



Faithful GOD
COVENANT People
a Good Soil series for small group study

#16: *To The Ends Of The Earth*

Bible Readings: Acts 1:1-11, Romans 15:14-33

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES: *Faithful God, Covenant People*

This series is taking us on a journey through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, looking at God's purposes in calling human beings into a **covenant relationship**.

PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

The central theme of this session is that God's Covenant with Christian believers is for everyone everywhere – "**to the ends of the Earth**". Please read the Bible passages and background information, firstly **Acts 1:1-11**, which contains Luke's version of the 'Great Commission' given by Jesus, and also **Romans 15:14-33**, in which Paul sets out some plans for bringing the gospel to "the ends of the earth". The Great Commission depended on disciples down the ages teaching successive generations the good news of Jesus. Encourage your group to share their experiences or thoughts on this, reminding them that any personal information or stories are not to be shared outside of the group.

PREPARATION FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS (before the session)

In this session, we are thinking about the dramatic spread of the Christian message, from when Jesus commissioned his disciples in Jerusalem, to the "Ends of the Earth". **God's covenant** with Christian believers is for everyone everywhere, and we all have a part to play in this. If you have time, please read the Bible passages: **Acts 1:1-11** and **Romans 15:14-33**, and perhaps give some thought to the questions below. Over the last 10 years, many Christians around the world have taken part in an initiative called **Thy Kingdom Come**, during the period **between Ascension Day and Pentecost**, with times of prayer, as churches, groups, or individually, remembering the words of Jesus to make disciples of all nations (**Matthew 28:19**) and to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (**Acts 1:8**). During this time, you might like to consider praying more for God's kingdom to come, in a world which desperately needs God's healing and guidance.

STARTING THE SESSION: A PRAYER

Loving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We thank you that you have brought us together to reflect on your Word,

this time thinking about the commission given by Jesus to his disciples before his Ascension.

We thank you that this commission has so challenged and inspired disciples of Jesus ever since that now over 30% of the world population are Christian believers.

We pray that we will be able to see how we may play our part also, in some small way, as you call us, in our individual circumstances. In the name of Jesus we pray. **Amen.**

FINDING OUR ROOTS – some questions to explore in small groups

We live in a very "instant" society. For some, **waiting** is almost impossible, but to others it comes naturally. *Share in your small group how you feel about the need to wait sometimes. When is it good to wait and why?*

Read together **Acts 1:4-5**. Jesus commanded his disciples to **wait for the Holy Spirit**. *How do you think they felt? Why do you think Jesus commanded this, and did they obey?*

How is the Spirit essential to our sharing of our faith today?

READING THE SCRIPTURES and DIGGING DEEPER – Part 1: The Great Commission

Read together the first Bible passage: **Acts 1: 1-11**

Verses 1-5 of Acts chapter 1 provide a link between **Luke's Gospel** and his second work, **The Acts of the Apostles** (known as 'Acts'). Acts tells some of the story of the early Church, starting with the Apostles in Jerusalem and Judea. Then, in **Acts 8**, we hear of the work of Philip, the deacon, in Samaria; and in **Acts 10**, we see Peter's important first steps towards the Gentile (non-Jewish) world. Much of the rest of Acts outlines the vital start Paul made in taking the Gospel to the Gentiles to "the ends of the earth" (ending in Rome, which was then the capital of the Empire). **Acts 1:4-5** records the command of Jesus to remain in Jerusalem and wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit (ten days later at Pentecost). **Verses 6-11** contain Luke's version of the Great Commission. His disciples were to continue Jesus' work by being his witnesses (in the short term) in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and (in the longer term) "to the ends of the earth" (**v.8**).

*How do you think the disciples felt on being given the "Great Commission"? (See also **Matthew 28:16-20**)*

*Do you think that the teaching Jesus had given his disciples before his death, preparing them for this moment, had helped or confused the disciples? (See **John chapters 14-16**, for example)*

In what ways is the Great Commission for all disciples for all time, including us?

Why did Jesus stress the need to wait for the Holy Spirit before starting this work? In what ways was the presence of the Holy Spirit essential then, and also today?

READING THE SCRIPTURES and DIGGING DEEPER – Part 2: To the Ends of the Earth

Read together the second Bible passage: **Romans 15: 14-33**

Paul's Letter to the Romans was written to Christians in Rome, around **AD 55-57**. It is Paul's longest letter, theologically very significant, and the first in biblical order (although not the first written).

In Romans chapter 15, Paul said that **he wanted the Gospel to reach a wider audience**, to go where Christ was not already known (**v.20-21**). Paul wrote that he would shortly be travelling back to Jerusalem with a monetary gift for the poor in the Jerusalem Church (**15:25-26**). Paul then planned to visit Rome on his way to Spain (**v.24**). But things didn't go to plan. He did deliver the gift to the Jerusalem Church but then spent a long time in prison in Caesarea. Eventually, he did reach Rome in AD 62, but as a prisoner and was confined in house arrest. (This part of Paul's story is told in **Acts chapters 21-28**.) There, the story from Acts ends. So, did Paul ever reach Spain? It is unlikely, but some think it possible.

