



# Faithful GOD

## COVENANT People

a Good Soil series for small group study

### #8: *Epiphany: Glimpses of a Covenant for All*

**Bible Readings:** [Matthew 2:1-12](#), [Ephesians 3:1-12](#)

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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

As you prepare to lead this session, hold the members your group (and yourself) in prayer. Since it may have been a while since you met, it might be helpful to send a little reminder to your regular group members of the date and time of the session. Please read through the material carefully, especially the readings: [Matthew 2:1-12](#), and [Ephesians 3:1-12](#). Consider adding your own questions or discussion topics.

### PREPARATION FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS (before the session)

In this session, we will be thinking about the meaning of **Epiphany**, and its significance in terms of Jesus and the covenant. *What do you understand by the word "epiphany"? Is it a word we commonly use? Have you ever had an epiphany? How would you describe it?*

**An epiphany** is a moment of sudden revelation or realisation. It is from a Greek word meaning 'to reveal' – a hidden message being made clear, or a divine being becoming visible. For Christians, it means the 'manifestation' of God in the person of Jesus, and the ways in which Jesus is 'revealed'.

**The Day of Epiphany is 6<sup>th</sup> January**, following the 12 days of Christmas. It is the traditional date when we think about the visit of the Magi (or the Wise Men). It can also be celebrated on the Sunday before or after that date. In some churches and traditions, the **Season of Epiphany** also focuses on the Baptism of Jesus, and his first miracle at the wedding at Cana. The season can be observed up to Candlemas (2<sup>nd</sup> February) or even up to the start of Lent. *What do you think of the Christian celebration (or season) of Epiphany? Is it sometimes overlooked (or squeezed out) in the Methodist calendar?*

### STARTING THE SESSION: A PRAYER

Holy God,  
You have revealed yourself to us in Jesus Christ, your Son,  
manifesting your character, grace and love, and also your purposes for all humanity.  
Help us to glimpse your glory, and to celebrate the little revelations you give us through one another.  
Be with us as we start this session, and this year, together. In Jesus' name, we pray. **Amen.**

### FINDING OUR ROOTS – some questions to explore

In your group (or perhaps in twos or threes), catch up on your experiences of Christmas.  
*Where or when did you hear God speaking to you over the Christmas period? When did you feel most able to worship? What were the greatest blessings? How does God reveal his will or his love to us? Have you had any thoughts or revelations about what God might help you to do in the year to come?*

## READING THE SCRIPTURES – with background information

### Read together the first Bible passage: **Matthew 2:1-12**

There is a mysterious and legendary quality about this story, told only in Matthew's gospel. It is very familiar to us because of its place in Nativity plays and carol services. It certainly has captured the imagination of generations, and carols such as 'We Three Kings' have helped to bring it to life with characters, reflecting on the meaning of the gifts. There is also a lot of speculation about the **star** of Bethlehem, with reports of celestial happenings around that time which could account for it. Rather than probing too deeply into the historicity or accuracy of the story, however, it is best savoured with a sense of mystery and awe. For Matthew, this legend of the Magi was worth reporting because of its symbolism and connection with Old Testament prophecy (see **Isaiah 60:1-6**), as well as the striking point that the Messiah was NOT to be found where people expected him! The vitally-important aspect when it comes to Epiphany, is that the Magi represent the **Gentiles** (non-Jewish nations), and that God's purposes and Messiah have been revealed to (and worshipped by) these people from far-away lands. This links very powerfully to **the Covenant-promise to Abraham** (see **Genesis 17:1-7**, **Genesis 18:18**, and **Galatians 3:14**) – a blessing to the nations!

### Read together the second Bible passage: **Ephesians 3:1-12**

This is another of the set readings for the Feast of Epiphany. It is Paul's explanation to a largely non-Jewish church, about how Jesus the Messiah has been revealed to them and for them. The Gentiles are included in the gracious plans of God, and can share in the 'boundless riches of Christ'. If Christ is the Gift of God, wrapped in human flesh, Paul makes it clear that the gift-label says: "**For everyone!**".

