

Top Tips for 40 days with Jesus

Introduction to Section 1

The theme of this first section is how God meets us and what type of a relationship we have with him. The central claim of Christianity is that God comes looking for us we can't find him ourselves. If we look for God all we will find is ourselves and get into a mess. Over the next few days you will read about how God goes to find various people in the bible. Throughout history God always works in the same way. God is the same in the ancient world as he is today. God calls me and you just like all these other people we will read about.

God loves us first before we even knew him, that is why he is our father. I loved my son from the moment I found out he was growing inside my wife. From the moment that pregnancy test showed two lines I loved him. Hopefully as my son grows up he will respond to that love and love me back. It is the same with God, he loved us first before the beginnings of the universe. Following him is like any child responding to his love and loving him back.

The bible also says that we are in a covenant relationship with God. What on earth does that mean? Well, it means that we are married to him, a covenant is a contract based on promises, just like a marriage. There are many covenants in the bible and they are a bit like the covenants we have between our partners, parents and children.

Day 1

This reading is central to the whole of Christianity. It shows us how God deals with us as people. Notice how God is calling Mary not the other way round. The angel goes to ask Mary if she is willing to have his son. God is calling all of us to get to know him just like Mary. When we say yes, God is born in us just like Jesus is born in Mary. Although not literally as men would have some serious issues.

Day 2

This reading is all about Jeremiah trying to Chicken out of being a prophet. He was scared that nobody would listen to him as he was too young. God provides the answer by empowering him to carry out his calling. Notice it is God calling Jeremiah not him looking for God. Have you felt that God is calling you in a less dramatic way? Have you tried to Chicken out? I have. Psalm 19 is where we respond to the glory of creation by saying that the universe itself says how great God is.

Day 3

This is the story of the still small voice of God. In prayer we have to stop gabbing on and listen to him. So try and be still and listen.

Day 4

This is the story of the call of Abraham and covenant with God. Covenant is a contract like a marriage or adoption of a son. Notice Abraham isn't very grateful he laughs at God and doesn't believe. But, God still makes the covenant with him. The contract says, God will be the God of all of his descendants and give him the land to live in. Notice also that this is a one sided deal there are no conditions for Abraham to fulfill. We too have the same covenant with God as Abraham.

Day 5

St Peter is called by Jesus to be a 'Fisher of men' or 'catch people' to be all P.C. Peter feels that he isn't good enough to follow Jesus. God calls all of us not just 'good people'. The one thing that happens in the bible is God always calls the most sinful and weakest people. Just like me, so thank God for that.

Day 6

This second Covenant is quite different to Abraham's one. Here God is saying he will bless those who keep his laws, this passage is just before Moses gets the Ten Commandments. The thing to remember about this Covenant or contract is that the people never keep it. When Moses gets back with the Ten Commandments all the people have forgotten about God and worship the Golden Calf. All our relationships are a mixture of both the conditional covenant of Moses and the unconditional one of Abraham. We love our kids unconditionally, but when they just won't listen it drives us mad. I think it is the same for God.

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Introduction to Section 2

In this section we will take a whistle stop tour around the bible and look at the various types of literature within it. The bible wasn't written by one man at one time but was put together over thousands of years. The bible can be misread and this has caused huge problems over the centuries and still does today.

When we read it we must ask ourselves several questions:

1: What type of literature is this, is it a poem, a story, a myth, a letter or set of laws?

2: What context was this written in? I know that this would take ages to answer. A good place to start would be to read a short introduction to the book you are reading, many bibles have these. Part of the reason for having these Top Tips is to put the reading in context.

3: How does this section I have just read relate to what I know about God? If you take a single verse or small section from the bible and look at it alone you can get it to say anything you want. We must look at each reading in relation to the whole bible.

4: How does what I have just read relate to today and my life and that of the church? As we have seen already God is always the same so he called Jeremiah to be a prophet and he tried to chicken out. He called me to be a priest and I tried to chicken out. My story and Jeremiah's are the same and I bet yours is similar too.

5: If you don't understand it ask.

Day 7

This is a form of ancient poetry that tells us what life is like. If we think of our own lives in relation to what is said here very little has changed. There still is a time for everything.

