



**Theme Resource Pack
November 2024
(3 - 30 November)**

Introduction

This month we are zooming in on discipleship! Join us as we zero in on four disciples we meet in the New Testament: Phoebe, Timothy, Lydia, and Apollos. For this theme the twist is that we are going to spend all month looking at just a small selection of verses — less than 30 over the entire month. In week one we are only going to be reading two verses!

What will we discover as we slow down and take time to get to know these men and women who were some of the first disciples of the Jesus movement. While Timothy has some letters addressed to him in the Bible (1st and 2nd Timothy!) the other three are only mentioned briefly in the New Testament — but what they offer us is a fascinating insight into the early life of Christianity. As we explore what it means to be a disciple in the 21st century we can learn from them how to be a bright spark, a trusted envoy, champion texters, and astronauts on the Apollos Mission!

Weekly Overview

- Phoebe, A Bright Spark — *Sparking others!*
- Trusty Timothy — *Representing for Jesus!*
- Lydia Texts Us — *Getting to grips with pretext, context and subtext!*
- The Apollos Mission — *Humour, humility and holiness!*

Format

Every month we have a God-given theme delving into different aspects and areas of faith. Over the course of 2024 these themes connect and take us on a faith journey out into the wonders of life with Jesus. Our themes shape our Daily Worship, Sunday Live streams and all sorts of other creative things we get up to! Each week runs Sunday - Saturday and each has a series of daily Bible readings and prompts for reflection.

Phoebe, A Bright Spark — *Sparking others!* (Week 1, 3 November)

Introduction: The name *Phoebe* means pure, radiant, bright! Part of discipleship is being bright sparks in the world. Phoebe wasn't just a bright spark herself — she sparked others! This week in a Sanctuary First *first* we are going to spend all week just reading *two verses!* The picture the early church gives us of discipleship is a diverse, distributed network of mutually supporting individuals and communities. Discipleship cuts across demographic, economic and cultural backgrounds — it is spread out but constantly on the move and communicating with one another.

Setting the scene: Phoebe lighting a candle of hospitality to shine from a window.

Seeds to sow: What candles of hospitality can you light in your local neighbourhood this week?

- 1. Romans 16: 1 Bright sparks!** Something we glean from Phoebe right away is that her name means *pure, radiant, bright!* Part of discipleship is being bright sparks in the world like Phoebe. It only takes a spark to start a fire, and sometimes it only takes one small gesture of grace to transform the world around you.
- 2. Romans 16: 1 Serving in leading others!** Phoebe was a landmark example of women in leadership! The use of *deacon* here is notable, read in the context of Paul's wider writing we can understand her to be a significant leader, preacher, and teacher! How can we ourselves serve through leading and lead through our serving — teaching and guiding others? And do we expect service in those who lead us? Or leadership in those who serve us? Being a disciple sometimes means turning the world's expectations on their head, as Phoebe did, as we live lives transformed by grace.
- 3. Romans 16: 1 A key harbour!** Cenchrea would have been a significant location in the Mediterranean, a meeting places of goods, people, and ideas. Phoebe's church was right at the crux of social, economic and cultural life — are we?
- 4. Romans 16: 2 Hospitality!** As God has welcomed us into our arms, we welcome others. The hospitality to Phoebe is a reflection of the hospitality already received from God. Why are we doing what we are doing? Because of who we are in Christ! Are we welcoming one another in a way worthy of the Lord's people? What stops us being hospitable? What helps us to be welcoming?
- 5. Romans 16: 2 Any help!** Discipleship is not an esoteric mysterious path to enlightenment — it's being alive to God and one another and rolling our sleeves up when necessary! What could we roll our sleeves up and go and do for someone else today?
- 6. Romans 16: 2 Champion!** Phoebe was a champion — not just in the sense that she excelled herself but because she championed others! From the context here it would seem that Phoebe financially or otherwise materially supported others. How are we investing (both financially *and* also our social capital) in charitable works and in others who need our backing and support?
- 7. Romans 16: 2 Testify!** The power of Paul's own story — he is speaking from his own experience to build up his sister in Christ. What are our stories of the disciples who have supported us? Sharing these stories can be a wonderful testimony of Christianity in action — the Kingdom in motion!

Trusty Timothy! — Representing for Jesus! (Week 2, 10 November)

Introduction: Paul thought very highly of Timothy, he is an example of a young person given tremendous responsibility in the early church. In Philippians and Thessalonians we get to see how much his integrity and character were appreciated.

Setting the scene: Timothy on the road, letter in hand, on a mission.

Seeds to sow: What are the different things we represent or are an ambassador for in our lives? How do we feel about representing those things?

