

Through-Life discipleship – Following Christ through the ages and changes of life

The Lifelong journey

Although it may be a cliché to say it, we can find it helpful to view our life and indeed our faith as a journey. It is not a fixed state but something constantly moving, growing and developing. Over the course of our lives we come through many peaks and troughs, ups and downs, and our faith is often shaped by those experiences but also can be a resource to draw on in such times. This session will help you to take a long view of life, from cradle to (beyond the) grave. We will reflect on how the view we take of our past, present and future can significantly shape us and will explore how we can persevere to the end through all life brings.

Drawing your own personal timeline (10 min)

👉 Take a piece of paper and draw a line across the middle from left to right. On this line, mark on the years of your life from when you were born to the present and leave some room on the right. Using words or pictures describe your life and faith journey so far; mark significant moments or experiences, including those relating to your faith and spirituality. Where you have left space on the right, express what your hopes and expectations for the future are.

- What on your time-line do you want to give thanks for?
- What do you want to bring to God about the difficult times?
- Did you notice any themes or patterns developing over your life so far?
- Does the story so far lead you to think differently about the present and the future in any way?

If you have time, share with those around you. Are there any obvious similarities or differences? Or any points at which your timelines coincide?

Recognising your 'time perspective' (25 min)

As the time-line activity may have begun to hint, our sense of who we are can be hugely shaped by our sense of where we've come from and where we're going. But equally, where we see ourselves now can strongly influence our view of our past, or our expectations for the future. Our personal life experiences (good or bad) have an important part to play here. But however big those past experiences are, we always retain some choice in how we join those separate events and experiences together in a particular way to create a 'bigger story' about where we've come from and where we're going.

The way we join the dots between our past, present and expected future in a particular way gives each of us a distinctive 'time perspective'. This activity is designed to help you explore what your own 'time perspective' is and how you think it affects your gut reaction to new things.

EITHER:

If you have internet access, watch this 6 minute presentation by Philip Zimbardo, a psychologist who has spent years researching our attitudes to time. He talks fairly fast so you might have to pause it from time to time! http://www.ted.com/talks/philip_zimbardo_prescribes_a_healthy_take_on_time.html

OR READ THE FOLLOWING:

Psychologists Philip Zimbardo and John Boyd have spent years researching our attitudes to time and suggest that there are three main views of time:

- PAST ORIENTATED – i.e., we focus on what’s gone before, and allow this to shape us
- PRESENT ORIENTATED – i.e., we live life in the here and now, more than on past and future
- FUTURE ORIENTATED – i.e., we focus the future and what we hope or fear it will hold, anticipating consequences, or sacrificing aspects of our present life to reach a goal

Each of these can be split further, to give SIX different types of views of time

PAST-POSITIVE	You are grateful for your roots – what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger
PAST-NEGATIVE	You often wish things had been different, or that you’d done things differently
PRESENT-HEDONISTIC	You live for the moment, not worrying about tomorrow – if it feels good, do it
PRESENT-FATALISTIC	Your life is fixed – what will be will be, and it doesn’t really matter what you do
FUTURE LIFE-GOAL ORIENTED	You are focused on achieving goals in your life and may sacrifice pleasures in the present to achieve them
FUTURE TRANSCENDENTAL	You place future life above present life but focusing on a future which is ultimately in the hands of God – e.g., life after death, the end times

Our view of time is made up of a mixture of these different types (we don’t just hold one of them). However, every person will have a slightly different mix of attitudes, and even our own attitudes will change over time.

This unique individual mixture of time perspectives combines to shape our gut reaction to new situations we have to face, or decisions we have to make. It may also shape (or be shaped by) our particular take on our journey of faith as Christians...

 **Discuss:**

- a. Do you tend to think more about the past? The present? Or the future?
- b. Do you tend to be more...
- **Positive** or **negative** towards past memories or experiences?
 - More **fatalistic** about the present, or more **live-for-the-moment**?
 - More focused on **life-goals** you hope to achieve, or on **life beyond death**?

Optional: If you are really interested to pursue this, you could take Zimbardo and Boyd’s short ‘time perspective’ test (the ‘ZTPI’) online at: <http://www.thetimeparadox.com/surveys/>

c. Philip Zimbardo and John Boyd suggest that (at least as far as personal happiness and wellbeing goes) there are more or less healthy combinations of the six time perspectives, and that the best combination is:

- STRONG on 'past-positive' - i.e., with a sense of roots, and able to take the best from the past
- FAIRLY STRONG on 'present-hedonistic' and 'future' - i.e., able to enjoy the opportunities of the present and with a sense of hope or expectation about the future
- LOW on 'past-negative' and 'present-fatalistic' – i.e., not getting too caught up in regrets, not feeling that the present is fixed and unchangeable

Do you agree? How far do you think we have a choice about our attitude to the passing of time?

d. Each of the six time perspectives identified by Philip Zimbardo and John Boyd can be found at different points in the Bible: arguably, each reflects an aspect of our walk with God. However, do you think there are more or less healthy 'time perspectives' for us as Christians? *(Some examples of different time perspectives found in the Bible can be found in the appendix at the end of the session)*

Exploring the Bible (35 min)



Read Psalm 71

The Psalms often bring the concerns of the psalmists' life to God, and in doing so reflect upon God's faithfulness in the past and express hope and pray for a brighter future.