## DIGGING DEEPER – some questions for you to consider in your group:

*What does the story of the Wise Men mean to you? Where do we get our ideas about this from?*

Epiphany tells us that God's salvation, blessing, and Covenant-relationship are now available to more than just God's original chosen people, through Christ. *Why should this revelation be particularly important for us? What does it mean for us to have been welcomed and included?*

The voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism brought an audible revelation of his identity (**Matthew 3:13-17**), while the wedding at Cana (**John 2:1-11**) was chance for everyone there to 'taste and see that the Lord is good' (**Psalms 34:8**). Put this with the smell of the frankincense, the bright vision of the star, and Jesus' healing touch... *What could it mean that Jesus is revealed through all our human senses?*

The Jewish people have so often cherished and protected their identity as God's chosen people, and yet the promise to Abraham could be seen to be so much wider in scope. Thankfully, God has reached us through the world-wide expansion of the gospel. *How do you reflect on any sense of entitlement or exclusivity we might have as Christians, and our relationships with people of other faiths?*

## PRAYING TOGETHER

Bring to God the needs of the world – and pray that all will come to know God's grace, compassion and salvation in the coming year. Pray for our relationships with other faiths, and for the parts of the world where there is faith-based persecution, or where people of different beliefs are at war with one another. Pray for the needs of the group at the start of this year, and for any who are worried about the future. Perhaps have a time of open prayer, and finish with **the Lord's Prayer** together.

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

The message that **the good news of Jesus is for everyone** has always been important to Methodists. The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, was passionate that God's offer of salvation was "**for all**", and he devoted his life to sharing it with as many people as possible, directing them to God's grace, forgiveness, and new life in Christ. As his brother Charles put it: "*My every sacred moment spend in publishing the sinner's friend*" (from *Singing the Faith*, **661**). *How can we, in our lives, our words and actions, **make Christ known** to more people, and let them see the difference it makes to trust in him?*

## Junior Good Soil, issue #8

### EPIPHANY and the WISE MEN:

### God's gift is revealed, but who is it for?

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 looking at the story of the Wise Men coming to visit the baby Jesus. The Wise Men are sometimes called the Magi, or the Three Kings. We don't know for certain that there were three of them, but the Bible tells us they brought three gifts! We traditionally celebrate this story on 6<sup>th</sup> January (or around that date). Mary and Joseph and the shepherds were all Jews, so the arrival of the Wise Men was the first time the new born King (the Messiah) was worshipped or honoured by people from other countries and faiths. The Wise Men are known as 'Gentiles' – which means non-Jewish people – so this gives us a clue that Jesus was to be a Saviour and King for the whole world, not just his own people.

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

Dear God, at the start of this year,  
after the wonder and excitement of Christmas,  
as the noise dies down, and the decorations are put away,  
help us to remember that you are still with us, your light keeps shining, and your love goes on.  
Help us to share that love, and the message of Jesus, with everyone – all year round.  
Be with us today and always, we pray, in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

### TELLING THE STORY – reading the Bible... Matthew chapter 2, verses 1-12

You might be able to tell the story from memory, or ask the children to tell it.  
Or for younger children, try the **Usborne Children's Bible**, pages 84-87.  
For older children, [click here for the International Children's Bible](#).

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

Jesus comes like a gift from God. He is God's presence, and God's love, wrapped up for us as a human being. But who is this gift for? He came to the Jewish people, as part of God's chosen family. Many of them saw his light and love, and followed him. Some didn't recognise him. But he also came to bring God's love to the whole world: to people wherever they were born, from every part of the world; so that through him all the families of the world might be blessed. God will not exclude anyone from his love. Everyone matters to God, of every culture, background and faith. Jesus came for us all. So, if he is a gift from God, the label on the gift says: "FOR EVERYONE".

### LETTING IT GROW – ideas for activities and discussion

Design and make some **posters** to put up around church, telling people about Jesus, making them feel welcome, and saying that God's love is 'for EVERYONE'.  
Discuss the **gifts** Jesus received from the Wise Men. Think about the gifts you have received for Christmas. How can you give something back? Perhaps you could make or write some '**Thank You**' cards!  
Think about the light of Jesus coming into the world – starting off small but spreading to all nations. Make or decorate a **candle** to shine God's light into the new year.

### PRAISE AND WORSHIP – hymns and songs (can be used at the start or end, or whenever!)

**We Three Kings** (by 'Love to Sing') [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBwL3y-Wlms](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBwL3y-Wlms)

**Shine Jesus Shine** (by Graham Kendrick) [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVVE1eL0Diw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVVE1eL0Diw)