / ‘great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language’*
There are different interpretations of the vision of the ‘144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel’ (7:4) and its relationship to the subsequent vision of an ‘uncountable multitude from every nation’ (7:9). One interpretation sees this as a reference to ethnic (or biological) Israel and understands the 144,000 as either a symbolic or literal number of Jewish believers. Another common approach understands ‘Israel’ as a reference to the church, the people of God under the new covenant. In this view, the visions of the 144,000 and the international multitude are complementary perspectives on the church: believers from all nations, including ethnic Israel. The listing of the 144,000 resembles a military census of twelve thousand people from each of the twelve tribes of Israel (Numbers 1). The way this group is described resembles what happens in Revelation 5 with the Lion of Judah, whom John then sees as a Lamb. In both cases, what John sees when he turns around is a surprising fulfilment through Jesus: a lion is a Lamb; 144,000 people (7:4) are

an uncountable multitude (7:9). They are the messianic army of God's Kingdom. It consists of people from all over the world, fulfilling God's ancient promise to Abraham. This multi-ethnic army of the Lamb can stand before God because they have all been redeemed through Jesus' blood. They are called to overcome, not by killing their enemies, but by suffering and bearing witness like the Lamb.

- 7:11 - *'All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures.'*

The great multitude (from verse 7) exalts God and the Lamb for 'salvation'. Their praise consists of seven elements and corresponds to Revelation 5.

- 7:14 - *'the great tribulation'*

Some understand this 'great tribulation' as a specific final period of suffering, while others understand it as a symbol of the suffering of the church throughout history.

7. How should we interpret revelation?

Revelation can be interpreted in many different ways. This may well come up during the small group. Perhaps someone is very familiar with ideas about the end times, while others do not primarily read Revelation as a book about the end. For some clarification, a few approaches are outlined below.

If we read the text entirely within the context of the first or second century—what is known as the **preterist approach**—the first beast (from chapters 12–14) is Rome, perhaps Nero in particular, who had died shortly before but who, according to local legends, would return. The second beast represents the local leaders in Asia Minor who, in their efforts to win Rome's favour, zealously enforced the imperial cult.

According to the so-called **futurist approach**, everything described in the book—whatever similarities it may have with events from the past—still has to take place. The Beast, the 'Antichrist', is therefore a human figure who is yet to arise.

There is also an **idealist approach**, which sees these symbols as ideas that recur in every generation throughout history and represent the cosmic struggle between good and evil. In this case, the Beast is not specifically Rome, but Empire in an abstract sense—the oppressive forces of military power that persecute God's people. Likewise, the second beast may represent commercial or cultural imperialism—the subtle forces that compel God's people towards conformity and submission. Notice that it looked like a lamb but spoke like a dragon (13:11): the false prophet is always subtle and appealing. Sometimes Satan attacks us violently, like a beast, but more often he appears like a lamb in order to deceive us.

We should probably understand the book as a combination of all these approaches. As with the prophecies of the Old Testament, we need to take the original context into account—what this book would have meant to John's original readers. We therefore cannot ignore the strong similarities between the Beast and the corrupt city on the one hand and ancient Rome on the other. At the same time, this book has been handed down to us by the early church and is called a prophecy about things that are still to come. In that sense, we should also understand it as having a future dimension. And yet, at the same time, the drama that unfolds in the book is nothing unique. The dragon is always

waging war against the people of God. And God's people are constantly in danger of being deceived by false prophets who look like a lamb but speak with the voice of the dragon. As 1 John 2:18 says: 'The antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come.'

It may therefore be unwise to accuse Donald Trump of being the Antichrist—or Joe Biden, or Google, or Apple. And yet the spirit of the antichrist is at work in the empires of this world.

However exactly we interpret these images, John has set the scene: the persecution Christians face, and the ultimate judgement and vindication for which they wait, are part of the age-old struggle waged by the dragon against the people of God. This leads to a kind of distinction between the people of God—the 144,000 marked with His seal—and the people of the Beast, who have received its mark.

Preparing the small-group meeting

To lead a small-group study, you first and foremost need to study the Bible passage yourself. Work through the three steps yourself: observation, interpretation, and application. Do not immediately turn to the background information in the small group guide or to external sources. Use general observation questions, as described in the introduction to the small group guide, as well as the specific questions under Reading and Understanding for this passage.

