

Creative Bible Study Methods for Youth Leaders



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Finding ways to help young people explore, understand and apply scripture should be high on our 'to do' list in Christian youth work. Over the years I've tried to read widely and adapt ideas I've come across. I'm also indebted to friends and colleagues who have given me new ideas and inspiration in times of need! What follows is a brief compilation of ideas that have worked for me.

This is written for volunteer youth leaders and small group bible study leaders who, in my view, are the 'unsung heroes' of Christian youth ministry around the world. But I hope there's something here for everyone who has a passion for discipling young people to know more of Jesus.



Start here

As Christians, how can we make sense of our world, our relationships and our faith without some knowledge and understanding of the Bible? Well, I guess we can't! Finding ways to help young people explore, understand and apply scripture should be high on our 'to do' list in Christian youth work.

So we facilitate creative stimulating and engaging opportunities to explore God's word together as a group. Hmm. Easier said than done.

Over the years I've tried to read widely and adapt ideas I've come across while working with different church youth groups. What follows is a compilation of ideas that have worked for me. But first, three key values for studying the Bible with young people;

Get them talking

What do you think of when you hear the words 'group Bible study?' Perhaps we should start with what it's not! A Bible study is not a lecture or a sermon. It's not a conversation between you and the most 'spiritual' member of your group, or an argument, or an interrogation. A group Bible study should involve every member of your group and our role should be that of a catalyst for discussion.

Research shows that people remember less than 10% of what they hear, but remember over 80% of what they experience. Positive interaction and discussion help move young people from impassive listening to a deeper involvement with each other as they share thoughts and views about a passage of Scripture.

Listen up

Do I really listen to and respect the opinions of my young people? A good group Bible study leader is also a good listener. Of course, there will be times we need to clearly state the Bible's position on foundational Christian truths. On certain issues the Bible is very clear. But, let's not use that as an excuse not to give time to hear the thoughts and opinions of our young people. Listening first earns us the right to be listened to when we speak.

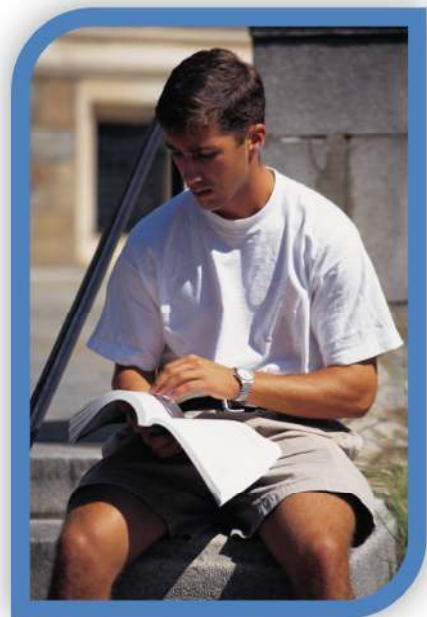


Ask questions

Questions are an essential tool in group Bible study. Good questions help you engage with a passage, reflect on it and discover its meaning. Good questions can stimulate your young people to participate in discussion.

Jesus frequently posed questions to get people thinking for themselves. He asks the rich young ruler, 'Why do you call me good?' He asks the disciples, 'Who do you say that I am?' Around 150 questions are recorded in the Gospels.

Prepare your questions in advance. Try to anticipate what kind of response you might get. Is an important question too quickly introduced? If so, add other questions which lead up to it. Prepare questions which encourage your young people to dig into the Bible text.



There are really only three types of questions you can ask in a group bible study. Open questions, closed questions or limiting questions.

Open Questions

Open questions are great for stimulating group discussion because there are no right or wrong answers. Open questions allow young people to share their own answers and thoughts on the subject or passage studied. Open questions can have a variety of answers. For example: Why do you think this is true? How is this important? Who does this apply to? What could this mean for our lives today?

On the other hand, closed questions stifle group interaction and discussion. Closed questions suggest an obvious answer or imply an answer expected by the leader. For example: Paul says we are to rejoice in everything, doesn't he?

Finally, limiting questions do just that! They limit the number of responses or correct answers your young people can give. For example: What 3 reasons does Paul give in this passage?

Clearly, good questions are 'open questions' because they can have lots of answers. They allow young people to comment more freely on personal experience, implications and opinions. For example:

- What makes it difficult to live as a Christian at home? (Personal experience)
- If this were true, what would it mean for our lives today? (Implication)
- If you were God, how would you stop the suffering in the world? (Opinion).



How to create an embarrassing silence!

Bad questions cut short discussion and discourage participation. Some members of your group will begin to feel threatened and feel that they don't know anything. So, here are my five suggestions to avoid an embarrassing silence:

- Don't ask questions which can be answered with one word (Do you agree God loves you?)
- Don't ask loaded questions which suggest the answer (Our bodies are God's temple, so should we smoke?)
- Don't ask intimidating questions (If you really loved God, what you would do?)
- Don't ask embarrassing questions (What is your most frequent temptation?)
- Don't try and make them guess the answers you want (What are the three great truths from this passage?)

With some thought and preparation questions can be used very effectively in a group bible study to stimulate discussion. Sure, it's not as neat and tidy as a sermon, but your young people will get more out of it.



Inductive Bible Study

The aim of an 'Inductive Bible Study' is to find out what the writer of the passage is trying to say and then to apply our understanding and insights to practical action in everyday life. *'Inductive' means reasoning, finding out and making deductions.*

Bible study is about being inquisitive and learning to ask questions. Be a detective. Look for clues. What's going on? What stands out to you? What don't you understand?

Your group may not allow you to use all your carefully prepared questions. Sometimes they will jump to the heart of the matter before you ask. That doesn't matter. Just be prepared.

An inductive Bible study is put together with three types of questions.

Questions of observation

Get your group to search for the facts – who, what, where, when, why, any commands? Any promises? Your prepared questions will vary depending on the passage you're studying, but here are some typical ones:

- Who wrote or said this?
- When was it written or said?
- Where did this happen?
- To whom was it written or who was listening?
- What circumstance or event prompted this incident or teaching?
- Why did the person act as he did? Or say what he said?

Questions of interpretation

These questions encourage the group to examine the meanings of words, phrases, actions, and the connections between them. Your questions should help them to link the lessons of the passage with any biblical truth they already know. What is the meaning of the passage for us today?

Remember to ask the Lord for guidance. The Holy Spirit is essential to understand the depth of scripture John 14: 26, 1 John 2: 27



Questions of application

How can I apply what I have learned to my life?

- Do I need a change in attitude?
- Are there actions to take or avoid?
- Is there an example to follow?
- Do I need to confess something to God?
- Is there a promise to claim?

Application questions challenge us to put into practice the things we discover from the Bible. Check out what James says about putting our faith into action (James 2: 14-18). True Christian faith transforms our conduct as well as our thoughts.



Ten questions

This is a simple method for those who are new to Bible study. It works well with passages from the Gospels. Divide into small groups and give your young people details of the Bible passage to look at. From the passage ask them to list 10 questions of things they would like clarified, answered or have the opportunity to discuss. After 15 minutes each group reports back and their questions are written on a board or flip chart for all to see.

The rest of the time is given to discussion in the whole group until they find satisfactory answers to their questions. Encourage young people to respond with their own thoughts. As you move through the passage take time to explain the background, give more information on the problem questions and provide clear teaching where appropriate.

Meet Jesus

Select a passage from one of the Gospels. Read the passage together and ask the group to answer the following questions:

1. Where is Jesus?
2. Where was Jesus before this event?
3. Who is Jesus talking to? (crowds, disciples, Gentiles or Jews etc)
4. Summarize or quote everything Jesus says. Note Jesus' feeling, tone, and attitude. Note what Jesus does not say.
5. What are others saying about Jesus?
6. How do they feel about him?
7. How do people respond to Jesus?
8. What are my impressions of Jesus?
9. What is Jesus saying in this passage that could change my life?
10. What characteristics of Jesus would I like to see in my own life?
11. How can I work with Him to make it happen?



Symbol study

This is a very effective method of introducing young people to Bible study. Ask a member of the group to read the chosen bible passage aloud. Everyone then takes a sheet of paper and writes the five symbols down the left hand side.

After quietly reading through the Bible passage again, each person writes (next to the appropriate symbol) what they think the passage is saying. After 10 minutes of individual work, encourage the group to share their findings together.

Where there are questions, encourage group discussion to try to find out the answers together. Take a few minutes to summarise what you have discovered and close with a prayer to act on anything learned.

