



Avenue Baptist Church

Our **vision** is to see a **transformed world**
through **changed lives**

Over the next seven sessions you will be exploring one of Avenue's seven values. They are:

Celebrating God's presence

Holy Living

Active Obedience

Never ending grace

Generous lives

Engaged in prayer

Deepening our understanding of the Bible

As you can see if you add together the first letter of each value you end up with the word 'changed'. This links into the church's vision:

Our vision is to see a transformed world through **CHANGED** lives

These seven weeks are an opportunity to explore what a changed life looks like in reality. Each week you will be invited to read a bible passage, explore it using the questions and notes provided and then spend some time in prayer. Our hope is that by doing this you will not only deepen your relationship with God but with other Christians. It is through this deep fellowship that we experience the grace, joy and love of God as part of God's family.

God bless you

Andrew and Jim

Before you start we would like to give you some advice about the questions and notes. The questions have been selected in a particular order so that you will hopefully be building on each question. The notes are not necessarily there to give you answers to the questions but to give you additional information to develop your discussion. You can read the notes out if you wish but ideally they are there to help the group leader develop the conversation. One last thing, you will notice that most questions have a note attached, but not all. The expectation is that the group leader will do some preparation before the meeting by reading and praying through the questions before hand.

Week 1: Celebrating God's Presence

Please read 2 Chronicles 6 v40-7 v3

1) In what ways have you encountered God?

This is an opportunity to explore your experience of God. To use an old fashioned phrase to give your testimony. A testimony isn't solely about your story in coming to faith but testifying to an ongoing experience of God. So what can you tell others about the times and moments when you experienced God's presence?

2) Have you ever felt God was not present in your life?

In Psalm 139 the psalmist asks a series of questions. *'Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.'*

The Psalmist is meditating on the omnipresence of God, that is there is no place in heaven or earth where God is not. This attribute is a characteristic of God's infinite nature, for if there are no limits to God then he will be all powerful, that is omnipotent, he will be all knowing, that is omniscient and he will be everywhere that is omnipresent. This belief about the nature of God impacts upon numerous areas of our life, for example the universe wasn't formed and does not continue to exist because of impersonal laws but through the past and present continuous will of Almighty God. Without God's active

participation and deliberate will the universe which we are part of would cease to exist.

God's omnipresence can also be a deep source of comfort in sorrow and a steadfast assurance in all the varied experiences of life particular in those moments of transition. For life is full of transitional moments, births, deaths, anniversaries, new jobs, new homes and these moments can be both exciting but also troubling and maybe even fear inducing. At these moments God's continuing presence can be for the believer a source of comfort and strength knowing that we do not go through such moments alone.

3) Are there any holy places in your life?

This is a question to get you thinking about special moments when you have encountered God's presence and our first opportunity to engage with our reading. In 2 Chronicles chapter 5 we read how the tabernacle was moved into the temple. The tabernacle which had accompanied the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert and had symbolized their nomadic past, was now being housed in the temple which was to be the permanent resting place of the ark. Here it rested in a magnificent building between the wings of the cherubim, the ark which had symbolized the place where God met his people had now found a permanent resting place in a temple. This now became the holiest place in the nation.

Do you think transitional moments in your life have made you more aware of the presence of God? And are those moments linked to a particular place as well as time? If so, could these be holy places for you?

4) Do you think the informal nature of Sunday worship at Avenue is a help or hindrance in the worship of God?

This is an opportunity to explore how personality, culture and preferences influence our spiritual life, including our encounters with God.

5) How do you feel about Governments and other organizations use of religion and the church to mark celebrations or crises?

The young King Solomon had inherited the throne of Israel from his father David and has been given the task of building a temple in Jerusalem as a focal point of Jewish worship and in 2 Chronicles Chapter 5-7 we have a record of the dedication of the temple. In some ways this wasn't just a transitional moment for Solomon, as in taking over the mantle his father had left him but also for the nation. For in some ways the old ways were disappearing, the nation in only a few years had gone from being ruled by judges who had been appointed for a particular time to a hereditary monarchy, much to the disgust of some.

