

# A Generous God

Bible studies on God's generosity to us all



***Walking** with Jesus and getting to know Jesus better as we journey on  
**Welcoming** all, embracing our diversity and seeking new ways  
of being church*

***Growing** in numbers, generosity, faith and discipleship as we  
grow God's Kingdom*



Parish Support

**Fund**

The Diocese of Southwark



The Diocese of  
**Southwark**



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# Foreword

How do you describe ‘generosity’? Or measure it? You may like to pause and give that a moment’s thought before reading on! We probably all recognise actions or words that are ‘generous’ — but what makes them so? How do we determine if someone is generous to us?

One of the key principles on which the Southwark Parish Support Fund is based is ‘informed generosity’: we look to the generosity of the people of God across the parishes of the Diocese to fund the ministry and mission of the Church in Southwark. Generosity can be a mark of an individual, a household, a community, a parish. It can shape so many aspects of our lives of Christian discipleship, expressed through the ways in which we each pursue our vocation and calling; set our priorities; use our time; spend or save our money; treat people; care for the planet; pursue or build relationships (and more besides).

The three Bible studies provided here invite us to take a step back and look at what it means to know and relate to a generous God. Our generosity might be described as our attempts to respond to the generosity of God — shown in creation, in Jesus Christ, in the world, in other churches, in one another.

I would dare to say that we will struggle to think or act or give generously if we haven’t grasped, experienced or understood something of God’s generosity to us. We may still, after these studies, find it hard to describe or measure generosity but hopefully we will have glimpsed and experienced the generosity of God. When we do that it will have a profound effect at parish level and individually as we respond to the Parish Support Fund and in the offering of our lives to God.

*The Venerable Chris Skilton,  
Archdeacon of Croydon*

# How to use these studies

These Bible studies and reflections are designed to help God's people here in the Diocese of Southwark to think about what it means to be generous in response to God's generosity to us; to help us deepen our faith and live out our generosity in our churches and communities. They can be used with a small group, in pairs, or individually; in fact, they can be used in what ever way studying the Bible works best in your church.

In each study there is a variety of ways to think, reflect and pray about the passages and their meaning in our lives today. Everyone learns differently and so, if you are working together as a group, it is good to use some of the variety of ways of helping people to think about the issues raised. This will help to ensure that everyone can engage with the discussions.

If you are working individually or in a pair you may still find it helpful to try some of the suggestions for different ways of engaging with the passage from scripture but it may be that you will feel that it is enough to think about the questions related to the passage without undertaking the activity. (It's up to you, of course, but taking the time to do the activity may help you to think about and experience the text in a new way.)

## The sessions

If at all possible try to have an hour and a half for the sessions to give enough time for everyone to join in. In order to make people as relaxed and comfortable as possible offer refreshments at the beginning or at the end (or if there is time: both!)

### **Making the group work**

If the group using these studies is established and knows each other then simply use your usual way of studying together; if you are meeting together for the first time it is important that you spend a few moments saying hello and making sure that everyone knows the names of all those in the group - even if you know each other from church. (There is an exercise to help with this in the first session.)

### **Reading in the group**

Some people are very happy to read aloud but some will not feel comfortable. There may be all sorts of reasons for this so when there is something to be read aloud ask for volunteers, in order to avoid embarrassing people who would rather not put themselves forward. In Session One we suggest that the members of the group might like to read the Psalm verse by verse, half a group each side; so long as there are two or three people on each side it should not be embarrassing for the less confident reader.

The Bible verses printed in these studies come from the New Revised Standard Version, but please feel free to use whichever Bible version you are comfortable with.

### **Equipment**

Sometimes you may need some pens and papers or music and, if that is so, there is a note at the beginning of the session. Please do make sure to have a look at the suggestions before the session so that everything needed during the session is to hand.

### **Prayer**

Begin and end each session with prayer and pray between the sessions for God's Spirit to move in our lives.







# Session One: A generous God — from golden sky to honey-drenched laws

## Aim

To learn about God's generosity and to think about our response to it.

## What you will need

You will need to have a supply of paper and pens for Question 3 in this session. If possible have some coloured pens.

## Pray together

Pray in whatever style works best for your group.

## To begin

If the group is new to each other, take a few moments and ask members of the group to get into pairs with someone they don't know as well. Ask them to tell each other their names and how long they have been going to church. Ask them to say one thing that they would like other members of the group to know about them. (Make sure that people are reminded not to share something that they would not want everyone in the group to know.) Give people three minutes each and then, once the time has gone, invite them to introduce the person with whom they have shared to the group.

If the group has already been meeting regularly, ask people simply to say their names (so that everyone is reminded of them) and to share one thing that they hope to get out of these meetings together.

## To help you to focus

The Psalm being discussed in this session (see pages 10-11) celebrates the glory and generosity of God in creation and in the Law. The first of these may be easier to understand. However, the Psalmist puts them together to emphasise that living life well as people of God includes an awareness that the world is created and ordered for life by God.

Understood rightly, God's law was not a burden in contrast to his generosity, but the highlight and crown of it. Exodus 19, in the Old Testament, speaks first of what God does for his people. He gives them a promise, helps them to escape from tyranny, gives them a land, an identity and a new relationship with God and one another. The Law was God's gracious provision for how to live well in response to this.

### To think about

Psalms were written to be said or sung aloud: try reading this together as a group (or reciting it aloud on your own). When Psalms are read aloud in church they are often said antiphonally: that is, one half of the people present read the odd verses and the other half read the even. Alternatively, the leader reads the odd verses and the rest of the group responds with the even. Try this in the group or try reading it aloud together. (See notes about reading aloud in the 'How to' section on page 6.)

#### God's Glory in Creation and the Law

##### To the leader. A Psalm of David

<sup>1</sup>The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

<sup>2</sup>Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.

<sup>3</sup>There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;

<sup>4</sup>yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,  
<sup>5</sup>which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,  
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

<sup>6</sup>Its rising is from the end of the heavens,  
and its circuit to the end of them;  
and nothing is hidden from its heat.

<sup>7</sup>The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the decrees of the LORD are sure,  
making wise the simple;

<sup>8</sup>the precepts of the LORD are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the LORD is clear,  
enlightening the eyes;

<sup>9</sup>the fear of the LORD is pure,  
enduring for ever;  
the ordinances of the LORD are true  
and righteous altogether.

<sup>10</sup>More to be desired are they than gold,  
even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey,  
and drippings of the honeycomb.

<sup>11</sup>Moreover by them is your servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward.

<sup>12</sup>But who can detect their errors?  
Clear me from hidden faults.

<sup>13</sup>Keep back your servant also from the insolent;  
do not let them have dominion over me.

Then I shall be blameless,  
and innocent of great transgression.

<sup>14</sup>Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable to you,  
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

*Psalm 19*

### Questions to consider

1. After the Psalm has been read aloud, take a few moments to look at it again and reflect upon it. Then, if you feel able, tell others in the group:

- what stands out for you and why?
- what do you most notice in the Psalm? Why do you notice it?

2. Do you have a favourite song or piece of poetry? Share what it is with other members of the group. Think about what makes you like it so much. How much of what you like about it has to do with the way it sounds rather than your understanding of it? We sometimes forget that Psalms are poetry and that has an effect on what we hear. The 19th-century poet Coleridge wrote: “Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood.”

Ask someone to read the Psalm again slowly. Think about what you understand and how much of the pleasure in this Psalm lies in how it sounds. In what ways does what you hear help you to understand what the writer of the Psalm was trying to say?

3. Spend a few minutes quietly thinking about what especially speaks to you about God’s generosity in creation. Try to draw it so that you can share what makes you think of God’s generosity in creation with the rest of the group. (It doesn’t matter if you are not very good or experienced at drawing as you can explain your attempt at representing what you want to say to the rest of the group.) Or, if you would rather, you can share photos or videos on your phone which make you think of God’s generosity – although sometimes it is good to do something outside of your comfort zone to help make you think more about what you are sharing.

When everyone has had a chance to share their drawings/photos/ videos and what speaks to them, see if there are any similarities in what people have said. Does this tell you anything about the way in which God speaks to people?

4. Spend a few minutes thinking about what living responsibly in God's generous world might look like. Consider how each of us might live and act differently in order to respond to God's generosity in our world. How might we mirror and reflect God's generous creative activity? Share your thoughts with the rest of the group.

5. Notice the effect of God's law in verses 7-9 of the Psalm. How might this be seen as a sign of God's generous provision? And note the consistent colour of generosity for the Psalmist: the sun (v.4); gold and honey (v.10). What does that tell you? How does it make you feel?

In his book *A Rabbi Reads the Psalms*, Rabbi Jonathan Magonet, reflecting on this Psalm, shares the words of Immanuel Kant, who said: "There are two things that fill my soul with holy reverence and ever-growing wonder: the spectacle of the starry sky that virtually annihilates us as physical beings and the moral law which raises us to infinite dignity as intelligent beings."

Pray together about the things that you have thought about in this session and give thanks for God's generosity.

### Next week

In Session Two we will be thinking about God's generosity yesterday, today and in the future. Please bring to the Session an object or piece of writing or a drawing, in fact anything that would help you to share with other members of the group your sense of God in your past, the present and your hopes for God's presence in your future.