After you have worked through the Reading and Understanding stages, try to formulate a key idea. Compare it with the key idea given for this small-group study. If you arrive at something very different, it may be wise to discuss it with another small-group leader, small-group coordinator, or student worker.

The question you now need to answer is how you will help the members of your small group arrive at that central message. Use the activities suggested for the different sections, or come up with a new one yourself. Feel free to be creative. What matters is that the three steps—Reading, Understanding, and Applying—come through clearly during the small group, so that group members learn to study the Bible responsibly.

Resources for further study

- bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-revelation/
- *The New Testament in Its World* door N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird (2019).
- ESV Study Bible (2008), comparable to the Dutch *HSV Studiebijbel*

9 // Psalm 148

Lectio Divina

Bible passage

148¹ Praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights above.

² Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his heavenly hosts.

³ Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars.

⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens
and you waters above the skies.

⁵ Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for at his command they were created,
⁶ and he established them for ever and ever—
he issued a decree that will never pass away.

⁷ Praise the Lord from the earth,
you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
⁸ lightning and hail, snow and clouds,
stormy winds that do his bidding,

⁹ you mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars,
¹⁰ wild animals and all cattle,
small creatures and flying birds,

¹¹ kings of the earth and all nations,
you princes and all rulers on earth,
¹² young men and women,
old men and children.

¹³ Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.

¹⁴ And he has raised up for his people a horn,^[b]
the praise of all his faithful servants,
of Israel, the people close to his heart.

Praise the Lord.

What is Lectio Divina?

Lectio Divina is a spiritual practice that monks have used for 1,500 years when studying the Bible. It literally means 'divine reading'. Through Lectio Divina, we develop the habit of slowing down and practising contemplation (reflection).

→ We are often used to rushing through the texts we read. In Lectio Divina, however, the intention is to deliberately slow down: to become still, to read slowly and repeatedly, and to allow the text to sink in deeply. It is about meditating on God's Word, as the Psalms repeatedly encourage us to do.

→ We can also fall into the habit of approaching the Bible primarily in search of new knowledge or insight. Lectio Divina is a way of reading with your heart rather than your head, trusting that God wants to speak to us through His Word. Instead of seeing the text as a kind of challenge that we need to dissect and analyse, it challenges us to receive the text for what it is: a gift that has been given to us.

This is radically different from traditional inductive Bible study. We might call it a form of meditative Bible study. The aim is not, as in some forms of Eastern meditation, to detach our minds from everything, but precisely to attach ourselves to God. There are some differences in how various groups practise Lectio Divina, but the core remains the same. It is, in a sense, praying with or through the Bible.

This practice consists of four parts:

- Lectio – Reading the text
- Meditatio – Meditating on the text
- Contemplatio – Contemplating the text more deeply
- Oratio – Prayer

Lectio Divina can be practised individually or in a group. Although not every passage may be equally suitable, it can be used with all kinds of biblical genres: a story or part of a story, a song, a letter, a law text, etc.

Today we will use Psalm 148. Print it out or read it aloud from your Bible. It is, of course, not strictly forbidden for your small-group members to have the Psalm in front of them, but this often makes it more difficult for them to really listen, so we would advise against it. Make sure you have the steps below at hand. As a small-group leader, try not to switch into your analytical mode either—dissecting the different steps, rationalising what is happening, or filling silences too quickly with additional explanations. We work from the conviction that if we give God space, time, and silence, He will use them

.

1. Silencio

Create the right atmosphere in your small group, making it as easy as possible to attune our hearts to God's Word and enter into a moment of genuine and deep connection. We try to leave all distractions outside and focus on this moment and on His presence. To make the transition easier, you could light a candle as a symbol that God is with us. It can also be helpful to give group members something to look at. Spend some time in silence. Invite the members of your small group to pay attention to their breathing. Ask them to relax their shoulders and each part of their body, and to redirect their scattered attention towards God. You can begin with a prayer.

2. Lectio

Read the passage aloud once, or ask a member of the small group to read it. Read slowly and calmly, so that we can fully receive what the passage has to say to us. After reading the passage, remain silent for a while to allow the words to sink in.