I wonder how King Solomon felt as he turned to the whole assembly of Israel and began his prayer of blessing as recorded in chapter 6 verse 14. Was he excited or nervous about the future, did his heart beat faster, was his mouth dry as he looked upon the leaders and people of Israel? There is much we could say about King Solomon but there is one thing he wasn't and that was stupid for this whole passage speaks of a man who was politically very astute, he knew that things had changed and would continue to change in the life of Israel but this transitional moment in his life and in the life of the nation needed to be handled with care if the country wasn't to fall into disunity. Something Solomon's son didn't learn after his father's death.

What do you think of the idea that religion can be a unifying force for a nation whether a person is religious or not?

Now spend some time in prayer

Week 2: Holy Living

Please read Colossians 3:1-17

1) What does a holy life look like to you?

This question gives you the opportunity to open up the subject of holiness. Back in 2014 in the exploration of Avenue's values the congregation voted on one Sunday which description best described Avenue. When it came to this value it received no votes. 'We live disciplined lives which are characterised by purity and holiness'. The congregation may have changed over the last three years but why do you think this value received no votes?

2) How do you cultivate a Holy Life?

It's a dilemma identified by Paul in our passage today. '**Since**' in verse 1 points back to the false teachers that Paul was having a go at in **chapter 2** and in particular **verses 20-23**. Their remedy for restraining the dark passions of the heart was to practice asceticism '**do not handle, do not taste, do not touch** is their motto quoted in **verse 21 of chapter 2**. The only real remedy according to Paul is found in a person's experience of union with Jesus '**since, then, you have been raised with Christ**' he writes in **verse 1**. It's that union that enables a person to die to sin and to the world's way of thinking and acting. That new way of living is encouraged by setting our hearts and minds on Jesus (v1-2) by doing so we are helped to see the vices that entrap us and to see the virtues that bear fruit from a relationship with Jesus. What are these vices? See verses 5-11. What are these virtues? See verses 12-17.

3) **Our definition of holiness centres on relationships. How should a holy life influence the way we spend our money, use our time and engage with politics?**

As a church we have defined holiness as *'We value a Godly life, seeking relationships that are characterised by goodness, love, honesty and a life that is becoming more like Jesus.'* The question is a bit presumptuous in the fact that it assumes that everyone agrees that a holy life will influence those three areas I've identified but the assumptions behind the question are based on the belief that every area of our life has been called to be holy as 1 Peter 1 v15 tells us *'But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."*

4) **What would your advice be to someone who was nearly giving into temptation?**

Aurelius was born in Algeria-torn between a passion for sexual satisfaction and a passion for truth and wisdom he compared the Bible to the writings of the roman philosopher Cicero and the Bible came off worse in his view. He tried many philosophies but found himself trapped in *'the swirling mists of lust'* which thrust him into *'the whirlpools of vice'* (his words). He could not break the chains that held him. He was a very clever man and took up an appointment as Professor of literature and elocution in Milan. Here he met a Bishop called Ambrose who declared that Jesus Christ had the power to break the chains of moral failure and Ambrose opened up the bible to Aurelius. But he wasn't sure he was quite ready for such soul-shaping commitment *'Give me chastity and self control'* he prayed *'but not yet'*. In a moment of honesty he realised that to become converted to Christ meant that he had also to become a disciple of Christ. Which meant that his life had to change.

One day in a garden in Milan he overheard the voice of a child saying *'take it and read it, take it and read it'* he took it as a command to pick up a bible and to read the first passage which he saw which happened to be **Romans 13:13-14** which reads **'Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.'** I will let Aurelius speak in his own words how that bible passage affected him, he writes in his autobiography called the 'confessions' **'I had no**

wish to read further; there was no need to. For immediately when I had reached the end of this sentence it was as though my heart was filled with a light of confidence and all the shadows of my doubt were swept away'

One of the virtues listed in verses 12-17 of our passage says this **'let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom'**. And that's what Aurelius or as he is better known Augustine did, he let the word of God dwell in his soul and through it he received healing and saving grace.

Augustine was a changed man, not a perfect man but a changed one, his priorities and life were turned around because God spoke to Augustine through the bible.

Some other suggestions are to refocus your attention on something else. And that by telling someone else about your temptations you break the power of secrecy which adds to the power of temptation.

5) What place does worship play in a holy life?