➤ **ARROW POINTING UP**

Write something these verses tell us about Jesus/God

➤ **ARROW POINTING DOWN**

Write something these verses tell us about human nature

➤ **A LIGHT BULB**

Write down any new discovery you have made reading these verses

➤ **AN EXCLAMATION MARK!**

Write down the most exciting verse in your opinion and why

➤ **QUESTION MARK?**

Write anything you don't understand or want to ask about

➤ **ARROW POINTING TO SIDE**

Write down something these verses say we should do

The symbol method is a tool used to explore the Bible together in small groups and encourage the participation of all. It can be used with parables, psalms and many sections of the epistles. Examples of passages you could use are:

Psalm 104, Psalm 107, Psalm 139, Romans 8: 1-17, 2 Corinthians 5: 14-21, Ephesians 2: 1-16, Colossians 1: 15-23, Colossians 3: 1-17, 1 Peter 1: 3-16, 1 John 1: 1-7.



Silent sharing

This is another simple method which can be used with all age groups.

Explain to the group they are to look for a verse which either: Means the most to me OR tells me something new about the Christian life OR tells me something I need to do.

1. Encourage them to work individually and in silence.
2. Explain they will be asked to share their answers when they have finished reading.
3. Give the Bible verses to be studied.
4. You should also read the verses and be prepared to briefly share first.
5. Encourage the group members to share. Significant answers may be recorded on a white board.

If some share the same verse, it's OK. They may have different reasons for choosing it.

Examples of passages you could use are:

Psalm 139, John 15: 1-14, Romans 12: 9-21, 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13, Ephesians 4: 1-16, Colossians 3: 12-17.



I've talked a lot about using questions in Bible study, but there are many other creative ways for young people to express themselves and their answers.

How would you feel?

Take a story or parable from the Gospels and ask everyone in your group to play the role of one of the characters. If you have more young people than characters, two young people can share one character. Ask everyone to be quiet while you read the story and concentrate on how they think their character feels as the story unfolds.

You can stop at key points during the story or wait until the end before asking each character to describe their feelings i.e. anger, surprise, thankfulness. If they want to, the group could act out the scene to help them understand how their characters felt.

Examples I've used include: Jesus heals a paralysed man (Mark 2: 1-12); Jesus heals a blind man (John 9); Jesus meets Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 1-10).

My favourite

Ask every member of the group to bring a short Bible passage or a few verses which are special to them. When you meet together encourage them to read out the passage, explain what they think it means and why it is special to them. When each person finishes, invite the rest of the group to comment on what they feel about the passage.

Members of your group who are shy can prepare their verse with another young person. It doesn't matter if the same passage comes up more than once, because there are likely to be different perspectives on the text. This activity encourages your young people to think about a Bible passage, promote personal understanding and discover how it applies to them.



In my own words

Divide into small groups and ask your young people to put a Bible passage into their own words. This works well with parables. For example, ask them to rewrite the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37) in a 21st century setting. Encourage them to use modern words and phrases, but they must agree on and stick to the original meaning of the passage.

Alternatively, the parable could be turned into a poem. Some members of your group might want to act out their version of the story to the rest of the group. Discuss the central meaning of the story and what it can teach us today.

Fill in the blanks

Choose a Bible passage from one of the New Testament letters which teaches an important Christian doctrine. Alternatively, choose a Bible story which your group is unlikely to know. Design a work-sheet but remove some of the key words and leave blank spaces.

Ask the young people individually or in small groups to decide what words they think are appropriate to fill in the blanks. When they have finished, ask them to read out their answers. Then read the original version, compare the differences and talk about why Jesus, Paul or the biblical author chose the words they did.



Some young people may have difficulty in reading or expressing themselves clearly in words. Exploring other ways of expression and interpretation can be an encouragement, where they can feel their contribution is valued and accepted.

Montage a word

Take a word like worship, church, disciple, witness, salvation or fellowship and ask your group to try to express its meaning in a montage. This is a large picture made up from pieces of other pictures, photos, headlines and words cut from magazines and pasted together on card.

Discuss how the montage helps us to understand more about the word and its meaning. Follow this with a short 'word study' looking at how the word is used in several Bible passages.

Paint a story

Take a theme like 'I am the light of the world' (John 8: 12) and ask your group to illustrate the phrase in pictures using paints, crayons or pencils.

Alternatively, create a collage using scrap materials (magazines, newspapers, scrap fabric or wool, cardboard boxes etc), or make a banner or mural using fabric or wallpaper.



Hold the front page!

Select a Bible story and ask your group to design a newspaper front page complete with logo, story heading, an interview with your 'on-the-ground' reporter, eye witness accounts, celebrity comments on the story etc.