3. Meditatio

Tell the group: "I'm going to read the passage again. As you listen this time, notice whether anything stands out to you. It could be a word, a phrase, or a sentence. If nothing stands out, that's completely fine."

Read the passage aloud a second time. Remain silent for a while. Then invite everyone, one by one, to share what stood out to them, if anything did. As the small-group leader, be strict about this: ask group members only to briefly share what stood out and nothing more. They should not explain it yet.

Before the third reading, tell the group: "As I read it again, ask yourself why this stood out to you. Very often, it is because there is a connection between the Bible passage and our lives. Is there a connection with your life? Does it evoke an emotion or a memory? Again, it's completely fine if you don't find a connection."

Read the passage aloud a third time. Remain silent for a while. Then invite everyone, one by one, to briefly share what connection they noticed. As the small-group leader, make sure people keep their answers concise. Intervene if necessary.

4. Contemplatio

Tell the group: "Is there something God wants to make clear to you through this passage? Is He calling or challenging you to something? God still speaks to us through the Bible, and perhaps He is doing that now. Sometimes God does not speak immediately, or we do not understand Him. It is okay if it is not yet clear whether God wants to say something or what He wants to say."

Read the passage aloud a fourth time. Remain silent for a while. Then invite everyone, one by one, to briefly share what they believe God wants to say to them through this passage. Again, as the small-group leader, make sure everyone keeps their contribution concise.

5. Oratio

You can read the passage a fifth time, but you do not have to. Give back to God what you have just received. Pray, ask for guidance and clarity, and give thanks for what you have received. Take plenty of time to pray for one another and for what has been said and shared. Try to remain in this atmosphere of stillness rather than switching back into an analytical mode.

6. Silencio

Become silent again and remain in God's presence for a few more minutes. Enjoy the silence and connect with what is happening in your soul. You may want to write something down at this point.

For those who want to go deeper

Lectio Divina is a form of contemplative/meditative Bible study. Would you like to learn more about Christian meditation, why we believe it is biblical, and how it creates space for the Holy Spirit to speak? Read the second chapter of Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*. There is a very good chance that your local staff worker has a copy—or can quickly get hold of one. The original guide also provides the following resources.

- [an explanation of lectio divina](#)
- <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/253799/1-What-is-Lectio-Divina.pdf>
- [History of Lectio Divina – Contemplative Outreach, Ltd.](#)
- [Lectio Divina: A Beginner's Guide - Busted Halo](#)
- [Lectio Divina; een relatie met God op een dieper niveau - EO](#)
- [Lectio Divina: wat God de lezer vandaag wil zeggen | Protestantse Kerk](#)

10 // Thematic small group

#NoFilter

Introduction

Imagine we are watching a football match together. One person supports Real Madrid, the other Manchester City. The exact same tackle happens in front of us. One shouts, “Perfectly got the ball!” The other says, “That’s a red card!” The footage is identical, yet they see something completely different.

Or:

Two historians read exactly the same historical document. One concludes that the author was a hero, while the other concludes that he was a war criminal. They have the same facts, but not the same interpretative framework.

Historians call this an interpretative framework. Philosophers speak of a paradigm. Sociologists speak of a frame. Psychologists speak of cognitive schemas. Theologians speak of hermeneutics. Whatever term you use, the point remains the same: we never perceive reality in a completely neutral way.

In this small group, we start from the awareness that no one looks at reality in a completely neutral way. Our upbringing, culture, education, church background, social media, news sources, and political convictions all shape the way we understand the world. The question, then, is not whether we look through a filter, but which filter shapes our thinking.

This applies not only when we look at the world, but also when we read the Bible. I still remember hearing a speaker at a conference when I was a teenager say that he read the Bible “simply literally”. My first thought was: “Then it’s strange that you’re still standing here with two hands and two eyes.” After all, Jesus says that you should cut off your hand or tear out your eye if it causes you to sin. Apparently, no one reads the Bible without interpretation. We all read from within a particular framework.

In this thematic small group, we therefore want to explore which stories or convictions shape the way we see the world. How do media, politics, culture, and our own backgrounds influence our thinking? And, above all, how does the gospel resist simply being fitted into a single political or cultural narrative, instead inviting us to see the world anew?