- 1. Philippians 2: 19 Trusted envoys.** Paul saw Timothy as a trusted messenger and representative who could carry important news. As disciples of Jesus we are not lone agents who only represent ourselves — we are ambassadors for Christ who sends us out. What way could we 'rep' for Jesus this week in an aspect of our life we don't normally associate with faith and the Kingdom?
- 2. Philippians 2: 20 Genuine concern.** Timothy is the real deal, an example of exemplary leadership - he genuinely cares about the welfare of others. How can we make sure we maintain genuine care for the welfare of others?
- 3. Philippians 2: 21 A warning!** When and how do we need to recalibrate so we don't end up like those Paul is referring to here, keeping our focus foremost on Christ? For Timothy and Paul Jesus was always central, their connection to Jesus inspired and sustained them.
- 4. Philippians 2: 22-24 Alloparents!** An *alloparent* is a term for all the adults that contribute to the parenting of young people who are not their parents themselves. Discipleship is not a personal path to solo enlightenment — it's a model for vibrant thriving community, where meaningful and mutually sustaining relationships can blossom, like that between Paul and Timothy.
- 5. 1 Thessalonians 3: 1-5 Strengthen and encourage!** A key aspect of discipleship is strengthening and encouraging one another in faith, especially during unsettling times. Discipleship is not a call to an easy life — it's a call to life itself in all its fullness!
- 6. 1 Thessalonians 3: 6 Remembering kindly.** Timothy is the bearer of good news! What and who are we remembering kindly? Whose good news do we bear? How can we, like Timothy, pass on and share kind memories in a world that's often full of bitter feuds and grudges?
- 7. 2 Timothy 1: 5-7 God's flame, the gift in us.** All of the integrity and character we see in Timothy is because of who he is in Christ, and the gifts from God he is learning about. God is giving us gifts to fan into flame too! To do so, we come sit in his presence.

Lydia texts us! *Getting to grips with pretext, context and subtext!*

(Week 3, 17 November)

Introduction: In this text message about a textile merchant, we want to have eyes open for the *context* — what's around the words, the *subtext* — what lies underneath the words, the *urtext* — the origins of the words as an object in history, and then the *pretexts* we might bring to those words!

Setting the scene: Lydia sending Paul a text message.

Seeds to sow: If you could send a text message to someone in the Bible who would you text and what would you say?

- 1. Acts 16: 11-13 Context.** The context: apostles on the move looking for a place of prayer and a group of women who had gathered by the river. What do we gain if we don't just skip past this scene setting but dig in a little further?
- 2. Acts 16: 14 Textile!** One of the *text* words we are thinking about this week is 'textile' as Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth. The Bible doesn't always provide CVs or job descriptions, especially of women, so it's significant that it's mentioned here. What does the fact Lydia was a textile dealer tell us about her?
- 3. Acts 16: 14 Text.** In this pocket of space that has opened up — across potential barriers of gender, culture and status — a woman comes to faith in Jesus. Imagine Lydia texting her family and friends about what happened.
- 4. Acts 16: 14 Subtext.** One of the subtexts of *The Acts of the Apostles* (a title that came much later) is actually the importance of *God's* acts in the world. Lydia was someone who listened, Paul is someone who spoke, but it is God who opened her heart.
- 5. Acts 16: 15 A text message.** What is the text message of baptism? For us as individuals and as a wider community? Lydia leads her entire household to faith — what an evangelist!
- 6. Acts 16: 15 Urtext!** The concept of an *urtext* — the earliest version of a text — reminds us that the Bible is woven into actual history! It only exists because life to life, home to home, community to community, these precious words have been maintained. It is through the ongoing overlapping *relationships* of disciples that the Holy Spirit keeps these words in our lives. We only have these words because of generous souls like Lydia.
- 7. Acts 16: 15 Pretext!** Lydia at the end of the verse seems to be putting the pressure on Paul a bit! Perhaps there was more she wanted to know or learn before he left town. While the hospitality was genuine it could also have been a bit of a pretext so that she could grill him further on this new faith! If she came to Paul with a pretext... she isn't alone! At the time and over the intervening two thousands years people have come to Paul with their pretexts, their assumptions and agendas. What's lovely about Lydia is that she comes offering genuine hospitality, shelter and connection. What happens in our lives when we don't ignore the pretexts we bring to the Bible but consciously acknowledge them with open minds and open hearts.

The Apollos Mission! — Humour, humility and holiness! (Week 4, 24 November)

Introduction: Suit up astronauts it's time to go on the Apollos Mission! Apollos was a very keen disciple and in his story we find humour, humility, and holiness! In a funny set piece one could imagine from *Early Church the sitcom* Apollos gets rather carried away preaching and needs to be quietly drawn aside by Priscilla and Aquila. You can picture the look on their faces: "Eh, should we jump in here?" He shows great humility and takes the new intel from mission control on board. The Apollos Mission is back on track!

Setting the scene: Apollos carried away in the moment out of his depth!

Seeds to sow: How best do you learn? What do you look for in a mentor?

- 1. Acts 18: 24 The gift of the gab...** There are various gifts God gives us and one of them is the Gift of the gab! Apollos knows his onions and he can talk the hind legs off a donkey. Extroverted or introverted God can and does use our distinct ways of communicating in the world to communicate his grace.
- 2. Acts 18: 25 The gift of enthusiasm...** Apollos was a man on a mission and he spoke with burning enthusiasm. He's paid attention, learnt about Jesus but there are some gaps in his knowledge. Are we aware of our blindspots?
- 3. Acts 18: 26 The gift to boldly go...** Houston we have a problem! Apollos was bold, he put himself out there. Priscilla and Aquila quietly take him aside afterwards to help him clarify things a bit more, to put him in the picture. Who are the Priscillas and Aquilas we are grateful for — that keep our missions on track!
- 4. Acts 18: 27 The gift of friendship...** Apollos's pals encourage him and vouch for him. They are witnessing a man in real time growing and maturing as a believer and they've got his back. Who are the new leaders and missionaries that we are backing as they grow and mature?
- 5. Acts 18: 27 The gift of passing it on...** Apollos — who has been greatly helped by Priscilla and Aquila — is now greatly helping others! Jesus isn't *something* to hoard or stockpile — he is *someone* to pursue with all our heart, mind, strength and then share!
- 6. Acts 18: 28 The gift of sharpening...** