



Free to Give

A four week bible study for small groups looking at money, wealth and worship



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Introduction

We often talk about life as a journey, about taking the next step. It is also a very Biblical way of thinking about things. We meet Abraham, Isaac and Jacob travelling to a new country. The journey to Jerusalem is a significant moment in the ministry of Jesus and of course we have the record of Paul's missionary journeys. To this day we speak of the journey of faith and many people make physical journeys, pilgrimages, to special places.

This four week Bible study course for small groups explores that famous journey in the book of Exodus when the Israelites leave Egypt and travel to the promised land. We think about the situations they faced, the lessons they learned, their good choices and bad mistakes. And one of the lessons Israel learned on their journey was God's perspective on money and possessions. They were heading for a land 'flowing with milk and honey', a rich and prosperous land. Their desert journey helped prepare them to live well with this gift entrusted to them by God. We need to learn those same lessons as we follow Jesus in our day to day lives. So in these studies we explore a little of God's perspective on living and giving well around money.

At the beginning of the story, the Israelites are in a terrible situation, powerless and persecuted. When they were eventually able to leave Egypt, they suddenly became wealthy because gifts of gold, silver and jewellery were given to them by their neighbours. This was no accident but a promise made many years previously (Genesis 15:14). But for all that they had in wealth the people of Israel were travelling in fear of the Egyptians and lacking in food and water, the basic necessities of life.

Israel's physical journey from Egypt to Canaan was also a spiritual journey. They travelled from captivity to freedom and from poverty to building a richly adorned tent in the desert where they met with God. Israel had to learn to trust Him for the food and water they needed in a harsh desert. They had to learn how to use the wealth they had received wisely and well: they made mistakes with a golden calf and they gave generously to build the Tent of Meeting. These are issues just as real for us in our own day as we learn to trust God for our own provision.

Course overview

Session 1 – Trapped and treasure – The journey from captivity

Focus: The Israelites are set free from captivity and gain treasure on release. How modern wealth can be a trap and how this affects our attitudes to others and to worship.

Advance preparation needed: Bibles, prayer needs information from Tearfund website, optional Conspiracy of Freedom video.

Session 2 – Trusting and travelling – The journey across the desert

Focus: The Israelites learn that they are dependent on God for all their needs.

Advance preparation needed: Bibles, optional Conspiracy of Freedom video, a bowl or a jar, paper and pencils/pens.

Session 3 – Tempted and tried – The dead-end journey

Focus: The Israelites make a golden calf and realise that bad choices lead to worse situations.

Advance preparation needed: Bibles, copies of adverts from celebrity magazines and Sunday supplements (not necessary, just helpful), optional Conspiracy of Freedom Video.

Session 4 – The journey to freedom – offering your all to God

Focus: The Israelites honour God with their generous gifts

Advance preparation needed: Bibles, worship CD or YouTube clip of a worship song, YouTube link to Conspiracy of Freedom Video, jewellery (optional).

Conspiracy of Freedom video clips

Short video clips from the Breathe network (www.breathenetwork.org/conference) offer an *optional* starter for each session. They may not be suitable for every group and require internet access if you wish to use them.

Leader's preparation

Leaders should make time to read the whole of Exodus 1- 36 (relax, lots of it is rip roaring story!). There are also helpful web resources and commentaries (see below) to help you understand the trickier sections, but the most important resource to absorb is the Bible story itself. Try not to overload the group members with background information as this can communicate that it is not worth reading the Bible unless you know lots of stuff already.

Being sensitive

Money is a personal matter. Be clear that people should share only as much as they feel comfortable with and that the group keep confidentiality. Every person is in a different financial situation and has different priorities in managing finance. It would be helpful to acknowledge this at the first session. In addition, you may wish to obtain leaflets or local contact details from Christians Against Poverty (www.capuk.org) or explore the resources at www.stewardship.org.uk/money to offer help and support for those who are in debt or struggling with money worries.

Resources to help understand the book of Exodus

- 🔗 www.biblegateway.com
Try reading the story in one go using the NEB. Also look at other versions of the passages used. There is a commentary on each passage available.
- 🔗 The Message of Exodus by Alec Motyer (Published by BST).
- 🔗 www.biblestudytools.com
This makes the Matthew Henry commentary available online.
- 🔗 'The Prince of Egypt' Dreamworks – A light hearted animated version of the first half of Exodus. Might be worth a watch to help you get a feel for the drift of the story.



Session 1: Trapped and treasure – the journey from captivity

Starter

Ask the group: have you ever felt trapped - perhaps in a job, in unemployment or a situation - and felt powerless to make changes?

Conspiracy of Freedom video clip (optional):

The video, "ENOUGH" will be a good introduction to this session. Access it at www.breathenetwork.org/conference

Searching the Bible

We start by exploring the experience of the Israelites in slavery. Ask three people to read the passages below to build a picture of the suffering of the people. Try a paraphrase such as The Message.