Together, we will explore how we can distinguish God’s Kingdom from this world, and how the gospel can shape the way we see, think, and act.

We will use Belgium’s colonial past as a case study, in the hope that this will also help us discuss other, perhaps more sensitive, topics. The most important thing here is the awareness that we all look at things through a particular lens.

Place in the annual theme

This thematic small group connects with our annual theme **Faith in the World**. Throughout this year, we are discovering that God is not absent from the world, but is already at work in it. At the same time, we live in a world full of narratives, ideologies, and convictions that influence the way we see things. As followers of Jesus, we are invited not to uncritically go along with these narratives, but to learn to discern. How do we look at reality? Which voices shape us? And how does the gospel teach us to see the world anew?

Key idea

No one looks at the world neutrally. As Christians, we are invited to continually allow the gospel to shape the way we see.

Through this small group, we hope participants will learn to recognise that everyone interprets reality from within a particular framework. Participants will also critically reflect on the influences that shape their own thinking. They will discover how biblical texts can challenge political and cultural narratives, and practise discerning God's Kingdom within social issues.

Part 1 – Congo case study

Belgium's colonial past evokes many emotions today. Some speak of a period of economic development, education, and healthcare. Others speak of exploitation, violence, and racism. Still others point out that both can be true and that history is rarely black and white.

Before considering how we ourselves look at this history, we first want to reflect together on a number of important events.

1. A short timeline

- *1885 - Congo free state*

At the Berlin Conference, Congo is recognised as the personal possession of King Leopold II. Congo is therefore not a Belgian colony, but the property of the king.

- *1885-1908 - Rubber and ivory*

As demand for rubber grows, Congo's economic value increases enormously. The population is forced to collect rubber. Those who fail to meet the imposed quotas are often severely punished. There are numerous testimonies of violence, including the cutting off of hands, hostage-taking, and executions.

- *Missionaries*

Thousands of missionaries leave for Congo. They establish schools, hospitals, and churches, translate the Bible, and train local pastors. At the same time, some work closely with the colonial administration, while others denounce abuses.

- *1908 – Belgian colony*

Following international criticism, the Belgian state takes over Congo from Leopold II. Reforms are introduced and investments are made in infrastructure, education, and healthcare, but Congolese people remain excluded from political power.

- *1960 - Independence*

Congo becomes independent. The transition is chaotic. Political tensions, foreign interference, and violence lead to an unstable situation.

- *Today*

Belgium continues to wrestle with its colonial past. There are debates about statues of Leopold II, apologies, reparations, and the way history is taught.

2. Source 1 - Alice Seeley Harris and her photographs



- What do you see?
- What do you **not** see?
- Why do you think Alice chose to capture precisely this moment?
- What influence can a single image have on the way people view a conflict or a period of history?
- Is this photograph objective?
Alice chose whom she photographed, which moment she captured, the angle from which she took the photograph, which photographs she did not take, and to whom she showed the photographs. That does not mean the photograph is untrue. Quite the opposite. But a photograph tells a story too verhaal.

Background

This photograph was taken around 1904 by Alice Seeley Harris (1870–1970), an Irish Protestant missionary who worked in Congo together with her husband John Harris for the British Baptist Missionary Society. During their missionary work, they encountered Congolese people who had become victims of the system of forced rubber extraction under Leopold II. Alice began photographing these victims. Her photographs were subsequently used during lectures in Europe and North America to draw attention to the abuses taking place in Congo.

One of her best-known photographs shows Nsala of Wala, looking at the severed hand

and foot of his five-year-old daughter Boali. According to his testimony, she had been killed after his village failed to meet the imposed rubber quotas.

The photographs of Alice Seeley Harris became an important part of the international campaign that eventually contributed to the transfer of Congo from Leopold II to the Belgian state in 1908. On the one hand, she is seen as someone who helped expose serious injustice and increase international pressure on Leopold II. On the other hand, some contemporary historians point out that missionaries were themselves part of the colonial context and that their photographs could sometimes reinforce a paternalistic image of Congolese people.