A Christian writer called Richard Foster writes 'If worship does not propel us into greater obedience, it has not been worship. To stand before the Holy One of eternity is to change. Resentments cannot be held with the same tenacity when we enter his gracious light. As Jesus says, we need to leave our gift at the altar and go set the matter straight (Matt 5: 23-24). In worship an increased power steals its way into the heart sanctuary, an increased compassion grows in the soul. To worship is to change.'

Now spend some time in prayer

Week 3: Active Obedience

Please read Matthew 26:36-46

1) What you feel about the word 'obedience'?

I don't know about you but obedience is a very emotionally loaded word, it reminds me of struggles of being a child but also a parent. It also conjures up images of co-ercion, bullying and control. And maybe it is those emotions that inform our thinking about obeying God. Especially when Christian teaching about obedience starts with something like this 'obedience is the recognition of God's right to rule and to command.' I would say Amen to that-I do want God's will to be done here at Avenue as it is in heaven. To paraphrase the Lord's Prayer.

But such a definition of obedience I believe doesn't get to the heart of the matter. For God's right to rule doesn't mean that He rules through co-ercion, bullying and control. A better way of understanding Active Obedience is to say that when we are obedient to God we are responding to the invading, urging, inviting persuading call of Eternal Love. Active Obedience is more about a response to the character of God than it is a reaction to the demands of God.

2) If Jesus hadn't been obedient to his Father, what would our world be like today?

John 3:16 puts this scene in the Garden into context –For God so loved the world that he gave his only son' –As a response to God's love Jesus entered into our world. Firstly because He loved the world and secondly because he was obedient to his father. Jesus's obedience didn't stop there, his obedience to His father was who he is. If you want to understand Jesus you need to understand that obedience to his father was as natural as eating. As Jesus said in John 4: 34 "My nourishment comes from **doing the will of God**, who sent me, and from finishing his work. So when we get to the garden of Gethsemane even though Jesus knew that the will of His father who sent him in love would end up at the cross he says in Matthew 26:39 "My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. **Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.**"

In some ways this question is impossible to answer and some may even think pointless but what I am hoping to do is explore the effects of disobedience. What would a world look like without the millions of lives that God has transformed through the gospel and a world without the influence (both good and bad) of the church.

3) How do you cultivate a life of obedience to God?

Active Obedience is habit forming-you start with the little things before you build up to the big things So for example start with reading the bible and praying regularly before you leave your home and become a missionary, Start speaking kindly to others before you generously give away money every month to God's work. Or how about forgiving your critiques before you forgive your enemies.

4)'Active obedience makes us deal with reality'-discuss this statement.

The temptation when we face a painful and difficult choice is to go for the easier option or if that is not available then ignore it and hope it will go away. Twice Jesus found his disciples sleeping-by sleeping they retreat from reality into dreams and fantasies. Just before they enter the garden of Gethsemane Peter, James and John were told they would desert Jesus in his hour of need and then Jesus told Peter that he would deny him three times. Sleeping is a metaphor for ignoring the reality of their own temptation by withdrawing into the fantasy of sleep? The choice to follow Jesus is often hard but when we do we grew not just spiritually but emotionally and mentally. We become stronger, braver, we become more like Jesus.

5) What area of your life do you need to be obedient to God in?

One area that most people find hard to be obedient to God in is 'forgiveness'. You might like to read the following as a spiritual exercise in obedience.

Jesus said this in Mark 11 when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too. Jesus commands us to forgive-what is our response? I can't? I won't?

I don't need to? In thinking through your response to the command of Jesus let me tell you about Eva Kor, who was recently interviewed on the radio. Eva Kor is the 81 year old Auschwitz survivor who gave evidence in the trial of 93

year old Oscar Groning – he was the SS guard who took and recorded the money of Jewish prisoners as they arrived at the death camp. When Eva had finished giving evidence against him she went over to where he was sitting and shook hands with him. He responded by pulling her towards him and kissing her. She said that she had spoken out at the trial to give voice to the victims and to help the world never to forget what had happened. But she also said that she had forgiven the Nazis. There's been much criticism of her for saying that, with people insisting that forgiveness can only be given where there is genuine repentance. I can see why. Forgiveness can sound like weakness as though what has been done doesn't really matter.

But that isn't what Eva Kor was saying. Forgiving the perpetrators of Auschwitz meant that they lost the one thing they once had – their power over her life. The fact that she had forgiven Groning neither prevented her from testifying against him, nor stopped him from taking responsibility for his own actions. So repentance and justice are part of the picture, but as a response to forgiveness not as a condition of it.

