



Towards a Transformed Society

Bible Studies Linking Faith to Transformation



Social Justice Season 2011
Diakonia Council of Churches

CHANGING LIVES

Bible studies linking faith to transformation



*Towards a
Transformed
Society*



Social Justice Season 2011
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OPENING PRAYER FOR EACH WEEK

Gracious God, the Spirit of Life,

*I offer myself to you this day, inviting
your will and your way to flow as
living water in my life.*

*I acknowledge that your power of
goodness is the force in my body, mind,
spirit and soul.*

*I ask for your inspiration as I allow
your transformation to take place in
my life, my church, my family and my
community.*

*I pray this prayer for transformation
through Christ, who strengthens me.*

Amen



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INTRODUCTION:

Welcome to the Social Justice Season of 2011. Let us allow space during these four weeks for God's Holy Spirit to move in our hearts, to transform our lives and to enrich the life of our congregations.

We continually need to reflect on the concerns in our communities and so we invite you to participate as fully as possible. We also warmly invite your group to share, as fully as you can, in the Social Justice Season exposures, planned for the month of August.

Each of the four Bible Studies follows a similar pattern. A suggested opening prayer for each week is printed on page 2 of this guide, along with a reflection and/or a poem. A scripture passage draws your attention to the focus of the week's study and some thoughts for consideration are provided. Please use the suggested material or pray your own prayer – or both. The thoughts for consideration could be shared out loud or in quiet personal reflection or, if yours is a large group, in smaller groups or in twos.

The *Discussion Questions* draw out personal, community and congregational responses from the participants. You may not be able to answer all the questions, please don't let this affect the group's participation. Allow enough time for discussion. The extra questions could be discussed after worship services on a Sunday or informally.

Allow enough time, at the close of each session, to discuss the 'action plan' for the week ahead. The journey towards transformation requires us to respond to the challenges of each session and to make commitments to consider, talk about and do something about these four areas of study. Agree with one another to hold the group accountable for the 'action plan' component of each week. Remember that these plans could be short or long term. They could also be individual, group or church activities.

Week I TRANSFORMATION OF OUR ATTITUDE TO GOD AND OURSELVES

SCRIPTURE PASSAGE: Romans 12:1 – 8

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is true worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - God's good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION:

The Holy Spirit is called the Comforter; and indeed, the Spirit of God does comfort the disturbed, but equally, the Spirit disturbs the comfortable. A divinely transformed attitude to ourselves will mean fresh courage and confidence for those who think too negatively of themselves, and humility to those who think too much of themselves. As you think of your own life, what have been the areas where the Spirit of God has needed to discomfort you? What have been the areas where you have known the restoring comfort of God's Spirit?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Many expressions of religion involve the offering of sacrifices, but what does it mean for us to offer *ourselves* as a “living sacrifice”? How has this influenced your attitude towards God over time?

2. For the first disciples it was really hard to proclaim “Jesus is Lord” in a society which said “Caesar is Lord”. What are some of the ways in which our society exercises pressure on us to conform our thinking to its value systems, rather than those of Jesus?

3. In your experience, what are the damaging results that come from people either thinking too highly of themselves or thinking too lowly of themselves? As you consider this, think of the political arena, labour relations, church life, family life and community life.

4. How does having an estimation of ourselves, which is transformed by God’s Holy Spirit, release us to serve with much greater confidence, using all the gifts and talents we have received from God?