Day 8

This is an ancient myth about people getting too cocky and believing that can get to God by their own strength. They try and build a tower to reach heaven and show how clever they are. God plays a trick on them by giving them different languages so that they 'Babble' to each other.

This is not a literal story as it is written in style of a myth like the myths of our own culture. The question that underlies it is why do we all speak different languages? The answer is not an historical one but a myth that says something about God. The story isn't history like most of the stories in the book of Genesis. They are stories that tell us about our relationship with God. In this case the 'moral' of the story is, no matter how clever we think we are God is always beyond our understanding and in charge of our world.

Day 9

This is an extract from one of St. Paul's letters. Most of the New Testament is a collection of letters, some from St Paul others from different Church leaders. These letters are usually read for the second lesson in Church. The most important thing about these letters is to remember that they are letters. Written to churches just like our one in response to specific problems they faced. This letter to the Corinthians is all about Paul kicking off at them as they are all fighting with each other and doing awful things.

Paul was busy going round the world spreading Christianity. He started the Church in Corinth, in Greece and moved on to Athens and on to loads of other places. After he left Corinth things went pear shaped. The people in the church were all fighting with each other and gossiping. Sound familiar? Some of the things that Paul tells them off for; like gossip and divisions are easy to understand today. Also, when he gives them instruction in Christian doctrine this is familiar to us after a while. But, some of his stuff can be easily misunderstood if we don't think about the context.

In the ancient world sex was massive and weird. Many of the pagan temples in Greece and Rome had orgies. Paul seems to be going on and on about sex all the time about disgraceful acts etc. When he is going on and on about lust he is making reference to these orgies that were happening. People were going to church and then going off and having an orgy, why, because that is what ordinary people did at the time. I don't think that happens on a Sunday afternoon here.

So if you find some of the letter a bit strange ask what the context was and try and relate that to our church today. The classic is found in 1 Corinthians 7 where he says 'Women should be silent.' This doesn't mean that women shouldn't be able to take a full role in the church. We know this because Chloe the woman who told Paul about all the problems in the Church in Corinth was a Deacon, so was part of the hierarchy of the Church. What Paul is talking about is the age old problem about women talking all through the service. Except they were talking about bargains in Corinth market not Chorley market.

Day 10

This is the ten commandments. Again to understand these correctly we must put them into context. These Laws were written for a tribal society living in tents. Some of them are relatively straightforward like don't kill people. Or is it? Do you get cross with people, do you want to hit people? Also, if taken literally, I think we can all say that we haven't converted your neighbour's ass. But, we may get jealous when he turns up with nice shoes on. The Bible contains lots of Laws, these are guidelines that need to be interpreted for each generation. They all apply to us even though we don't live in a tribal society, but, we have to take the spirit of them not the letter of them and apply it to our lives and our society. If we take the letter of them we are all OK because nobody has got an ass to covert.

Day 11

This is not a myth like the tower of Babel but it isn't history either. There was no such thing as history in the ancient world. All we can say is that there was a king called David who fought various battles. This is history like the King Arthur stories. There is a grain of historical fact but the story isn't about what happened in the past. It is about how to be a good King. David unlike Arthur is a rubbish king he is always getting into trouble, usually with women and power struggles. When we read these stories we have to think about the 'moral' of them. David got himself into trouble because he was being a Peeping Tom and did a terrible thing. After he did this he wrote Psalm 51. The moral of this story is that David was a rubbish king but God forgave him.

Day 12

Self explanatory, as Jesus gives the explanation himself. But, how does this effect our lives? Where has the seed fallen for us? Are we the stony ground or the weeds or the good soil?

Day 13

This is a lot stranger than yesterday but shorter so that's good isn't it. This type of literature is prophecy. Prophecy is really weird and poetic and sometimes difficult to understand. The prophets were called to be the mouthpiece of God. The problem is nobody understands God. They would have vision that was beyond words and then try and describe it. When we read this stuff we must remember it is almost like poetry. The language is beautiful and points to God. Reading it should make us go wow, even if it is wow that is weird.