What she is insisting on here is that by enacting forgiveness victims can escape from being trapped in a cycle of helplessness and victimhood. She has found the strength to live freely and not be defined by the horrors of her past. The forgiveness declared by Eva Kor certainly invites repentance and Oscar Groning has already acknowledged his moral guilt. But perhaps the real significance of what she said was to announce the ultimate impotence of evil. Sin does not have the last word. We can choose to be free. We need that astonishing confidence in a world which would often tell us otherwise. It is the basis of all our faith and all our hope.

Active Obedience is the response to the invading, urging, inviting persuading call of Eternal Love. A love that forgives, accepts and welcomes.

Now spend some time in prayer

Week 4: Never Ending Grace

Now please read: Luke 15: 11-32

1) Describe a moment you can recall when you were the recipient of an act of grace.

What was it like ? How did it make you feel ? How would you define 'grace' ?

In the late 1980's the American author Philip Yancey published his bestselling book, 'What's So Amazing about Grace'. It sold millions of copies around the world. In the the book he famously coined the acronym:

Gods

Riches

At

Christ's

Expense

Whilst A.W Tozer summed it up in just three words ! "God's unmerited favour".

2) In 2014, Philip Yancey wrote a follow up to his book, this time he called it 'Vanishing Grace'. On the back of that book he wrote these words:

"Like a sudden thaw in the middle of winter, grace happens at unexpected moments. It stops us short, catches the breath, disarms. Yet not everyone has tasted that amazing grace, and not everyone believes in it. In a time of division, and discord, grace seems in vanishing supply."

How closely can you identify with the feelings of the other son in Luke's parable ?

Do you agree with Philip Yancey ? Why do/don't you think grace might be in 'vanishing supply' ? And what can we do about it ?

3) Read Hebrews 12:15 and then ask each other what it might mean for a church to dispense grace more freely to a damaged world. (What might that mean/look like?).

4) In Exodus Chapter 33 (read verses 17-19), God declares himself a gracious God. (Some versions substitute grace for mercy, see who has which translation!) This is because the root word that is used, 'hesed', is interchangeable between the english words love, grace, mercy and kindness, amongst others! A 'hasid' therefore, is someone who has become the recipient of God's love and grace.

This is where the Hasidic Jews take their name from, (a Jewish sect which emerged in the 17th Century), as those who have come to know God's love, grace and kindness. They are literally a 'gracious people' !

Fast forward to John's Gospel, Chapter 1, (read verse 14), and we find Jesus is being described as the One who is 'full of grace and truth'. The translated word for grace here from the greek language into Hebrew, is, (yes, you've guessed it), 'hasid'. Jesus is The Hasid ! And through Him, we have come to know of God's love, grace and kindness! We too, can be known as a gracious people, because of what we have received in Christ.

However, in a survey conducted by Christianity Magazine in 2008 the top four most common complaints against Christians were these:

- 1) You don't listen to me
- 2) You judge me
- 3) Your faith confuses me
- 4) You talk about what's wrong, instead of making it right

Think about those for a moment. Those are the top 4 complaints about Christians!

Now dream for a moment! How might extending grace to those outside the church affect each of those four complaints?

5) Finally .. as people of grace ...

Paul often had to teach the church that free acceptance does not rule out the need for obedience. (See 1 Cor 6:9f). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (the German theologian who joined the resistance against Hitler and who was later hanged by the Nazis towards the end of the war), wrote about the difference between 'cheap' grace, and 'costly' grace.

Cheap grace interprets 'grace alone' to mean that we can remain as we are without changing. Or to put it another way, we receive the forgiveness of our sins without the need to resolve to forsake our sin.

Costly grace however, calls us to follow Christ in our actions. It's costly because it cost God the life of his Son, and it costs us to make changes in our life. Or to put it another way, the entrance fee to the Christian faith is nothing, it's free, but our daily subscription is everything !

Bonhoeffer wrote in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* :

“Those who try to use (cheap) grace as a dispensation from following Christ are simply deceiving themselves”.

Think for a moment .. How do you hold the free gift of justification, of having received God's grace, against the task of sanctification, of becoming more like Him ? Which one wins ? Which do you need the most ? Do you hold them both equally ?