Exodus 1:8-14

Exodus 5:1-9

Exodus 6:6-9

Context: The Israelites (Jews) had fled the famine in Canaan and settled in Egypt in the time of Joseph. Generations later, their situation had deteriorated drastically.

Prompts for discussion

- ✎ What does the passage say about why the Egyptian Pharaoh was so anxious to enslave the people of Israel?
- ✎ How might the Israelites have felt as slaves surrounded by the wealth in Egypt?
- ✎ Was Pharaoh trapped in any way?

Next, we explore one aspect of the story of how the people of Israel were released from their captivity: the wealth they received when they left Egypt.

Read Exodus 12:31-38

Prompts for discussion

- ✎ What do you make of the people of Israel gathering their neighbours' treasure? Were they being given bribes to leave or

compensation for years of slavery or where they plundering the frightened Egyptians?

- ✿ What are the possibilities and pitfalls of suddenly becoming rich beyond your wildest imaginings?

So what now?

What does this mean for us in the world, our church and individual lives? In this section we ask questions in each of these three areas.

- ✿ What sort of circumstances can trap people in either wealth or poverty across the world today? *Group members may be invited to share particular situations that they are especially concerned with or touched by: human trafficking, personal debt, third world poverty, war zones etc.*
- ✿ In what ways can our local church be trapped by financial concerns – and what would help to set us free?
- ✿ And how does or might our local church follow Moses' example and help release people God loves from poverty, injustice or oppression?
- ✿ In what ways can we find ourselves trapped by wealth and possessions? How can we avoid turning our blessings into a curse? Where and how might we look for help or to find freedom?

Taking action

Challenge the group to find out more about people who are trapped by money. Personal debt is one area to explore or find out more about the links your church may have with a church overseas or to a mission agency that works with the poor.

Alternatively, make it your business this week to watch, hear or read the news and to pray briefly for those you hear about trapped in any way by wealth, poverty or injustice.

Closing worship

You could provide a visual prompt for worship by putting out some money – pound coins and a note or two. Suggest people use a short time of silence to ask God to release them from being trapped by their attitude to money or possessions or difficulties linked to a lack of money.

Pray for communities and individuals across the world trapped by hardship and persecution. The Tearfund website offers helpful resources for this.

Session 2: Trusting and travelling – the journey across the desert

Starter

This study explores gratitude and grumbling so ask when group members last grumbled about money or possessions – the lack of them, responsibility (eg sorting out insurance) or worry about future provision such as pensions. How often do we routinely grumble about such matters and when was the last time we said thank you to God for what we do have? OR

Conspiracy of Freedom video clip (*optional*):

The video, "HOME" will be a good introduction to this session. Access it at www.breathenetwork.org/conference

Searching the Bible

In this session we look at one of the better known stories from Exodus, the story of the manna that God gave to Israel to feed them in the desert.

Read Exodus 16:1-18

Prompts for discussion

- ✿ How might the Israelites have been feeling at this point in their journey; what prompted their complaints?
- ✿ Why might they have experienced the urge to return to Egypt, seeing their enslavement in a new light?
- ✿ What did God promise to provide for them each day? (v4)
- ✿ Does grumbling show a lack of trust in God?

Read Exodus 16:19-35

Prompts for discussion

- ✿ What strikes you about the gift of manna? (Note: the poor did not go without, the rich could not store it, it did not fall on the Sabbath, they kept some as a reminder of God's faithfulness.)
- ✿ What do you think might be the motivations of the 'hoarders and grabbers'? Why was Moses angry with them?
- ✿ Where did obedience fit alongside daily trust in God's provision?

So what now?

- ✚ What does this mean for us in the world, our church and individual lives?
- ✚ How different are the world's values compared to God's manna economy? (Note: consider especially that the manna was abundant for the community not just for the individuals and also the important place of Sabbath rest in the manna story)
- ✚ When it comes to money matters, are we a grumbling or a trusting, obedient church – and how could we develop a stronger culture of patient trusting? (You may want to refer to 2 Corinthians 8:13-15 where Paul uses this manna story to illustrate fair shares in giving)
- ✚ What would be different in our lives if we trusted in God implicitly for all our needs?

Taking Action

- ✚ Read Philippians 4:11-12 where Paul talks about how he has learned to be content. Practise being content and developing an 'attitude of gratitude' as things come and go during the week
- ✚ Read Matthew 6:19-21 and choose a verse to learn off by heart and try to recite it to yourself when you are tempted to grumble his week.

Closing worship

Exodus 16:33-36 tells how God told Moses to keep a portion of manna and put it in a jar in the ark as a reminder of his provision. Offer each person a slip of paper and pencil to write down gratitude for God's provision or possibly a particular or special time when God has provided for them (if they wish). These could be gathered together in a bowl or a jar and provide a focus for prayers of thanksgiving and praise for God's gifts.