If you want to be more ambitious, use a camcorder to shoot a news bulletin, complete with newscaster, 'on-the-ground' reports, expert opinion, perhaps even a weather forecast! (John 6: 1-21)

Some Old Testament stories can really come to life with this sort of format i.e. Jonah and the Whale, Moses and the Israelites cross the Red Sea, Elijah defeats the prophets of Baal. Discuss the key points of the story as the group designs their front page or news bulletin. What does this tell us about God and what does it mean for us today?



Three more methods for those who want to dig deeper in their understanding of God and their Christian experience.

Encounter bible study

The goal is to help each young person answer, 'What does this passage mean to ME?' In this kind of Bible study the method of sharing is different from the usual 'everyone jumps right in' discussion, allowing the quieter member of the group more time to reflect.

Use only a small group of verses which can be remembered easily.

Step 1: Your own translation

Ask each young person to write out their own translation of the passage. Ask them to write as they would say it, or imagine they are writing a letter, or email, or text to a friend.

Make it clear and keep it simple. (HINT: Try to put into your own words each of the key words and phrases before you write out your translation).

Step 2: Ask yourself?

Once the 'translation' is complete, ask the young people to consider and write down;

- What does this passage say to me?
- What does it say about my relationship with God and with others?
- What would it mean to me, if I took this seriously?

Step 3: Feedback

Every person is given the opportunity to read their translation and share their thoughts on the questions. The young people should do more listening than speaking. The leader should not comment yet, but make notes on the main points being shared. Thank everyone for their thoughts.



Step 4: Questions

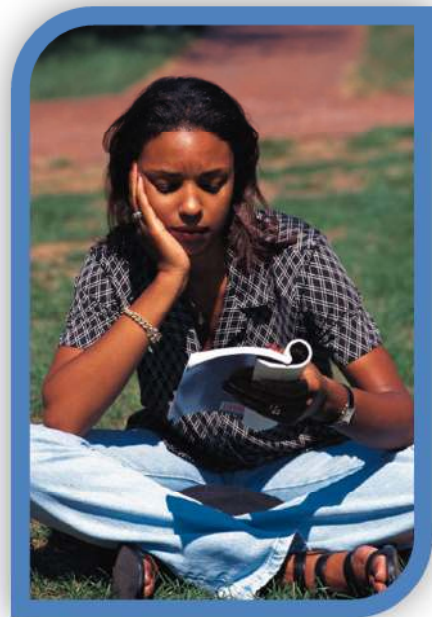
Encourage a time of more general discussion on the passage, beginning with any common points raised by the young people. Here the group leader can also add comments and guidance. Close with a time of prayer asking God to help us apply what we've learned to our lives.

For this type of study narrative passages are generally less fruitful. Choose passages which comment and guide on Christian lifestyle, witness and growth.

Some passages you could look at are:

Romans 12: 1-2; Ephesians 3: 14-20; Philippians 1: 27-30, 2: 1-16, 4: 4-13,

2 Timothy 2: 1-15; James 1: 2-7; 1 John 1 2: 7-11



Word study

The study leader will need to prepare in advance using a concordance, topical Bible, and Bible index to provide the verses for the group to study. Alternately, can I encourage you use an online resource like www.biblegateway.com

This is a simple and effective resource for preparing bible studies. Here's how. Choose the Bible version you wish to search. Click to do a keyword search. Enter your keyword and the references you want will be searched. If you wish, you can refine your search further and limit the search to selected books of the Bible.

Key words you might like to choose can include; grace, prayer, faith, assurance, witness, sacrifice, servant, peace, redeem, fellowship, body. You get the idea. This kind of study is a great way to encourage young people to discover things for themselves. Let them dig into the Bible!

Here's a quick summary of a word study I've used. It's a word search on God. What do we know about him? What is he like?

Give out a work sheet containing a list of verses on the attributes of God and ask the young people to discover, what is God like? Of course, they will come up with their own descriptions from the verses, but this should prompt an interesting discussion!

I've included my own answers to save you some work!

- Deut 6: 4-5 (God is one)
- Genesis 1: 1 (God is creator)
- Psalm 90: 2, Romans 1: 20 (God is eternal, he transcends time)
- Isaiah 40: 21-22 (God is infinite, unlimited by time and space)
- Psalm 139: 7-12 (God is omnipresent, everywhere, at all times)
- 1 John 3: 20, Matthew 6: 8, Psalm 139: 1-6 (Omniscient, knows everything that is happening everywhere)
- John 4: 24 (God is spirit)
- Exodus 3: 5-6, 1 Peter 1: 15-16 (God is holy)
- Luke 18: 19, Rom 8: 28 (God is good)
- Psalm 115: 3, Luke 1: 37 (Omnipotent)
- Malachi 3: 6, James 1: 17 (God is unchanging in character)
- Matt 5: 48, Duet 32: 4 (God is perfect)
- John 3: 16, Rom 5: 8, 1 John 4: 8-16, Psalm 136 (God is love)
- Psalm 103: 3-6, Exodus 3: 7-8 (God is forgiving and compassionate)
- Rom 3: 25-26 (Just)
- Ephesians 2: 4-5, 2 Peter 3: 9 (Merciful)



