



exile

living as aliens and strangers

The times they are a changed

Back in the 60s, Bob Dylan sang, "The times they are a changin'..."

After 50 odd years, we can definitely say they are a *changed*. The West has witnessed and brought upon incredible technological, social and cultural transformation.

One of the great shifts in our western culture has been the turning away from Christian thought and practice. Whereas it was once at the centre of our culture, Christianity is now one of many ideas or entirely discarded, even derided. As such, the term "post-Christian" aptly describes the western world.

So how do we navigate our present culture?

The Bible has always described God's people as "aliens and strangers". Therefore, the attitudes of God's people, to a large extent ought to be foreign to the world around us...

1 Peter 2:11, 12

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Living as a follower of Jesus can be tough. It can seem like we're in a war from within and from the outside. The good news is that one day we will no longer be in exile but go home.

As such, these studies will help you live as an alien and stranger in a culture that can make you feel like an alien and stranger. They'll also help you look forward to the day God visits.

Are we there yet?

Every Christmas there seems to be a battle. Not for last minute shopping ideas but over the word itself. "Christmas" has largely been dropped in favour of "Holidays". Some have suggested that wishing someone, "Merry Christmas" may offend. Christmas Carols about Christ and Nativity scenes have been pushed out of the public square.

As such, many have declared that there is a "War on Christmas". Some go further, suggesting this heralds a war on *Christians*. Others put it in biblical terms, that we are now living in Babylon, just as God's people once lived in exile.

But are we there yet? Are we really living in Babylon or is that an overreach?

These studies are designed to help you think about our culture, its challenges and opportunities. It's also a time to think back to the early church and how they lived out their faith. Remember, the church was born in occupation. I guess you could say that it started in exile.

Hopefully by looking at how they lived as aliens and strangers in their day we can be encouraged to do the same in ours.

Identity

We are aliens and strangers in this world

How has our culture turned away from Christian thought and practice? Is this a good thing?

Is Christian thought and practice totally alien to our culture? Are there any shared values? If so, how can they help us navigate the new cultural landscape?

Read Genesis 17:8, 21:23, 23:4

In what ways was Abraham an alien and stranger?

Read Exodus 22:21, 23:9, Deuteronomy 10:19

Why were God's people called aliens? How was this to influence their treatment of others?

Skim through Matthew 5-7

List as many of the alien and strange things Jesus asked his followers to do.

Is this one of the reasons why the crowds were amazed?

Does Jesus call us to be countercultural or is the world countercultural to how it should be?

Read John 1:10-13

In what ways was Jesus an alien and stranger?

Read Romans 12:1-3

How does not conforming to the world make us aliens and strangers?

Read 1 Peter 2:11, 12

Define these words and phrases...

Abstain

Sinful desires

War

Such good lives

Why does Peter use the word "war"?

How will these accusers glorify God?

Read 1 Peter 2:13-25

How is submission an alien and strange attitude in this world? How can Jesus' example help us submit?

Read Hebrews 10:32-34

What made these Christians hang in there?

Read Hebrews 11:1-16

List all the things that kept these Christians going.

How can the examples of these aliens and strangers help us live out our faith today?

Kind

Kindness is one of many alien attitudes we are to have in this world

Imagine if everyone at your work or on the roads or in your family were kind. What sort of places would they become?

We seem to tell children to be kind and not adults. Why do we limit it to children?

The Bible mentions "kindness" and being "kind" over 80 times. It talks about sexual relations much less. Why is this?

Read Isaiah 54:8

What is the relationship between God's anger and kindness?

In what ways is God's kindness everlasting?

Read Jeremiah 9:23, 24

We often think of God as being just and right. Why do we overlook God's kindness?

Why does God delight in these three things?

If these things make God happy, how should we live?

Read Luke 6:27-36

Why should we be kind to those who are unkind to us?

Is Jesus asking the impossible or just the really, really, really, really, really, really, really hard?

How was Jesus kind to others? How were his acts of kindness perceived by some?

Have you ever been kind to someone and others have been confused or angry as to why you would do such a thing?

Read Acts 14:17

How does creation demonstrate God's kindness?

Why does Peter appeal to nature as he shares the good news?

Read Titus 3:4, 5

How has God been kind to us?

Have you ever thought of what Jesus did on the cross as him being kind to you?

Read Colossians 3:12-14

What does "clothe yourself" with these attributes mean?

Look at *all* the character traits we are to put into practice. In what ways is kindness just one of many alien and strange attitudes to have?

Truth

Keep walking in the truth

In what ways is truth relative? In what ways is it absolute? Does the Bible possess both?

How important is truth in today's culture?

List the ways our culture and other religions view who Jesus is and what he did.

Read John 8:31, 32

How does holding onto Jesus' teaching set us free? What happens when we let go?