ACTION PLAN:

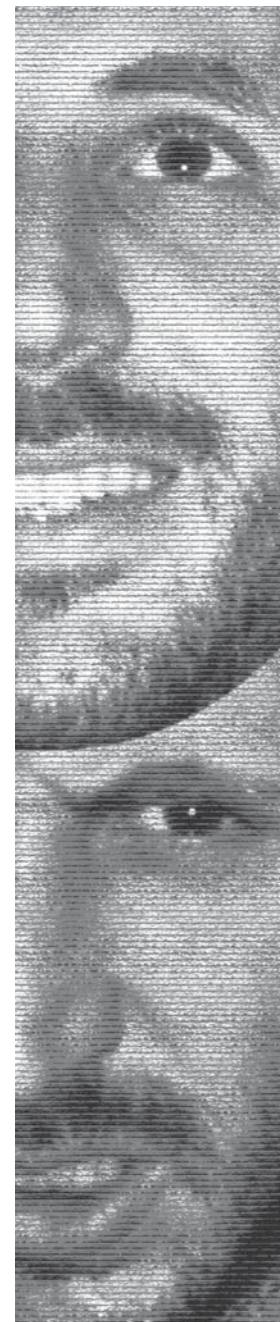
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NOTES:



Week
2 **GODLY REFLECTIONS
ON GOVERNANCE
AND LEADERSHIP**



SCRIPTURE PASSAGE: 2 Samuel 12

And God sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, 'There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.' Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As God lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.' Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!'

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION:

It is never easy to confront powerful authority with the truth. Even if you are God's prophet it is wise to be a little careful. Nathan tells a touching story that has the hint of truth to it. David is very angry about this and reacts quickly to declare how he will use his power to right this wrong. Nathan can now say "You are the man!". David then knew that it was true and he had to do something about it. When we hold our leaders, at every level of church, government and family, accountable, it is precisely because we believe they are doing their best. When they slip or fail we do not want to condemn them. Instead we want to help them become their best. Sometimes, confronting them head-on is not a good idea.

Usually it is not polite to do so. It is also not the African way of doing things. So we need to carefully and watchfully hold them accountable. Our confrontation can be indirect, careful, polite – but unmistakable about their wrong behaviour. We need also to recognise that we may not have all the facts and be a little humble. A good story and even some satire could also help to break the ice for everyone.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Can you remember any time in the scriptures that Jesus challenged the religious or political authorities of His day?

2. Have you ever said "I would like to ask the government about this!" What did you do about it?

3. If you feel reluctant to engage with political leadership, are there some organisations or structures in your church that could support you to do so? What role are you willing to play and how do you think you could contribute to your church and/or other organisations in terms of holding leadership accountable?

4. Are there any specific leadership issues in your church or denomination that need to be raised?





ACTION PLAN:

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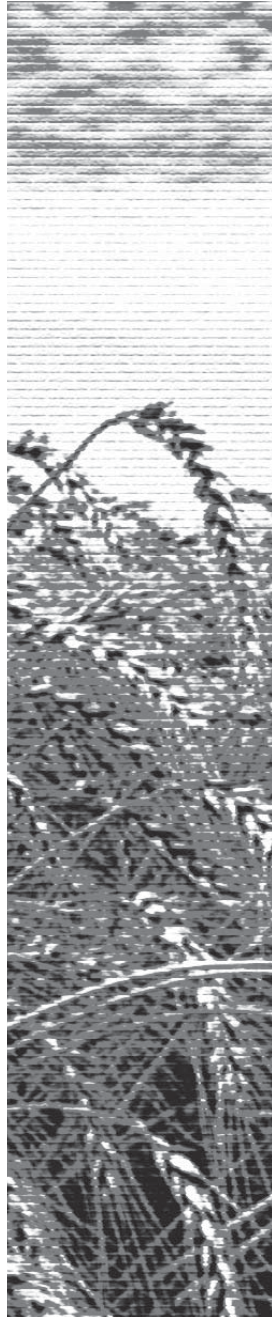
Week
3 **SHARING RESOURCES**