Following the search activity, ask each of the young people to choose an attribute (something about God's character) and share what it means personally and practically to them that God is... (Forgiving)

Or select a particular attribute. Ask your group to think about why it's good that God is like that. What would we (and the rest of the world) be missing if he wasn't like that?

Character study

A colleague of mine told me there are 2,930 people mentioned in the Bible. I haven't checked, but the Bible gives us a rich resource of illustrations of the human condition and how lives can be transformed by God.

Use a concordance or the proper name index in your Bible. Look up each reference of someone you would like to study. Again www.biblegateway.com gives a quick way to do this. Put the name into the keyword search i.e. Gideon, Daniel, and Timothy. Filter these results if necessary, to a more manageable number.

Check out some Old Testament characters for great adventures, personal challenges, godly living and relationship with God. For example, Moses, Samson, Joshua, Gideon, Samuel, Daniel, Hannah, Ruth, Esther. To illustrate this method, here are summaries of three figures in the early church.

Barnabas

25 references. All in Acts. First mentioned in Acts 4: 36. Noted in Acts 9 as bringing Paul to the apostles. Many of the other references are in Acts 11-14, where Barnabas travels with Paul on his first missionary journey.

Timothy

25 references. Begins in Acts 16 when Paul meets a young disciple in Lystra. Travels with Paul on missionary journeys. Final references are in personal letters to Timothy as pastor of the church in Ephesus.

Silas

25 references. First mentioned in Acts 15: 22. Silas was with Paul during his many adventures, including prison in Philippi. All references in Acts, except three 'signatures' in letters to the early churches.



At the beginning of the study give out the worksheets containing the Bible references and questions. If necessary, filter down to 15-20 key references.

Ask the young people to do some detective work and build up a profile of this character. Working in three's, each group looks up the verses to answer the questions you have selected for the worksheet. You can either ask each group to answer all your prepared questions or just one section. Feedback the results on to a whiteboard.

To get you started, I've listed 20 possible questions. They are divided into three sections-background, character and significant events in their life. Not all will apply to every character, but will give a guide for your preparations.

Background

- Who wrote what we know about this person?
- What did people say about him/her?
- What does his/her name mean? Why was he/she given that name? Was it ever changed?
- Where did he/she live? What was his/her home life like? What were the characteristics of his/her parents? Did they influence him/her?
- What was his/her occupation?

Character

- What type of person was he/she?
- What were the outstanding strengths in his/her character?
- What were his/her particular faults and weaknesses?
- How did he/she respond to failure? Did he/she get discouraged easily?
- How did he/she respond to adversity? Did he/she handle criticism well?
- How quickly did he/she praise God for the good/bad things that happened to him/her?
- How quickly did he/she obey God when told to do something?
- How did he/she get along with other people? Was he/she a loner? Was he/she a team person?
- What influence did he/she have on others?

Significant events

- Was there any great crisis in his/her life? How did he/she handle it?
- Are there accomplishments for which he/she is remembered?



- Did he/she experience a divine 'call?' How did he/she respond to it?
- What crucial decisions did he/she have to make? How did they affect him/her?
- Where did he/she succeed? Where did he/she fail? Why?
- What part did he/she play in the history of God's plan?

Once the profiling is completed and a personal bio recorded on a chart or whiteboard. Ask the group to reflect on these three questions;

- Why do you think God allowed this person to be mentioned in the Bible?
- Is there a lesson in this person's life that can help or encourage me?
- What can I learn from *** to apply to my own situation?

Close the study as appropriate with further group discussion or prayer.