Paul was a great encourager and knew the value of sound teaching of his disciples (**v.14**). He was also a team player, not trying to do everything himself. The mission of **preaching the Gospel** was what mattered, not who did it. In those days, **'the ends of the earth'** was probably the far reaches of the Roman Empire. As more lands were discovered, the vision expanded over the centuries, and more people came to know the Lord. Today there are an estimated **2.6 billion Christian believers** in the world – over 30% of the world's population – but there is still work to be done, including by us!

What challenges would Paul and others have had in establishing new churches in new lands? What challenges confront church leaders today when planting churches in areas of diverse cultures?

What resources would Paul (or others) have needed to reach more of the known world in their days?

Although today there are Christian churches throughout the world, few will be called to overseas mission.

What might "to the ends of the earth" mean in our personal situation?

Christ's commission to "the ends of the earth" is for all disciples for all time. And we remember that he also called them to be his witnesses more locally in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. *How do you think you can contribute to this locally in your own situation?* Share with your group your experiences and thoughts.

PRAYING TOGETHER

Share prayerfully any concerns on your hearts, be they personal, for the church, or the wider world. Then the leader may conclude with a brief summary prayer. Sing or read together the hymn: **'Lord, your church on earth is seeking'** (*Singing the Faith*, **410**). Conclude by saying **The Lord's Prayer** together.

COVENANT LIVING: PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE (to think about afterwards)

Perhaps you could consider praying during the 10 days up to Pentecost for any non-Christian family or friends to come faith in Christ – the traditional emphasis for prayer in **Thy Kingdom Come**.

Junior Good Soil, issue #16

Good News for the Whole World!

Written by Andy Murphy.

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Junior Good Soil is for children's and young people's groups in churches.

It can be easily adapted and you can add your own ideas!



PLANTING THE SEED – what are we thinking about today?

Today, we will be thinking about how the risen Jesus left his followers with a mission **to share God's love with the whole world!** We are coming to the time when we celebrate Jesus going up to heaven, and sending the Holy Spirit to help us. These special days are **Ascension Day** and **Pentecost**. There are two slightly different stories about what Jesus said to his disciples before his ascension. But they have something in common: the disciples were to help in sharing his good news and his love with the whole world!

QUIET TIME – a prayer (for use at the start of the session)

Dear God, We thank you that Jesus came and died and rose again.
We thank you for the new life he offers us, and that you are always with us.
Help us to know Jesus' presence, friendship and love on earth, even though he is with you in heaven.
And help us to follow him, just like his first disciples did, so we can make a difference in this world.
In Jesus' name, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we pray. **Amen.**

TELLING THE STORY – reading the Bible... Matthew chapter 28, and Acts chapter 1

Read the story from a Bible of your choice, or from the **International Children's Bible: Matthew 28:16-20** and also: **Acts 1:6-11**. Or, for younger children, read the story in the **Usborne Children's Bible**, page 142

WATERING AND GERMINATING – what can we learn? / what does it tell us?

When Jesus walked on the earth, he was limited in where he could go and the people he could talk to (there was no TV or internet in those days!). He couldn't meet or talk to everyone. He couldn't heal everyone or tell them about God. But he always knew that **God's love and salvation is for everyone on the earth**. So, before Jesus went up into heaven he told his disciples that he wanted them to make more disciples, to share their faith and tell others what they knew about Jesus (that's what it means to be a 'witness'). He left his followers with a **mission**: to take the good news to all the world, and make disciples in every nation. This was a big job! But it happened, and is still happening! It wasn't easy. There were just a few of them to start off with, BUT Jesus also gave them also a **promise**, that he would always be with them. When the Holy Spirit came, they were helped to achieve wonderful things and share his love far and wide.

LETTING IT GROW – ideas for activities and discussion

Think about how we can share our faith, or our church, with our friends and the wider community. *Have you ever talked to a friend about your faith or belief in God, or invited a friend to come to church? Why do you think some people worship God but others don't? Do you have any friends of other faiths?*

Make a **big colourful poster with the world on it**. This can be like a globe or a world map. You could make it yourself, or use a photo or real map of Planet Earth. Stick a pin in where **Jerusalem** is (where it all started) and have strings coming off, with pins, to all the countries where people are now Christians or followers of Jesus. (You don't have to do every country!) Give it a big title like: "**God's love is for all the world!**" or "**Jesus is for everyone!**" or "**He's got the whole world in his hands!**" (or something similar). Enjoy!

PRAISE AND WORSHIP – ideas for hymns and songs (can be used whenever you wish)

He's Got the Whole World... (by Allstars Kids Club) www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsw4VT8gfsU
(Singing the Faith – no.536)

Hear the Call of the Kingdom (by Getty / Townend) www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIPxUNOrTYU
(Singing the Faith – no.407)