Read John 14:6, 7

How is Jesus "the truth"? How does this clash with other religious truths?

Read John 17:13-17

What does Jesus mean when he prays, "Sanctify them by the truth"?

How does Jesus feel about God's word?

Read John 18:33-40

At Christmas, we reflect on Jesus' birth. What does he mean when he says that he was born to testify to the truth?

What truth is he testifying to?

Does the truth about Jesus always cause division?

Pilate asks a great question v38. Why didn't he stick around for the answer?

Read 3 John

Explain these phrases...

Whom I love in the truth

Walk in the truth

Work together for the truth

Well-spoken of even by the truth itself

How should we feel about seeing people at church walking in the truth?

Read Jude 1-4

How does it make you feel that you are entrusted with the faith?

What had some people changed the grace of Jesus into?

This twisting of the truth is not happening in the public square but within the church. How do we as a church hold onto the truth about Jesus?

Obey

Let us do what God says. But what about what the authorities say?

Is "obey" a dirty word? If so, why do we ask people to keep the law, do the right thing etc?

Is there room for Christian civil disobedience?

In what ways did Jesus obey the civil and religious laws of his times? Did he ever break them?

Discuss

The Bible Society in China prints over 1 million Bibles in China every year. As such the Chinese government and The Bible Society have asked Christians not to smuggle Bibles into China. If so, the number of locally printed Bibles may be at risk.

Should Christians obey the Chinese government or continue to smuggle them in?

Read Genesis 2:15-17 and Romans 5:15-19

How did this one disobedience turn out? What did this one act of obedience achieve?

We use words like sacrifice to describe Jesus' death. What does it mean that it was an act of obedience?

Read John 14:15-21

How does obeying Jesus show that you love him?

Read John 15:9-17 and 1 John 5:1-5

How did Jesus obey his father?

What is the relationship between love, commands and complete joy?

Why is love commanded and not suggested?

How are Jesus' commands not burdensome?

Read Acts 4:18-20

Why won't Peter obey? Does his example give us permission to do the same?

Read Romans 16:17-19

How is this church being obedient?

How should we feel when we see people at church being obedient?

Read Romans 13:1-7, Ephesians 6:5-9 and Titus 3:1-2

Is Paul being idealistic?

What does it mean that the authorities have been established by God?

Where do we draw the line if authorities ask us to do something illegal or against our beliefs?

Read 1 Peter 2:13-25

How does Jesus' example help us to submit to the authorities?

Good

Let us do good

Discuss, "You can be good without God."

Discuss, "Christians should be the good-est people on the planet."

A gay, an atheist and a Muslim come to church one (unusual) Sunday. How can we show good to them?

Read Matthew 5:13-16 and 1 Peter 2:11-12

Why should we let our light shine? What will be the outcome of our good deeds?

Read Matthew 5:38-42

How good does Jesus want us to be?

Read Luke 6:27-36

Why don't we get brownie points for being good to those who like us? Why should we be good to those who are not good to us?

Read Luke 6:43-45

How can we bear good fruit? What does this look like at a) work b) home c) church?

Read Luke 10:30-37

List all the things the Samaritan does. How good is he? How good should we be?

Read Romans 7:14-25

It's good to know that even an apostle struggles to do good! Who rescues Paul from his battle?

How can knowing that we've been saved help us do what is good?

Read Romans 12:9, 21

How should we feel about evil? What is the antidote to evil?

List three things that you think are "evil" and three ways to overcome them.

Read Galatians 6:7-10

Have you ever felt like giving up on someone after all the good you've shown them? How do you overcome this weariness?

Read Ephesians 2:1-10 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17

How does being saved and scripture help us do good?

Read 2 Timothy 2:20-21

Are the good things we are called to do always nice and pleasant?

What should motivate us to do "any good work"?

Read Hebrews 10:23-25

Apart from singing, praying and eating what should we be doing when we meet as a church?

Work

We are working for the man

How do Australians view work?

What are the benefits of work?

There are many ads that shout, "Love what you do." But do you have to?

Martin Luther King once wrote...

"If a man is called to be a street sweeper he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will say, "Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well."

No offence to the great man but is he kidding?

Someone once said, "The opposite of work isn't play, its depression." Is it possible to find joy in your work? If so, how?

Compare Genesis 2:1-15 with Genesis 3:17-19

What did God do? What does God get the man to do?

How do you think work was like before the fall? What is work like after?

Read Proverbs 33:10-31

This woman works bloody hard. List all the people who benefit from her work.

Who does your work provide for?

What % of your wage goes to others? Should Christians have a definite % in mind?

Read Ecclesiastes 2:17-26

How does The Teacher feel about his work? Have you ever felt the same way?

How does The Teacher find satisfaction?

How does our culture help people chase after the wind?