Think about and discuss the following:

1. What kind of situation do you think the writer of this Psalm is facing?
2. At several points in the Psalm (e.g., vv 5-6, 15-17, 23-4) the writer remembers the past. What has God done for him? How does that influence the writer's hope for the present?

3. What are the writer's hopes or expectations for the future? What is he planning to do? (see esp. vv. 14-24)
4. Does this Psalm give us any clues about how we can persevere through the highs and lows that we face in our own lives?



Do:

Think about your own life. How would you re-write Psalm 71 for yourself? What current challenges are you facing? What examples of God's love and faithfulness would you insert?

Just as the Psalms often look back and look forward, many of the New Testament letters encourage us to look forward and persevere in our faith.

Can you identify the various elements in these passages which may inspire and motivate us to persist and endure?

Hebrews 12:1-3 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Philippians 3:10-14 ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

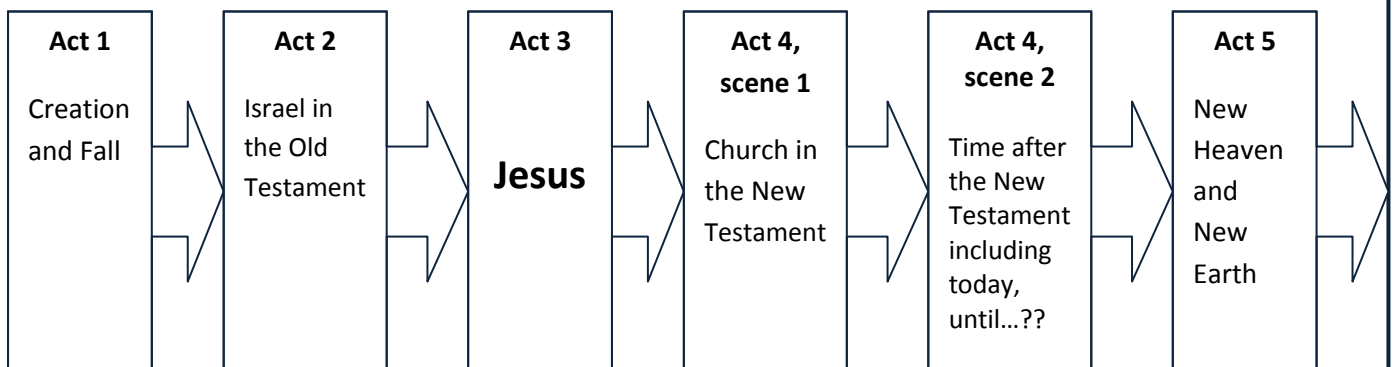
2 Corinthians 4:16-18 ¹⁶Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

2 Timothy 4:7-8 ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Romans 8:18,28-30 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us ... ²⁸And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who^[i] have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

You may also want to consider...

Just as we can develop a good habit of remembering God’s blessings in our own lives, the Bible also reminds us that our individual stories are just part of God’s bigger story. You could summarise this big story like this:



Adapted from: Tom Wright, 'How can the Bible be Authoritative?' *Vox Evangelica*, 1991, 21, 7–32 (http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm#_ednref5) and Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: the Drama of Christian Ethics* (2004)

As we begin to understand the big story and recognise our place within it (in Act 4, scene 2), how might that inspire us to persevere?

Spurring each other on (10 min)

Paul often uses the picture of a race to describe life, and in a long-distance race it may involve personal endurance but also requires help along the way – in the form of refreshment, fellow runners or indeed crowds cheering you on. As Christians we don't run this race alone, and together we can help each other to keep going.

Discuss

- What or who has helped you persevere in life through the ups and downs of life? Compile a list of key points in your group.
- Taking the key points you have raised from your own experience, what practical steps could you take to support and encourage one another to persevere day to day, week by week or year on year?
- Consider which of these practical steps you could incorporate into your church life. Set some targets (e.g., setting aside an evening to plan further, or to meet with your church leader to discuss your thoughts, or to start the project you have chosen).

Reflect: What have you learnt in this session that you would like to spend more time thinking about?

Worship/Prayer (10 min)

To close the session you may want to spend some time praying for each other – praying that your group members can persevere in their faith and that they may have the strength to face any struggles they are going through at present.

The following prayer is also presented as a suggestion to finish.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you knew us before we were born and that you know where we are going. You are the God of our past, present and future and we thank you that you have brought us to where we are today and we trust you with all the future will bring. We pray that you, by your Holy Spirit, would give us the strength we need to keep running with endurance the race that you have set before us, so that in the end we may receive the prize you have promised us. Through life's peaks and troughs we acknowledge that you never leave us nor forsake us but we pray that we may feel your presence with us in those moments. Fill us with your Holy Spirit now, by the grace of your son Jesus. Amen.

Appendix

Example Bible verses we suggest may correspond to Zimbardo and Boyd's six time perspectives (with some suggested links to aspects of Christian life in brackets):

Past-Positive (gratitude/grateful recollection): Psalm 136

Past-Negative (lament/acknowledging suffering): Lamentations 1

Present-Hedonistic (joy in life/recognising the transience of earthly life): Matthew 6:25-33

Present-Fatalistic (recognising the pervasiveness of sin and the marring of creation): Ecclesiastes 1:3-10

Future Life-Goal Oriented (obedience/striving to live the life God requires): Deuteronomy 6:1-3 or Proverbs 4:20-7

Future Transcendental (our hope of salvation/trust in God and God's grace): 2 Corinthians 4:16-18