### To ponder before the next session

The last section of the Psalm (verses 11-14) draw us to prayer for our response to this generosity. (Verse 14 doesn't have to be used only at the beginning of sermons!) What would your prayer for yourself and your church be that would enable you all to be "Walking, Welcoming, Growing"? You may like to use the 'Hearts on Fire' prayer (below) as part of your reflections.

### Hearts on Fire prayer

Stay with us Lord,  
open our eyes and set our hearts on fire,  
as you open your word,  
as you break your bread,  
as we live your life.  
Enrich us with your grace,  
empower us by your Spirit,  
enfold us in your love,  
as we walk the journey of faith with you. Amen.



## Notes



*Ruins at Ephesus*

# Session Two: A generous God — past, present and future

## Aim

To think about how we experienced God's generosity in the past, in the here and now and what we hope to experience in the future.

## What you will need

Some large sheets of paper and pens.

## Pray together

Give thanks for God's generosity since the group last met and pray that God will speak to group as the session progresses.

## To begin

Make sure that everyone remembers the names of the people in the group. It might be best simply to go around and ask everyone to share their name again.

At the end of the last session you were asked to consider what your prayer for yourself and your church would be to help you all to be "Walking, Welcoming, Growing". Share what you feel you can of what you had discussed with your neighbour. If any members of the group want to share something briefly with the rest of the group allow time for this to happen.

## To help you to focus

Many people believe that the letter to the Christians in Ephesus was written by Paul when he was in prison in Rome in 60-62 AD. There are, however, those who would challenge whether it was written by Paul because it misses many of the expected greetings that he used in his letters.

Ephesus was the most important city in Western Asia Minor: what is now known as Turkey. Unlike in some of his letters, Paul did not write to the Christian community in Ephesus in order to correct error; rather he wanted to write to the Ephesians in order to help to build them up in their faith.

### To think about

Ask people to prepare to show to other members of the group what they have brought to share which remind them of things in the past, present and their hopes for the future.

Share them with each other as group members feel able. Try to think about where God was and is in the things that you want to share. Where do you hope God will be in your future?

When everyone that wishes to has shared, think together as a group what these memories, our present and our hopes tell us about our experience of God.

Now let us look at the passage from Ephesians. This passage, like the Psalm of the first study, is worth reading aloud. But, in the original Greek this whole passage is one sentence! However, different translations of the Bible have split it into several sentences (albeit not always in the same way).

Sometimes listening to scripture being read aloud by a number of voices can give new insights into what the passage is saying. So divide the passage into two and ask for one volunteer to read verses 3-10 and another to read verses 11-14. Following the reading allow a few minutes for reflection. Then ask another two people to read the passage.

### Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup>just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. <sup>5</sup>He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, <sup>6</sup>to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. <sup>7</sup>In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace <sup>8</sup>that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup>he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, <sup>10</sup>as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. <sup>11</sup>In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, <sup>12</sup>so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. <sup>13</sup>In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; <sup>14</sup>this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

*Ephesians 1: 3-14*

### Questions to consider

1. After the reading take a few minutes to think about what you each notice about the passage as you read it and/or hear it. Ask people to write up on the pieces of paper the things that they most notice.

Are there any common threads in what people write? What might that tell you about what we know of and experience of God? Think, too, about what Paul wants the Ephesians to know about God. It might be that members of the group have noticed that God is

prominent — and the subject of seven key verbs: “blessed”, “chose”, “destined”, “bestowed”, “lavished”, “made known”, “gathers up”. (Try not to get too hooked on verse 4: it affirms that faith rests on the grace of God, which does not lead to complacency but responsibility for living well in God’s world.)

3. In this session we are thinking about God’s generosity in the past, the present and the future. Some see (especially in verses 3-10) the pattern of something said about the three persons of God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and others the pattern of God at work in the past, present and future. Whichever strikes you more, both can be summed up by speaking of the grace and generosity of God in his nature, his being in the world and his activity.

Which of these two ways of looking at the passage especially speaks to you? If you feel able to, tell other members of the group why and what this means to you.

4. The worship of the Church has been described by theologian Thomas Smail as “our attempt to cope with the grace of God”. Thinking about the worship of the local church that you attend and participate in, is there anything in that worship that speaks to you of the grace of God and how we respond to that generosity? Try to explain what you think to other members of the group.

5. In his book *Practice Resurrection*, the writer and speaker Eugene Petersen, who died in 2018, wrote of this passage: “This is no cramped world in which we live from hand to mouth. The horizons are vast. The heavens are high. The oceans are deep. We have elbowroom to spare.”



Can you think of ways in which the other activities and priorities of your church reflect the generosity of God and how we respond to that? What in your church's Mission Action Plan conveys something of the generosity of God? Explain to each other why you answer as you do.