Now spend some time in prayer

Week 5: Generous Lives

Please read 1 Timothy 6:11-21

1) If you had unlimited wealth, what would you spend your money on?

In v5-10 Paul gave some warnings about the desire to become rich. But there are some who, by whatever means, are already rich, and it is to them that he now turns. He does not command them to 'sell all and give away' as Jesus did to one rich young man. Rather he focuses on their attitude, both to wealth itself and to other people who are less well off. He calls them to reassess their priorities. The danger of wealth is that it can encourage the rich person to worship money instead of God (a reality for poor people as well). It can make people proud (v17), self-sufficient, 'I don't need to rely on others as I have money.' But this proud independence is a dangerous place to be as history (biblical and secular) reminds us that it is easy to lose what you have acquired. The other problem is in the way rich people can behave towards others. They can be materially rich but spiritually poor which leads us onto the next question.

2) Jesus tells us 'blessed are the poor', what does this mean?

In Matthew's gospel Jesus is recorded as saying 'blessed are the poor in spirit' but in Luke's gospel Jesus is recorded as saying 'blessed are the poor'. Some suggest the bible is indifferent to economic issues and that our attitude to wealth is purely a private matter. But nothing can be further from the truth. The bible fully engages with every area of economic life. Undercutting the notion that private property is sacrosanct the bible tells us that the whole earth belongs to God and that every so often there should be a redistribution of wealth (Lev. 25:23). 1 Timothy 6 v5 & 17 remind us that the bible deals with the inner spirit of slavery that an idolatrous attachment to wealth brings. Jesus himself condemns materialism by saying you cannot serve God and money.

3)What do you know about the ‘discipline of simplicity’?

Living a simple lifestyle is not primarily a unconcern for possessions but a desire for God first and foremost. Nothing must come before God for even a simple lifestyle can have the potential to become idolatrous. That is seeking a simple lifestyle can become the primary motive in life rather than God. But a simple lifestyle can be a means of becoming free from anxiety as we put our trust in God rather than our bank balance or our possessions. Here are some principals for creating a simple lifestyle, how about discussing them? Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status. Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you, whether that is alcohol, TV or coca cola. Develop a habit of giving things away, which in turn leads us onto our next question.

4)How can someone develop a generous spirit?

5)Identify one way in which you can be generous this week?

Now spend some time in prayer

Week 6: Engaged in Prayer

Please read Matthew 6:1-14

1) Are you encouraged or discouraged by the prayer life of the church?

Notes: I would encourage you not to use this question as a launch pad to complain about the prayer life of the church, but to identify when in the life of the church we pray and to encourage more people to participate in it. Here is a list I've drawn up:

Sunday morning- morning prayer meeting before service, prayer in sung worship, intercessory prayer, prayer ministry at the end

Sunday evening- Prayer Meeting twice a month and Prayer and Wholness Service once a month.

Monday-staff team meeting with prayer

Midweek homegroups

Leaders prayer meeting every six weeks

2) Should we view prayer as a learning process?

Notes: Real prayer is something we learn. The disciples asked Jesus, 'Lord, teach us to pray' Luke 11:1, (Luke's parallel version of Matthew Ch. 6). They had prayed all their lives, and yet something about the quality and quantity of Jesus' praying caused them to see how little they knew about prayer. If praying has an element of learning in it, who should we learn from and how should we go about learning to pray? How about studying the prayer lives of those who have gone before us e.g. Moses, Elijah, Hannah, Daniel and in particular Jesus? Is there some benefit in having a prayer partner (someone you regularly meet up with to pray with)? What about reading some books on prayer, e.g. *Prayer* by Richard Foster or *Discipleship* by David Watson. Can others in the group recommend any other books or other ways which have helped them learn to pray?

3) What should we do when we don't feel like praying?

Notes: I have no easy answers for you, although there is an element of discipline about prayer i.e. you try and fix prayer into the regular rhythm of your day (if your day has a regular rhythm that is?) but for some, perhaps through present experiences, God feels so distant that prayer doesn't just seem hard it feels pointless. George Herbert, poet and clergyman may put into words how you are feeling:

*When my devotions could not pierce
Thy silent ears;
Then was my heart broken, as was my verse:
My breast was full of fears,
And disorder*

*My bent thoughts, like a brittle bow,
Did fly asunder:
Each took his way; some would to pleasures go,
Some to the wars and thunder
Of alarms*

*As good go anywhere they say,
As to benumb
Both knees and heart, in crying night and day,
Come, come, my God, O come,
But no hearing.*

4) How many different types of prayer can you find in the Bible?