Top Tips for 40 days with Jesus

Introduction to Section 3

Over the next few days we will be looking at who Jesus is. There is a huge difference between God and humans, after all I don't know any humans who can create a universe. Also every human is imperfect, we all make mistakes in life large and small. To use old language we all sin. We are imperfect and not very powerful. God is perfect and all powerful. God is eternal, in other words he has been around forever, he created time itself. God has no beginning and no end. Humans have a beginning we were born and we have an end we will die.

Get a piece of paper and write down all the things that humans have in common. When I do this with Children they always say, 'Humans all go for a poo'. Adults tend to be more polite. Then on the other side of the paper write a list of things that God does, like he created the universe, he is perfect etc. Then think about Jesus and tick off all the things that Jesus does. You will find that he ticks all the human and God boxes. Jesus is 100% human and 100% God. He bridges the gap between God and humanity.

Day 14

The Christmas story, 'I know that one'. This story has two big questions did the shepherds really have tea towels on their heads and what does it really mean? Notice God is born just like we were born, but it isn't just like we were born. Very few of us were born in such poverty in a strangers back room. Also none of our mothers were virgins either. The story of the shepherds is even stranger, in Jesus' time Sheppard were thought of as the lowest of the low and very untrustworthy. In a Jewish courts shepherds were not allowed to give evidence as they were so dodgey. Think about the actual circumstances of Jesus' birth and the Christmas story is a nice story at all.

Day 15

This is another myth just like the tower of Babel last week. There is a lot of symbolic language used here, Adam means man. Eve is a women's magazine that my wife reads, I read it sometimes too. But, Eve also means woman. These are not, repeat not historical stories of two literal people who actually existed, this is a symbolic story about becoming aware of good and evil. We know this for three reasons, firstly the names Adam & Eve are symbolic names, meaning man and woman i.e. us. Second, the narrative is written in a mythological style, just like the tower of Babel story. Thirdly, this story was not repeat not taken literally by anyone in the church until the seventeenth century at the earliest. All the great saints of the Church and Jewish writers throughout history understood this story as a myth. To understand this as history is to take all the meaning out.

So like the tower of Babel what is the moral of the myth? The first thing to notice is that evil existed before anyone ate the fruit (not an apple but a fruit). Evil is represented by the serpent. Snakes were always seen as evil in the ancient world as they killed people. The serpent is evil, eating the fruit gives Eve and Adam the knowledge of good and evil. Evil was there all along. So what is this myth trying to tell? It says we are not born knowing the difference between good and evil, it is something we learn. Like a baby Adam and Eve don't know that they are naked. When we were very young our parents bathed us. Now I definitely would not like my Mam to bath me, why? Because I would know that I would be naked. As we grow up we understand that there is good and evil. We as humans can make moral choices. Infancy is often seen as an age of innocence like the Garden of Eden. God throws us out when we first knowingly commit evil. Basically this story tells us

that as humans we are all fallen, we are capable of good and evil and we know the difference. We are expelled from innocence in our infancy why? because we know that it is wrong to hit, bite and shout about bob the builder yogurts, but we just don't care. This follows us through life, except as adults we shout and hit about different things. We are in short imperfect sinners.

Day 16

Jesus isn't conceived like we were it is the Holy Spirit that fertilizes Mary's egg. Jesus has DNA just like us and grows inside the womb just as we did. Joseph isn't convinced by this story he think Mary has gone to a night club and hooked up with some dodgy bloke. Thankfully God shows him this isn't true.

Day 17

Jesus causes all sorts of trouble by forgiving a man's sins and healing him. Only God can forgive sins.

Day 18

Jesus in the garden, the night before he dies. He is scared and tired. He knows that the soldiers are coming and they will crucify him. He has faith that this is God's plan, but is still scared. Jesus is very human here, he doesn't know with certainty that he is following God's plan. He has faith just like us, but is still tired and scared.

Day 19

Jesus is worn out after walking for ages. He is tired, just like we get sometimes. He tells the woman with loads of husbands that he is the Christ. This is the first person who Jesus tells that he is the Christ, not a holy priest but a right slapper off Jeremy Kyle.