Session 3: Tempted and tried – the dead end journey

Starter

How easy or difficult was it to refrain from grumbling? Did learning and reciting a verse help in any way?

Collect some adverts from lifestyle and celebrity magazines and the Sunday supplements. Scatter these on the floor or on a table and ask people what the lifestyle messages and consumer attitudes that the adverts promote. Discuss the messages and how they impact upon us personally. Is there anything we have given more importance than God?

Conspiracy of Freedom video clip *(optional)*:

The video, "LIFE" will be a good introduction to this session. Access it at www.breathenetwork.org/conference

Searching the Bible

It would be helpful to give some context for this story.

Moses was called by God at the burning bush to lead the people of Israel (Exodus 3:12). God made a promise. He told Moses that he would bring the people out of Egypt to worship him at Mount Sinai. At last, we see the people have reached this destination and it looks as if the promise is about to be fulfilled. In preparation, Moses went up to the mountain to receive instructions from God, including the Ten Commandments. While Moses was away, the people became impatient.

Read Exodus 32:1-24

Prompts for discussion

- ✿ Why do you think the people acted as they did with the wealth they had carried with them from Egypt?
- ✿ Why did Aaron not only allow their behaviour but also build a golden calf and an altar?
- ✿ How does Moses' react to the situation he meets when he returns to the camp?

Read Exodus 33:1-6 to conclude the story:

- ✿ Looking back over the whole story what can we learn about handling money and possessions with integrity?

So what now?

What does this mean for us in the world, our church and individual lives?

- ✚ What are the golden calves in our consumer society?
- ✚ How could our church make sure that we are focusing on God's priorities when it comes to money matters?
- ✚ What do we worry about most in our day to day lives? Home? Security? Pension? Paying off debts? How could we consciously bring these concerns to God and make sure we put Him first?

Taking action:

- ✚ What might be the first step we can take this week to take to ensure that God, not money (either as a worry or lifestyle choice), is our priority? How could the members of the group support one another as they take this step?
- ✚ Try keeping a record of spending for the week – not the day to day bills and grocery shopping but the discretionary spending – a coffee here and something else there. How does it add up over a week? (Help for doing this can be found at www.stewardship.org.uk/money/downloads/resources/take_care_pennies_final.pdf)

Worship

Commandment Bookends:

Read out the first and last commandment from Exodus 20 to introduce a time of silent prayer. After some minutes, lead the group in prayer using a Psalm of praise such as Psalm 24.

Session 4: The journey to freedom – offering your all to God

Starter

Did anything surprise you regarding how you spend your money (if you kept a record of spending)?

Which is more important? Spending time, effort and resources; worshipping God; or serving the poor?

Conspiracy of Freedom video clip (*optional*):

The video, "PLAY" will be a good introduction to this session. Access it at www.breathenetwork.org/conference

Searching the Bible

After Moses had come down a second time from the mountain with the Ten Commandments on stone tablets, he told the people to make a tabernacle or tent for meeting and storing the ark (which held the Ten Commandments). The materials used were incredibly beautiful, rare and expensive.

Read Exodus 36:1-7

Prompts for discussion

- ✿ What gifts did the people bring (skim through chapter 35:4 onwards to give an indication of the variety and cost of the gifts)?
- ✿ Bezalel is the first person in the Bible whom we are told is filled with the Holy Spirit (chapter 35:31-35). What was he asked to do with his gifts?
- ✿ What was the attitude of the people bringing the offerings? How did this compare with the attitude of the people before they received the Manna (session 2) or when they built the Golden Calf (session 3)?
- ✿ If one described the three different attitudes as grumbling and being resentful, focused on and even worshipping material things and freely offering of your very best to God, which describes your attitude at the moment?
- ✿ How did the people move from grumbling, resentful and focussing on material things to offering all they had to God? (read chapter 36:6-9)

So what now?

What does this mean for us in the world, our church and individual lives?

- ✿ Can you think of example of how generosity can change our world or someone's world? http://www.forbes.com/2011/05/19/billion-dollar-philanthropists_slide_2.html The Forbes website provides an overview of the top 19 givers in the world. The brief overview of Bill Gates giving is a good example of the extraordinary effects of his generosity.
- ✿ How can we offer our very best to God in worship? What would the impact be on the Church if we all embraced an attitude of generous worship?
- ✿ What is our most precious possession in life? And are we willing to offer it to God? Can we expand this? The bible teaches that God is the owner of all we have, we are stewards. So imagine we had to sign over all our belongings to God: what would we find the hardest to transfer ownership?

Taking Action

- ✿ Make a commitment to find out about and pray for the financial needs at your church this week leading up to the Sunday service.
- ✿ Is there anything you can do to support those who look after the building you meet in as a church?

Worship

Read Psalm 145:1-13 together

For a visual focus for worship you could place a piece of jewellery or other items representing wealth such as a phone, ipod, car keys etc. Suggest that each person could offer their possessions to God in a time of silence.