3. Source 2 - Roger Casement investigates Congo (1903)

On the website referred to in the guide, you will find a transcript of an interview Casement conducted with Congolese people about the cutting off of a boy's hand: [“Note of Information Taken in the Charge of Cutting Off the Boy I I's Hand, Preferred to Mr. Casement by the People of E*” | One More Voice](#)

- Which facts do the witnesses describe?
- Which emotions can you sense?
- What questions would you still like to ask Casement?
- What information are you still missing?

Background

In 1903, the British government sent consul Roger Casement to Congo to investigate reports of violence and exploitation in the Congo Free State. During his journey, he spoke with Congolese people, missionaries, colonial officials, and soldiers. His findings were published in 1904 in the Casement Report. The report played an important role in increasing international pressure on Leopold II and contributed to the Belgian state taking over Congo in 1908.

4. Source 3 – The story Belgium told



In 1897, Belgium organised a World's Fair in Brussels. King Leopold II used the exhibition to present his project in Congo to the Belgian public. Visitors could admire exotic plants, animals, raw materials, and works of art from Congo. In addition, 267 Congolese people were brought to Belgium to live in reconstructed villages and show the public "life in Congo". Seven of them died during the exhibition.

The exhibition was intended to show that Congo was a source of wealth, progress, and civilisation. Violence, forced labour, and exploitation were barely mentioned.

The guide refers here to the AfricaMuseum resource: [The human zoo of Tervuren \(1897\)](#) | [Royal Museum for Central Africa](#)

Before going to the AfricaMuseum website, imagine that you yourself were living in Belgium at the time, with no knowledge of the abuses taking place in Congo.

- What stands out to you about this poster?
- Which words or images catch your attention?
- What picture of Congo is being presented here?
- Who seems to be the intended audience?
- What does Belgium want visitors to believe?
- What is completely absent?
- Why do you think these particular aspects are not shown?

Part 2 - Why Do These Sources Tell Such Different Stories?

So far, we have looked at three different sources. Are all three true? Why, then, do they tell such different stories? How is it possible for four reliable sources to present such different pictures of the same history? What questions does each source ask?

1. What Different Lenses Were People Looking Through?

- *The historical context*

In the 1900s, people were more likely to ask: "How do we bring civilisation?" Whereas our question today might be: "How did they deal with power?"

- *The Cultural background*

A Belgian, a Congolese person, and a Chinese person will not spontaneously ask the same questions.

- *Personal experiences*

Whether you grew up in Congo, work for a mission organisation, or come from a family with a colonial history influences the way you see things.

- *Political Convictions*

These too determine—or at least influence—which questions you ask.

- *Economic interests*

Who benefits? Who loses?

■ *Faith*

Christians, too, read history through particular theological convictions. Some saw colonisation as an opportunity for evangelism, an opportunity to bring civilisation. Others saw it as a violation of the image of God in human beings. Both based their views on the Bible. One source mentioned in the guide is [an article by Jaqueline Bel](#), Associate Professor of Modern Dutch Literature at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Another fascinating figure is [Cardinal Lavigerie](#), who fought against slavery in Central Africa and saw colonisation as a means of combating it. Historians today agree that Lavigerie sincerely opposed the Arab slave trade. At the same time, they argue that he seriously underestimated the colonial ambitions of European powers and believed that colonisation could be an important ally in the fight against slavery.

Part 3 – The Bible as a conversation partner

Why could sincere Christians in **1987** think that colonisation was a good idea? They read the same Bible. They prayed. They went to church. And yet...

If even sincere Christians could not completely transcend their own time and culture, how do we prevent ourselves from making the same mistake today?

"Which convictions of our own time do we take so much for granted today that Christians a hundred years from now will wonder how we could ever have believed them?"

1. A Biblical view?

Which Bible passages might missionaries in 1890 have used to motivate their work? These might have included passages such as Matthew 28, Mark 16, or Romans 13. The reader is called to make disciples of all nations. But which passages may have received less attention? Which questions does the Bible ask that none of our historical sources ask?

■ *Genesis 1:26-27*

Every human being bears the image of God.
How does that change the way we look at Congo?

■ *Micah 6:8*

Act justly.
Which questions does Micah ask that the World's Fair did not ask?

■ *philippians 2*

Christ gives up power. What does this say about colonial power?

■ *Revelation 7 of 21*

People from every language and nation. What does God's future look like?