Day 20

Nobody takes notice of Jesus because they can't believe that he is the Christ as they know his family. To them he is just a bloke from down the road. Someone who they grew up with and played in the street with, the carpenter they got round to put their kitchen in.

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Introduction to section 4

Over the next few days we will look at why Jesus died. There is no doctrine of how Jesus saves the world, just that he did. There are however several theories, I have boiled them down to three main ones. There is no right or wrong answer here, in a way they all aid in prayer. As you read the bible reading for the next few days think about each one and which one you find most helpful.

The Theories are:

Christ as Victor Theory

The devil can hold all humans as slaves as they have sinned. The devil is tricked into killing a sinless man (Jesus), this breaks the hold of the devil as Jesus is human but also sinless therefore Jesus sets all humanity free.

Christ's Death as Sacrifice

Sin must be paid for in a blood sacrifice. Jesus is the Lamb of God whose sacrifice pays for our sin.

Christ's Death as Example

Christ's death shows us how much God loves humanity even in the face of our sin.

Day 21 and Day 22

As you read these stories think about how Jesus felt, think about him being both human and God. Think about how you would feel as the various characters in the story, Pilate, the priests, the crowd and the soldiers.

Day 23

This is where the sacrifice theory comes from. "Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, Blessed are those who are called to his supper" Sound familiar you hear it every Sunday. Here the writer of Hebrews is saying that all the blood and guts of the old sacrifices is finished as God has sent a Lamb i.e. Jesus to be the perfect sacrifice.

Day 24

This is the Christ as victor theory. The first Adam was rubbish, remember Adam just means person. Jesus is the New Adam who is good. So we can now belong to the New Adam not the old rubbish one. Through this we become New Adams, new people who are good.

Day 25

This story is all about God providing a lamb. Abraham goes to sacrifice his son but God stops him saying he will provide a lamb. That Lamb is Jesus, God is like Abraham sacrificing his son, get the link. If you look in the chapel in church you will see a window with Jesus the Lamb on the Cross and Abraham underneath.

Day 26

This is one of the first hymns sung by Christians, it tells of the Christ as Victor theory. Jesus through goodness and love has destroyed evil.

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Introduction to section 5

This section is all about Jesus rising from the dead and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus rises from the dead in doing this he shows us that he has defeated all evil and defeated death itself. The disciples, Jesus' friends don't recognize him at first. He is different in some way which is beyond our understanding. Our imperfections or sin prevent the disciples and us from recognizing the risen Jesus. Remember that because Jesus is 100% Human and 100% God everything that happens to Jesus happens to us, so we too will rise from the dead.

Day 27

Notice in this reading that nobody sees the risen Jesus yet, but who are the first people to be told of his resurrection? Women. Do the disciple believe them? No. It is only through faith that we can recognize that Jesus has risen from the dead.

Day 28

The key to this reading is the phrase, 'Proclaimed to the spirits in prison'. This is where Jesus descends to the place of the dead and shows himself to them. When we meet Jesus in 'Hell' or 'Hades' or 'Sheol' or the place of the dead he will show himself to us. We then must recognize him and follow him to heaven. Trouble is I'll have to follow him with everyone else, including people I'd rather not know.

Day 29

This is a long reading sorry. But, it forms the centre of our experience of the risen Jesus. In church we hear the bible, this is where Jesus opens the scriptures to the disciples. When we read the bible he does the same for us. Then at the Eucharist Jesus shows himself to us and we recognize him, sometimes. Then he is gone. What happened at Emmaus is what happens at every Eucharist, but, we sometimes don't recognize Jesus.

Day 30

Doubting Thomas, notice how Jesus treats Thomas, is he angry or annoyed? Also, see that Thomas was absent during the earlier appearance. If we don't meet with the disciples, i.e. go to church then the chance of us recognizing Jesus are less. Also, Jesus has a body, he is not a Ghost, he has wounds. After the resurrection Jesus is human and God all at the same time. But, Jesus' body is different from before. Think of a butterfly, before the resurrection Jesus is like a caterpillar and after like a butterfly. This is the same animal but also different. After our resurrection we will be like Jesus sons of God. Really I haven't made that up honest.