6. There will be more in Session Three about life outside your church: but the last verses of this passage (especially verses 11-14) talk about the effect of two different communities (Jewish and Gentile) being brought together by the grace of God.

Think about your local community. How do the different groups within it and within your worshipping community relate together? Are there things that need to be helped to work together and live alongside each other more comfortably? Why is this? How might the generosity of God be transformative in your local community?

Spend some time in prayer thinking about your local area and praying for it. It might be that you can use stories from your local paper to pray for local events and about local stories. Or try to visualise the parish using the points of the compass and pray for the people and places around the parish.

### **To ponder before the next session**

If it is true, as many accept, that Paul wrote this letter, he did so under house arrest. He would not have been confined to a cell but almost certainly chained to a Roman soldier. Think about what this must have been like all day, every day. How do you think it would make you feel? What, if anything, does this tell you about the grace of God in hard times?





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# Session Three: A generous God – resources to live generously, wisely and well

## Aim

To enable group members to consider how to live well in response to God's generosity.

## What you will need

Some sticky notes and pens and something to stick them up on.

## To begin

During the time since the last group meeting you were asked to think about the grace of God in hard times. Have you any experiences of this that you would like to share?

## To help you to focus

The first two studies have looked at a particular passage from the Bible. This session dips into three sections of James' letter, which is possible to do because of the way James writes. Although we are only going to look at a few brief excerpts, the whole letter is worth reading as the themes that the group is about to study together and their implications for living weave in and out of the whole Epistle.

**Ask someone in the group to volunteer to read the following three verses aloud:**

<sup>17</sup>Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. <sup>18</sup>In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

<sup>5</sup>If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.

*James 1: 17-18 and James 1: 5*

James reminds his hearers then and now that God gives good things generously and that God is constant, trustworthy and dependable. One of the good things that God gives is wisdom.

For James, wisdom was not about intellectual knowledge and prowess or the accumulation of facts. It was about knowing how to live well in God's world and about seeing and living out how God calls his people to live.

### Questions to consider

1. What does the term living well mean to you? Write your thoughts down on a sticky note (or two) and then stick them up on the space provided. Does what you think align with what others in the group think? What would it mean for members of your worshipping community to live well together?
2. Who do you think of as 'wise' in these terms (name names if you like – living or dead; famous or unknown)? What makes them wise? What does it mean for you to live "wisely and well with generosity"? How does this tie in with the principles of the Parish Support Fund? (If you're not sure what those are look at the material sent with these studies!)

**Now ask someone from the group to read the following verses aloud:**

<sup>13</sup>Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. <sup>14</sup>But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. <sup>15</sup>Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. <sup>16</sup>For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.



<sup>17</sup>But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. <sup>18</sup>And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

*James 3: 13-18*

James sets out a picture of what wise and not so wise living looks like. These are not just individual or personal attributes but contribute to the well-being (or not) of the community.

3. What might be, or are, the effects of living wisely or not so wisely be in your church and wider community?

4. The word translated as ‘mercy’ in verse 17 is the same Greek word at root as the word for ‘alms’. What might this tell us about giving our resources (money, skills, time)? How might the generosity of wisdom be lived out in our own lives and the life of the church?

**Finally, ask someone to volunteer to read the following three verses aloud:**

<sup>14</sup>What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill”, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? <sup>17</sup>So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

*James 2: 14-17*

This is one of James’ case studies about the close relationship between what he calls ‘faith’ and ‘works’ and the importance of both. Pious conviction alone is not enough.

5. Think about your own giving. In what ways might you describe it as generous and wise? If you feel able to, please share what, if anything, you find challenging in this.

6. How might the Parish Support Fund enable the churches across the Diocese generously and wisely to support ‘faith’ and ‘works’ in our mission?

Members of the group might find it helpful to look at the Parish Support Videos online (<https://southwark.anglican.org/help/stewardship/parish-support-fund>), the Hearts on Fire Blog (<http://southwarkcofe.tumblr.com/>) or the Diocesan newspaper, *The Bridge*, which you can get from your church or online (<https://southwark.anglican.org/news/the-bridge>), where these stories are told.

We might be called to give more to the Church in terms of money or time, or trying to be more generous in our responses to people, and so on.

### **Pray together**

Give thanks for this time together, for what has been learned and for each member of the group.

### **To ponder in the coming weeks**

“Generosity begins by opening ourselves to receive from God...We are loved, valued, forgiven and provided for without meanness or measuring. Nothing can be done to earn it: the gift is free. And the more you become yourself through God’s abundance of giving, the more you want to let your own abundance flow from you, as a river does without ever running dry.”

*From spiritual director Chris Chapman's blog, 'Generosity doesn't have to be exhausting', September 2018*

## Notes

[illegible]



A series of 20 horizontal dotted lines for writing notes, spanning the width of the page.

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