Notes: Here are few to get you going: simple or arrow prayers (Neh. 2:4), Prayer of the forsaken ((Ps 13:1), Prayer of examination (Ps. 139:1, 1 Chron. 28:9), Prayer of relinquishment (Lk 22:39-46), Covenant Prayer (Ps. 57:7), Prayer of Adoration (Ps. 35:18), meditative prayer (Ps 1:2), Petitionary prayer (Matt. 7:7-8).

5) The Lord's Prayer is a model for prayer. What can you learn from it for your own prayer life?

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.

6) Does prayer change God's mind?

Notes: Some put this question in terms of believing in a 'closed' or 'open' universe i.e. a 'closed' universe has everything fixed and predetermined and an 'open' universe is the exact opposite. In a closed universe everything is preset and because God knows the end from the beginning, the question is asked why pray? But what about an open universe, does an open view of the universe mean that prayer changes God's mind, if so how does the belief that God is unchangeable (immutable is the posh word) (Mal. 3:6) fit into this idea of the universe. How does the story in Ex 32:7-14 fit into your discussion?

Now spend some time in prayer

Week 7: Deepening Our Understanding of the Bible

Please read Acts 17:1-12

1)How important is the Bible in your spiritual life?

This question is here not to catch out or embarrass anyone but an opportunity for real honesty. This honesty with one another is hopefully something you have been building towards in the group over the last few weeks. My hunch is that for many Christians in the west, the Bible has become a book that mainly sits on the shelf and is only looked at occasionally. If that is your reality maybe this week is an opportunity to reassess the place the Bible has in your spiritual life and gain some tools to help you sustain a regular engagement with it.

2)What attitude should we have when reading the Bible?

I would like to try and 'deepen our understanding of the bible' by turning to our preparation before reading the bible. But why do we need to prepare ourselves in reading the bible, why not just pick it up and read it? On one level that's how it should be, for the bible is God's gift to his people but in reality such advice can leave people bored and bemused, try reading those instructions about bodily discharges and killing, sheep, goats and doves in Leviticus. It can even leave us disturbed and confused, such as when we read the commands to commit genocide in Deuteronomy.

Reading the Bible can be hard. So preparing yourself to read the bible, is just as important as reading it when it comes to deepen our understanding of the bible. So how do we prepare ourselves? Let's turn to Acts 17:10-12

That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas to Berea. When they arrived there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul's message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth

Down hundreds of years this sole reference to the Christians in the town of Berea and their bible study has inspired the establishment of churches, schools and colleges and countless sermons and bible studies.

With their open mindedness and searching of the bible they point to both a humility and a hunger for God. The two chief characteristics in preparing to read the bible.

3)What advice would you give to someone who wants to read the Bible for the first time?

I'm not going to give you any notes for the next two questions as I want you to draw from your own thoughts and experiences and not be influenced by mine. As my hunch is that everyone has had to wrestle with these two issues sometime in their life.

4)What would you say to someone who says the Bible is 'boring, irrelevant and untrue'?

5)What are the benefits of studying the Bible together in small groups?

The bereans remind us that humility and a hunger for God are the prerequisites for deepening our understanding of the bible but I want to move onto their practice of reading the Bible and suggest that reading the bible is a conversation by which we listen but also speak to God. So when we read the bible we can say to God

'I don't understand this God'

'Is this really what you want me to do'?

'This is amazing'

But a better conversation is sometimes had when more than two people are involved and one of the ancient ways God's people have sought to deepen their understanding of the bible is through a conversation with others as we read the bible together just as the bereans did. '**They searched the Scriptures day after day**' v11 and I would like you to have a conversation about this passage:

Jeremiah 29 v4-7

This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: ⁵ "Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. ⁶ Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! ⁷ And work for the peace and

prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.”

Does anyone know the context of the book of Jeremiah?

What does this passage reveal about God?

What is God saying to us through this passage?

Now spend some time in prayer

We do hope you have enjoyed the last few weeks exploring the seven values of Avenue.

God bless you

Jim and Andrew