Part 4 – Back to today

We have used Belgium's colonial past here as a case study to show how we can look at the same story in very different ways because of the many influences on our lives. We can recognise the same thing when we consider contemporary issues such as Gaza, Ukraine, climate change, or AI.

Perhaps choose one topic and discuss some of the following questions:

- What narratives do you hear about this?
- Which sources do you instinctively trust?
- Which voices do you not hear?
- Which convictions do you take for granted?
- Which Bible passages might challenge your thinking?

1. Application

Where do you think Christians a hundred years from now will say: "How could they not see that back then?" The question is not whether we have blind spots. The question is whether we are willing to let God point them out to us.

Tonight, we discovered that even sincere Christians are shaped by their time and culture. That calls for humility. But God's Kingdom does not only call us to acknowledge our own blind spots. It also invites us to participate in truth, justice, and reconciliation.

Perhaps not everyone will be called to engage specifically with the colonial past. But each of us is invited to ask:

- Where do I see injustice today that I have come to take too much for granted?
- Which narratives have shaped the way I see?
- Where do I see God already at work?
- And how can I join in?

Choose one current issue about which you have a strong opinion. Commit yourself to deliberately reading or listening to one source over the coming week that represents a different perspective. Then pray and ask God to help you discern what is true, just, and loving.

Closing prayer

Lord Jesus,

Thank You that You came not only to save us, but also to teach us to see the world differently. We acknowledge that we too are children of our time. Our upbringing, culture, media, political convictions, and church traditions shape the way we see, often without us even realising it.

Give us the humility to acknowledge that we too have blind spots. Keep us from quickly assuming that we fully possess the truth or that we are immune to the convictions of our time. Teach us to listen, investigate, and discern.

Shape us through Your Word and Your Spirit. Let Your Kingdom become the lens through which we look at people, history, and the world. Give us a love for truth, a heart for justice, and the courage to allow You to correct us again and again.

Make us willing not only to consult the sources we already know and trust, but also to listen to voices we might rather avoid. Give us the wisdom not simply to accept everything we hear, but to seek with both openness and discernment what is true, good, and just.

Do not let this small group end merely with new insights, but change the way we live as well. Open our eyes to the work You are already doing in the world today. Show us where people are suffering under injustice, where restoration is needed, and where You invite us to help build Your Kingdom.

Give us the courage this week to re-examine one issue about which we have a strong opinion. Help us deliberately listen to another perspective, not simply to abandon our convictions, but to allow them to be shaped again and again by the gospel.

Make us disciples who do not merely want to be right, but above all want to become like You.

Amen.

Appendix 1: Making your own Bible Study

In this manual we want to help you, as a small group leader in studying your Bible so you may lead your small group well. For each text we have suggested a specific approach, but the foundation is always as follows:

1. Study the text Thoroughly

In the entire IFES-movement (the worldwide umbrella organization of which Ichthus is a member) the act of “inductive” Bible study is front and center as THE way to approach a Bible text. This means that you start from the text to reach it’s core and not the other way around. Below, in the attachment “Manuscript study” you’ll find a broader explanation of this method.

2. Extract the core from the text

If you understand well what the core of the text is that you’re studying, it will be a lot easier to get to that core during your small group. Not only will you be able to work goal-oriented, it will also allow you to more easily make a decision on the “sidetracks” which will present themselves during the night.

3. Think about how you will reach that core with your small group

Oftentimes we think that as soon as the exegesis (= explanation of the text) is done, the small group will be successful. This is not true. After deciding on the core of the text, it is important to consider how you and your small group will approach this core: what methods do you want to use? A lot of people think it is easiest to have an educational conversation (question and answer). This, however, is one of the hardest methods that exist, because you are never able to fully consider what your small group members will answer. Oftentimes you will find yourself confronted with answers you were not prepared for. In those times it is quite hard to find good questions to steer your small group members to the core of the message. The best thing you can do is find methods where you, as a small group leader, have to talk the least.

Appendix 2: Manuscriptstudie

One way of studying the Bible that you can use for any passage—and which is also very useful when preparing to lead a small group—is the ‘manuscript method’, which consists of three steps.

1. Observation

In this phase, your aim is to get a firm grasp of the passage: what does the author say? Print out the passage. Leave plenty of white space around the text as well as between the lines. If possible, remove all paragraph divisions and verse numbers.