Day 31

This is the story of Jesus' ascension. Remember everything that happens to Jesus happens to us. Jesus is human and God. Jesus unites humans and God. So that means that we will ascend to heaven. Also, notice this cloud stuff. In the ancient world a cloud means something that is unknowable, it is a veil between earth and heaven. Jesus has passed through this veil, but, has not left us, from the veil come God the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the power of God that prompts us to recognize Jesus today on this side of the veil.

Day 32

This is a list of all the people Jesus appeared to. Notice how Paul says that the risen Jesus appeared to him. Jesus appeared to him after he ascended to heaven. Even though we were born after Jesus' ascension, he still appears to us in our worship. We have to recognize him.

Day 33

Here, Paul is saying that we in our baptism have died to an old way of life and been resurrected to a new one. At the moment we can't see it fully but one day when we see Jesus face to face we will be reborn fully in heaven. Think of times in your life when you have died to one way and been reborn to other ways.

Day 34

This is the story of Pentecost the coming of the Holy Spirit. Notice how this amazing miracle happens and then some recognize what is happening and others think that the Apostles are a bunch of drunks. Do we recognize what God is doing today through the Holy Spirit or do we dismiss it as rubbish?

Day 35

This may seem a bit weird why are we reading about crossing the red sea, what has that got to do with Easter? If you remember a few weeks ago we talked about the window in the chapel and how the sacrifice of Abraham and Jesus on the cross were linked. This makes reference to something called Typology, big word alert. This is the key to understand the Old Testament. If we think of the slavery in Egypt as our life before we knew Jesus. Then the crossing of the red sea is like baptism. We pass through water from the slavery of sin to new life in the Promised Land. To understand the bible in this way we make it relevant, no more is it about a bunch of stories about dead people doing things, but is our story about stuff we do.

Day 36

This is the story of Jesus' baptism. It seems far more dramatic than our own one that we can't remember. But, hidden within that service a similar thing happened. We died to one way of life and were reborn to another. Think of a baptism you have been to and try and remember if you could recognize the Holy Spirit in it.

Day 37

Whoever says that the God of the Old Testament is nasty is wrong, he does get cross with the Jews and blasts them from time to time, but, eventually he forgives them. All this talk about baptism being so dramatic usually sounds a bit silly, because we think of it as an event when we were a baby. Baptism is like the crossing of the sea, but remember; the Jews crossed the sea into the wilderness not the promised land. The wilderness is like our life on earth after baptism, we have to get through it to get to the Promised Land, which is heaven. The Jews, just two chapters after they escape Egypt through the sea are in a strop with God. They say we are in the wilderness with nothing to eat. So what does that nasty God do? He gives them something to eat. In our wilderness on earth God gives us the Eucharist to feed our souls as we journey to the Promised Land.

Day 38

I once asked my Mam why we didn't have Passover in church, she said because we have the Eucharist. The Eucharist is our Passover meal. The original Passover meal was celebrated just as the last plague passed over the Jews in Egypt. They sacrificed a lamb and put the blood on the door posts. Jesus is the lamb remember and you need blood for a contract or covenant. The Jewish Passover meal is where they remember this night when God saved them from slavery in Egypt. This remembering is like the making present we talked about with the photos. In the last supper we have a New Contract or Covenant made in the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God. So in the Eucharist we remember that God has not just saved the Jews from slavery in Egypt, but saved us from the slavery of death and sin. Remember at Easter we say in Church, 'Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us'

Day 39

Here we have the story of the Jews coming out of the wilderness and into the Promised Land. The song 'Guide me o thou great redeemer' the one you sing at the rugby, when Wales win. This song has the line, 'when I tread the verge of Jordon, bid my anxious fear subside, death of death and hell's destruction land me safe on Canaan's side.' This is talking about death. The river Jordon is the border between the wilderness and the Promised Land. Crossing the Jordon is when we cross from the wilderness of this world to the Promised Land of Heaven.

Day 40

This is the end of the bible and the end of our story, the place over the rainbow when all things will be made new and all evil will be destroyed. This is a vision of heaven which we are called to make present today in the wilderness.