Read Matthew 5:16

How many hours do you work? Have you ever considered them as hours to let your light shine?

Read Colossians 3:22-25

How should we work? In what ways are these verses alien and strange?

Should we obey if we're asked to do something illegal? What pressure is there to toe the line?

Read Colossians 4:1 with Proverbs 31:8-9

Imagine if all employers took these verses to heart. Would this make people happier with their work? In what ways should Christians seek a fair go for all?

Read Colossians 4:5-6

How can these verses be applied to your work situation?

Image

We are created in the image of God

Why has sexuality become the primary way that people identify themselves? Why has sexuality become a battleground in our culture?

Is the Bible anti-gay?

Discuss, "You can be Christian and gay".

Discuss, "Jesus never mentioned homosexuality, therefore he had no problem about it..."

Read Genesis 1:26-27 and 2:21-25

What do these verses say about the equality of people?

In what ways has this original image been distorted?

Read Leviticus 18:1-30

Skim through all the things God instructs his people that they must not do. In what ways should we be careful in applying these Old Testament verses to sexual ethics today?

Read Matthew 19:1-6

This is the only time that Jesus calls God his father, "Creator". What is the significance of this? What does this say about how he sees Genesis 1, 2?

How would you respond if someone said these verses are about divorce and they shouldn't be taken out of context?

Read Romans 1:18-32

Has the world changed since Leviticus?

What does this say about the consistency of scripture's sexual ethic across the ages?

Are there behaviours in these verses that we ignore? If so, why?

Read 1 Corinthians 5:9-13

Paul listed a raft of behaviours that God finds offensive in Romans. Does he now contradict himself by saying, "What business is it of mine to judge those outside"?

Again, are there behaviours here that we ignore?

How can "not judging those on the outside" help us navigate the world's view of sexuality?

Colossians 3:1-11

What is happening to our image?

Could we add, "straight or gay" in the list of people in v11?

Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-20

Describe the people who make up the Corinthian church. What has Christ done for them?

How are they called to live?

Would it be naïve to think people in our church aren't facing the same struggles?

Seek

Let us seek the kingdom

Who are the movers and shakers of our age?

Why was the church born under Roman rule? Why didn't God choose an "easier" age?

Google the worst places to be a follower of Jesus. Pray for them to keep seeking the kingdom.

Recall the stories of Joseph, Daniel and Esther

How did they live for God's kingdom whilst serving in their earthly empires?

How can their example help us do the same?

Read Matthew 6:9-13

How do we see God's will be done on earth? Is it through the law? Or via Christian organisations and charities? Petitions and demonstrations?

Do we need more famous Christians to exert their influence on culture?

Read Matthew 6:25-34

In what ways does our culture run after things?

If you sought the kingdom more do you think you'd worry less?

Read Matthew 8:5-13

Why didn't Jesus say to the Roman, "You invade our country, impose your laws and culture and now you want me to help you? Go to hell!"?

How can Jesus' interaction with the Roman help us relate to others, even our enemies?

Read Matthew 22:15-22

Recently in the US, a Christian baker was prosecuted for not making a cake for a gay wedding. How does Jesus' response about "Giving to Caesar" help us navigate our culture?

Read Luke 13:18-21

Is the kingdom like an underground movement?

A tree takes time to grow. Yeast is kneaded through the dough. So what is Jesus saying about time and effort as we live for his kingdom?

Read John 18:33-37

What does Jesus mean that his kingdom is not of this world and from another place?

What does this say about the Roman and other empires?

Skim through Revelation 20. Compare it with Revelation 21:1-5

Which kingdom prevails?

How can this encourage us to keep living for the kingdom?

Time

Let us look forward to home

Read Psalm 137 or look up the Boney M song on YouTube

How do you think God's people felt whilst living in exile?

What will the psalmist do to ensure that he never forgets home?

How can their response help us to remember our eternal home?

Read John 14:1-4

What picture does Jesus paint of our future home?

Does it sound like fun?

Read 1 Peter 1:3-9

What awaits us?

How does this help us during times of trials?

Look at how the Christians feel about Jesus even though they haven't seen him. How will they feel once they do?

Read 2 Peter 3:8-13

How does God view time? What is God's desire for everyone?

How shall we live until the end of time?

Read Hebrews 10:35-39

How long will it be before we see Jesus?

Why is it difficult to think of eternity?

When you're in eternity, how do you think you'll look back on your time?

Read James 1:2, 3

What is James on?

How can we be joyful if our culture puts us through trials?

Read Revelation 21:1-5

Write down all the things we are looking forward to.

Who is doing this for us? How can this help us live our faith?

Read Revelation 22:17-21

What should the church be doing until the end of time?

Jesus says, "I am coming soon" and John replies, "Amen." Why doesn't he ask, "When?"

How can his answer be ours as we live as aliens and strangers?

Pray