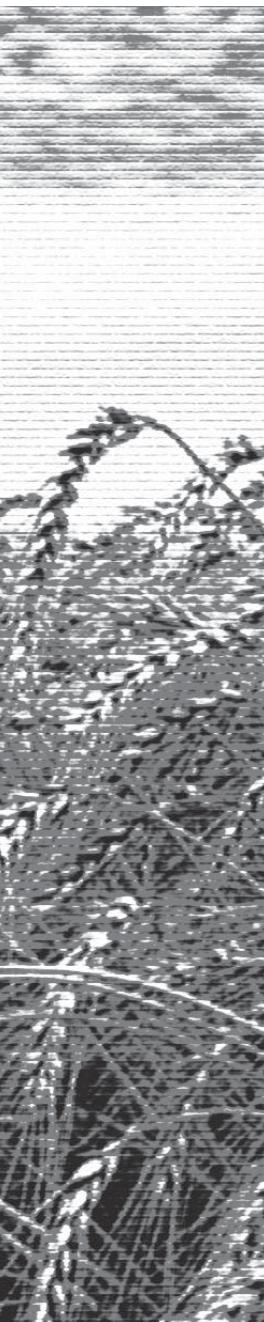
SCRIPTURE PASSAGE: Ruth 2:1-16

Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, 'Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favour.' She said to her, 'Go, my daughter.' So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, 'God be with you.' They answered, 'May God bless you.' Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, 'To whom does this young woman belong?' The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, 'She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. She said, "Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers." So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment.' At mealtime Boaz said to her, 'Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine.' So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, 'Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.'

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION:

Gleaning is not something we are familiar with in our culture. Especially when machines reap harvests so efficiently. Still, it is not unusual for a commercial farmer to allow subsistence farmers to gather cobs after the combine has been through.



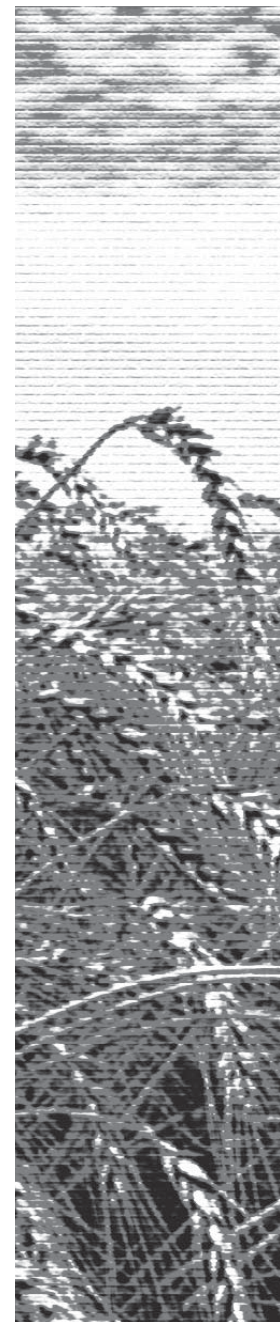


Boaz's actions with Ruth were unusual though – asking the reapers to deliberately drop some wheat stalks for Ruth. Was he moved by her loyalty to Naomi, or Ruth's hard work or perhaps she was very attractive – the bible does not say? But something made him do it. In our culture, especially with regard to the African concept of *ubuntu*, we also have ways in which we could be generous in sharing our resources. The situation was very similar for Ruth then to what it is like for refugees in South Africa today. As a foreigner, Ruth too had no right to work in that country. Think of some examples of how you could be more generous towards the refugees that you meet. A few years ago, a Social Justice Season focused on *The Oikos Journey*, which invites us to reflect on 'the Household of God'. Theologically this proposal stresses that there is enough in the world for everyone's need but not enough for everyone's greed. Like Boaz, we could practice being generous because we have learned to trust God rather than our material goods. Generous people are not necessarily people with lots of money, they are more often people who have learned to share their resources. If you hoard when you have little then you will hoard when you have much. On a percentage of their goods poorer people are often more generous than wealthy people.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. When have people been very generous with you, how did this make you feel? Share an example with the group.

2. Where is it easiest for you to be generous and where is it hardest?



3. How can we become as little children who do not notice class distinctions?

4. Which justice issues are raised for you in this scripture passage?

5. How can we, in our local churches, show generosity in keeping with the value of common good?

ACTION PLAN:

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NOTES:



Towards a Transformed Society

Week **4** MOVING FORWARD IN HOPE

SCRIPTURE PASSAGE: Colossians 1:3-12

We always thank God, the parent of Christ Jesus, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people – the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven, and about which you have already heard in the true word of the gospel that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world – just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

Verses 9-12: For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of God's will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of God and please Christ in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to God's glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to God, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of God's people in the realm of light.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION:

In his book, "The Power of Hope", Viktor Frankl, whilst reflecting on his observations in Hitler's labour camps, writes, "He [she] who has a why to live for can bear almost any how." In the bible hope is both a focus and an attitude, and it stands at the centre of a response to the Christian gospel along with faith and love. Think of times when you have





seen the power of hope at work transforming a seemingly desolate situation and motivating people to move forward.

Spend some time (about 5 minutes) in silent reflection:

- a. Consider what hope means for you.
- b. How have you been able to move from despair to hope?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What part does hope play in your life?

2. If you are comfortable with it, share any insights that emerged for you during the silent reflection, with one another in the group.

3. On what is your hope focussed?

4. How has hope strengthened you to grapple with real-life issues?

5. How have these bible study sessions helped you on your spiritual journey?

6. Take the prayer in verses 9–12 and rewrite it for yourself or your team to address a specific situation that you are struggling to respond to in a positive manner.

ACTION PLAN:

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NOTES:



ABOUT THE DIAKONIA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

The Diakonia Council of Churches is an ecumenical organisation based in the eThekweni Municipality in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The organisation consists of 16 member churches and 2 member organisations. Since its inception 35 years ago, the Diakonia Council of Churches mobilises its member churches to play a prophetic role in pursuit of social justice.

OUR VISION

A transformed society actively working for social justice.

OUR MISSION

In partnership with our member churches, we are inspired by our Christian faith to play a transformative role, enabling people to take responsibility for their lives, and to promote prophetic action on social justice issues.

STRATEGIC FOCUS

To ensure effective engagement of the churches in social justice issues, we strategically focus on the following:

- **Social Justice:** fostering peace and reconciliation, enabling effective responses to the HIV and AIDS pandemic, and increasing the participation of the churches in democratic governance.
- **Economic Justice:** building the capacity to understand and claim socio-economic rights for the poor, promoting better social systems and access to services. In addition, raising awareness of global and macro-economic links to our economy.
- **Environmental Justice:** promoting sustainable use of the environment, striving for food security, challenging approaches which may upset ecological balance, and protecting the integrity of all creation.

The issues of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, crime and youth, as well as human rights and advocacy, are integral to our central focus.

The Ministries Support Programme is a vital component of our work to strengthen relationships between our member churches and organisations. We would welcome the opportunity to come and visit your church, share something about our work and learn from you.



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Resources:

1. **The Poverty and Justice Bible**
Contemporary English Version, British and Foreign Bible Society 2008.

Websites consulted:

1. <http://www.wartoystopeaceart.com>
2. <http://www.innovint.com/services/small-acts-of-inclusion.php>
3. http://www.enewsbuilder.net/emmabragdon/e_article001144880.cfm?x=b11,0,w
4. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_\(philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_(philosophy))
5. <http://bible.oremus.org>
6. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritual_transformation
7. http://www.google.co.za/search?q=random+acts+of+culture&rls=com.microsoft:en-us:IE-SearchBox&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&sourceid=ie7&rlz=1I7ADRA_en
8. <http://www.randomactsofkindness.org/>
9. <http://www.diakonia.org.za>
10. <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/what-is-so-important-about-christian-hope>
11. http://www.equalityforwomen.org/courses/russell/rus_1_2.htm

(Some materials from the websites have been used as is, others were adapted and some have merely served as sources of inspiration.)





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