Top tips for leading group bible studies

- ✓ Open in prayer. Ask God to help us understand the passage and apply what we learn to our lives.
- ✓ Clearly explain that the study is meant to be a discussion. Encourage every group member to participate.
- ✓ Take time to read and understand the passage. Have a group member read the passage aloud. Then give several minutes to read the passage again silently so that everyone can take it in.
- ✓ Stay focused on the chosen passage of scripture.
- ✓ Don't be afraid of silence. People need time to think about the question before expressing their thoughts out loud.
- ✓ Avoid answering your own questions. If necessary rephrase them until they are clearly understood. An eager group quickly becomes passive and silent if they think you will do most of the talking.
- ✓ Don't be content with just one answer. Ask what others in the group think, until several people have had an opportunity to give answers to the question. Acknowledge all contributions. Be affirming. Never reject an answer.
- ✓ Don't expect every answer to be addressed to you. As the group becomes more at ease, they will broaden their interaction with each other. This is a sign of a healthy discussion.
- ✓ From time to time summarise what the group has said about the passage. This helps to draw the various ideas together and gives continuity to the study. Don't preach.
- ✓ Conclude your time together with prayer. Ask God's help in following through any lessons learned or commitments you have made.



And finally, three Bible study ideas for looking at different aspects of prayer.

Prayer

Ask the young people to find out what the Bible tells us about prayer. Get into pairs and give each pair one of the references. (Suggested answers are in brackets).

Allow 3 or 4 minutes for the young people to find the answers. Each pair reports back by writing their answer on a whiteboard or large piece of paper. Review.

- Psalm 55: 17 (We should pray regularly)
- Matthew 5: 44 (We should pray for our enemies)
- Matthew 6: 5-7 (We should pray secretly and honestly)
- Matthew 18: 19-20 (We should pray with others)
- Matthew 21: 21-22 (If we pray, we will receive)
- Matthew 26: 41 (Prayer will keep us from sin)
- Luke 18: 1 (Prayer will give us courage)
- John 14: 12-14 (We can talk to God about anything)
- John 15: 7-8, 16 (We should pray with confidence)
- John 16: 23-26 (Prayer involves asking. We should pray in Jesus' name)
- Philippians 4: 6-7 (Pray about everything, and be thankful)
- 1 Thess 5: 16-18 (We should pray at all times)
- James 5: 13-14 (We should pray for the sick and others in need)
- 1 John 1: 9 (Prayer involves confessing our sins)

Ask the young people to spend some time praying together in small groups of 4. In their prayers ask them to apply some of the principles discovered in the study e.g. pray for enemies, pray for the sick, confess sin, pray for strength to overcome temptation.



Prayer parable

Use the symbol Bible study method to examine Jesus' teaching on prayer.

Read Luke 11: 1-13 together and then hand out the paper to each person. Explain that they need to think about the passage and write their answers and questions next to each symbol.

Allow 10 minutes for individual study. Then lead a time of discussion where the young people share their answers and questions with each other.

You may wish to end by giving a short talk on 'prayer changes things'. Use examples from your own life of answered prayer, or what you learned from situations where your prayer was not answered in the way you wanted or expected. Alternatively, invite a member of the church to be interviewed about their experience of prayer.

People and prayer

Compile a list of prayers from the Bible. Give one prayer reference to each young person. Ask them to discover;

- Who is saying it,
- What kind of prayer is it (praise or worship, thanksgiving, petition or intercession),
- What can we learn about prayer from the verses?

Each person shares their answers. Make a list of what we can learn about prayer from the feedback. Close by asking the young people to write their own personal prayer (for their eyes only).

Examples of people in prayer:

- Genesis 18: 22-23 Abraham's prayer for Sodom
- Exodus 15: 1-18 Moses thanksgiving for deliverance from Egypt
- 1 Samuel 7: 5-11 Samuel's prayer for the nation
- 1 Kings 19: 4-16 Elijah and the 'still small voice'
- 2 Chronicles 1: 1-11 Solomon's prayer for wisdom
- Nehemiah 1: 4-11 Nehemiah asks for guidance
- Nehemiah 9: 6-37 Public confession lead by Ezra
- Psalm 51 David seeks forgiveness and restoration



- Jonah 2 Jonah's prayer
- Luke 1: 46-55 Mary's prayer
- Luke 1: 68-79 Zechariah's prayer
- John 17: 9-21 Jesus prays for the disciples and the church
- Acts 4: 23-30 Church prays for boldness
- Acts 7: 59-60 Stephens prayer at his death
- 2 Corinthians 1: 3-4 Paul gives thanks for conflict
- Ephesians 1: 3-14 Paul, thanks for spiritual riches
- 2 Timothy 1: 3-4 Paul's prayer for Timothy
- Psalms: 27, 67, 92, 100, 145, 150
- Rom 16: 25-27, Heb 13: 20-21, 1 Thess 3: 25-27, 1 Peter 5: 10-11 Doxologies

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