Go through the text and try to mark everything that stands out, raises questions, indicates structure, occurs repeatedly, etc. Use pens and coloured pencils to mark words, map out the structure of the passage, and indicate themes and connections.

Below are some useful questions and approaches.

Ask questions like a journalist

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
- When?
- How?

Look for **connections**

- Repetitions
- Similarities
- Contrasts
- Cause and effect
- From the general to the specific
- From the specific to the general
- Main ideas
- Secondary ideas

Enter into the text

- What do you see, hear, smell and feel?
- Become a person in the text?

Other questions to ask during observation:

- What kind of literature is this? A story? A dialogue? Poetry? Commentary by the author?⁵⁵ More than one type may occur within a single Bible passage.
- Mark connecting or signal words: **for, because, therefore, since, so that, but, thus**, etc.
- Mark logical units in the passage. Which sections belong together? Look for unity in theme, time, place, thought, action, etc.
- Write down anything in the passage that particularly stands out to you: things that are unexpected or unusual, or that raise questions, surprise, confusion, or irritation.
- Are there references to or associations with other Bible passages? Read those passages in their context—not just the individual verses—and ask yourself why they are quoted here.
- Is there anything in the passage that raises questions? Something that irritates you, surprises you, or that you struggle with? **Write it down!**

⁵⁵ The genre or type of text helps determine the best way to approach it. You read a legal text differently from a poem, and a story differently from an argumentative letter.

2. Interpretation

In this phase, you try to answer the following question: What does this text want to communicate? What do all the observations you have made mean? What is the central message of this passage?

The central task is: Formulate the meaning of the text by answering the question of what the author wants to communicate through it.

The following questions can help:

- Formulate questions based on the things that stood out to you in the passage.
- Formulate questions about the linguistic and thematic relationships you have identified. For example: Why does the author repeat this word? Why does the author use this contrast? Useful questions include 'Why (...) ?' and 'What is the meaning of (...) ?'
- Look again at the linguistic and thematic relationships you identified in the passage. What are the main connections and main topics in the passage?
- Focus on the crucial questions. These are questions that (1) arise from the text itself; (2) concern a large part of the passage; and (3) relate to the main idea of the passage.
- Now try to answer the questions. First and foremost, use the text itself; then the immediate context of the passage within the biblical book—in other words, the surrounding passages; then references to other Bible passages; and finally a Bible dictionary, commentary, explanatory notes in Bibles, and other resources.
- Ask yourself the 'big question': What message does the author want to communicate to the original readers? What do you think are the main points—or the single main point—of this passage? Why is this passage here?
- Try to summarise the central message of the passage in one sentence.

3. Application

In this final phase, you consider the significance of the Bible passage and its central message for our lives. This may involve a practical response (something that needs to be done), a transformative response (something that needs to change), an informative response (an increase in knowledge), etc. Try not to take the easy way out by formulating only applications that cost you very little. Remember that the Bible was primarily written to groups of people (the people of God and the church). Therefore, its instructions are generally first and foremost things that we are called to do together. Personal application often follows from this.

The central task is: Connect the passage with your own life and with the world in which we live.

The following questions can help:

- Do you see connections between the text and your own life and our world? For example: Do you recognise yourself in one of the main characters in the passage? Where does the message of the passage touch your own life?
- Do you have the sense that God is speaking specifically to your small group or to you about an aspect of your lives/your life—your field of study, student context, student city, life in student accommodation, current affairs, etc.?
- Are there specific commands, promises, examples, or counterexamples in the passage that have something to say to you?
- Are there concrete steps that need to be taken in response to this passage? Be honest and clear about them. Be sure to use a diary or calendar to write things down, and return to them the next time you meet as a small group.
- Does anything emerge from this passage that is important for my relationships with other people, for our small group, our church, or our society?
- Are there things that we, individually or as a group, need to put into practice?
- What does this passage tell you about God?
- Does this passage have anything to say about how I live, think, and act as a student? Does it shed new light on my field of study and the questions being discussed within it?

Appendix 3: Image for the Joshua 2 study

Chiharu Shiota – *'The Wall behind the windows'* (2023)

