

Best laid plans...

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

July 2020 (5 July - 1 August)



Sometimes things don't go to plan. As Robert Burns, Scotland's national bard, says in his poem *To a Mouse* "The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men / Gang aft agley" The line comes after the narrator has stumbled across a wee timorous beastie with his plough. The ploughman didn't plan to engage in rodent demolition and the furry critter certainly wasn't expecting it.

- Sometimes we are the mouse — with home and life and gravity turned suddenly upside down.
- Sometimes we are the plough — blundering in, oblivious, confused.
- And sometimes we are the poet — looking on, feeling keenly and kindly.

This month we are going to consider what happens when things don't go to plan. When there's a sudden departure that turns a humdrum chapter into a crucial plot point. Sometimes we plan for excitement and adventure and find instead we are faced with tedium and frustration. Sometimes we plan for happiness and wonder and instead come across devastation and loss. And sometimes we plan for disappointment, loneliness and despair and instead find joy and blessing and delight.

Through it all we hold on to the fact that plan or no plan, mouse or man — our God loves us and travels with us through all the twists and turns — promising hope and restoration and beauty and justice and mercy.

The following discussion questions are designed to accompany the [Best Laid Plans... Resource Pack](#) to help adapt the material for small group work. They are divided into 4 parts to correspond with the 4 weeks of the Daily Worship theme. **These questions are just a guideline and there is no need to go through all the given questions in a single session, or in the following sequence. Feel free to pick and choose, or adapt to what interests your group.**

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Part 1: Swings and roundabouts

Conversation starter

There's a common expression that runs: "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans."

Well let's give God a chuckle.

What are the things you are planning for in the future — in the new world that comes out of this strange year?

Read Song of Solomon 2: 8-13

Romantic love is one of the great disrupters in our lives. We can be sitting quietly minding our own business when suddenly our beloved pops up singing about turtle doves and inviting us on a madcap adventure. Romance can turn our world upside down, change our personality and catapult us into new situations — all in the space of a few minutes. It can be creative or destructive but it's always transformative. Truly loving relationships shouldn't contort us into someone we don't recognise but rather deepen and expand who we already are.

As a group discuss some of the ways in which falling in love and romance in general can upset our carefully made plans and change the directions our lives are going in.

Read Zechariah 9: 9-12

A warhorse or a chariot are no match for this donkey! In both our romantic and our platonic relationships we are often blinded by status and prestige and miss the beauty and splendour in unexpected places. What is it that draws us to 'chariots' over 'donkeys'?

When are there times in your life when you have been surprised in your friendships and relationships — perhaps when someone you have taken for granted has suddenly taken on a new significance for you?

Read Matthew 11: 28-30

As a group use Jesus's words here as a basis for a prayer, bringing before God the tired and the weary. This spring and summer of 2020 the whole world has had to reconcile itself to cancelled plans, from the irritating to the devastating; from the frustrating to the life shattering. Let us remember all the exhausted, the done-in, the *scunnered*. Think of those who have lost sleep, lost time and lost loved ones.

Take turns to say out loud people who will be weary and heavy laden at this time. Then as a group respond out loud together: "**Jesus will give you rest.**"

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Part 2: Traps and escapes

Conversation Starter

Reading the Bible it is striking how often the protagonists are stuck, caught, held, captured, trapped, imprisoned, enslaved and exiled. And yet it's also notable how often people are freed, escape, sneak away, break out, return home and are delivered. The people of God then and the people of God now get stuck in predicaments — but in their pain, their captivity, their anguish they are never left alone.

Why is there so much getting trapped and escaping in the Bible?

Read Isaiah 55: 10-13

Our God can take the thorn and brier of difficult situations and grow something new.

In times of social distancing and isolating — what are practical things we can do to join God in the work of planting good things to benefit others?

Read 1 Timothy 6: 6-10

The money trap... Our desire for evermore 'financial security' can actually compromise our safety and sense of self.

What are the warning signs that we are becoming trapped by our own affluence? When do we need to stop and realise we are relying more on money than we are on God?

Read Acts 9: 20-31

"Who is this basket case?" you can imagine the disciples saying... A daring escape with a basket and Paul is on the road but he's still in danger as folks are worried in case he is a double agent. We can learn two things here about God's escape plans: 1 they don't always involve respite, sometimes you're just thrown on to the next stage of the adventure. 2: sometimes they feature giant baskets being lowered out of buildings! Who knew?

Paul wasn't teleported out. He didn't bribe someone. He got into a basket — giant enough not only to fit a person but to entirely conceal one! There's something particularly quirky and unusual about this escape.

Sometimes when escape happens it comes about in unusual ways. Can you think of any other examples of strange and unusual escapes, from the Bible, from Christian history, of people you know...?

Why does God often use such quirky ways to free people?

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Part 3: Snakes and ladders...

A colour coded bullet pointed list, a carefully mapped out trajectory with diagrams, a 3-5-10 year plan with a mind map on A1 paper is no match for the sudden uplifts and precipitous drops of everyday life. Like the perennial family board game Snakes and Ladders, life is full of headlong head rushes of highs and hurtful helterskelters into heaps. Our God is not only a God of the ascent, our God is with us on every rung of the ladder. Even if the ladder is pulverised into a pile of splinters — God is next to us with a hammer and nail to get started again.

Read Genesis 28: 10-19

A very tall ladder providing two-way celestial traffic — to and from heaven. People sometimes talk about 'thin places' the idea being that the divide between heaven and earth feels *thinner* in certain locations or at certain times. It's a hard concept to get our heads around and is fairly abstract and subjective — what feels thin to me may be dense to you. But many of us experience strange moments when perhaps the hair on the back of our neck stands up and we are conscious of something *other* or *more*. Language fails to grasp something that is felt on such a deep level. But it would seem there are sometimes hatches with ladders up and down to heaven — moments of insight or perception where God or heaven feels more *immediate*.

Have you come across any unexpected 'thin places' on your travels? Specific times or places where you have felt in some way closer to God?

Read Romans 8: 12-25

Hope that is seen is not hope. Sometimes when we are really low it is hard to see a way out, but fortunately being able to see a way out is not a pre-requisite of hope! Sometimes there's no clear A to B. We are stuck at 'A' — and 'B' seems a long way off. But with the Spirit's power we can trust that there is a B.

Some of the most hopeful people seem have to the least reason to be given the adversities they have to face. Hope can and does blossom in the middle of difficulty and calamity. How can we help one another to find hope?

Read Psalm 139: 1-12

From the highest rung to lowest depths. Whether we are sliding down a snake or climbing a ladder — God is there.

One of the remarkable claims of Christianity is that we all matter. We are all important. We will all be missed. Whoever we are and whatever we have done — God notices us and cares about us.

Who are we that God cares for us so much?

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Part 4: Finding God amongst it all

Food for thought

How do we keep an eye out for God amongst the ashes, the rubble, the fragments of what we hoped was to be and now we must lament that it cannot come to pass? How do we listen out for God amongst the cries, the splinters, the explosions of the things that fall apart? How can we feel God through the coldness, the pressure and the pain? It is not always easy. But even when we can't quite believe it — we can remember that we follow a God that through Jesus knows human suffering, knows what it is to grieve, to feel lonely, to feel pain. And we are never abandoned. It is our God who guides us to find beauty in the midst of the ashes, and cries, and cold. Who works with us through the rubble, the splinters, and the rising pressure, to build again; who can take the fragments and the explosions and the pain and transform them into a new tomorrow.

Read Genesis 29:15-28

How can this polygamous work-for-wives scheme speak to us today? The set-up looks a bit like a reality TV premise.

Rather than look at Jacob as the protagonist of the story this time around — let's choose to think of Leah as the central figure. Imagine spending seven years married to a man who is in love with your sister and is waiting to marry her. Just because the Bible *portrays* this narrative doesn't mean it *condones* it. Many of the people in the Bible are flawed and a product of their age — just like we are. And yet God manages to use them anyway. Let's take the opportunity to remember the women that are heartlessly dealt with by men and yet have managed to persevere anyway. Leah's life doesn't go to plan but she nonetheless plays an important role in a pivotal family.

Have you ever had something in your life not turn out the way you had planned and yet something good managed to come out of it?

Read Psalm 119: 129-136

Considering the shining face of God. A face that brings light, warmth and blessing into darkness, loneliness and fear. When you picture God's face shining what do you see? What is God's expression?

Read Romans 8: 26-39

Nothing. Can. Separate. Us. From. The. Love. Of. God. **Period.** God is always there.

When there are no words. When there is nowhere to turn. When we have reached our limit...God is there. We don't have to be perfect. We don't have to be any good. God loves us just the same.

How does this knowledge affect how we live our lives day day, hour by hour?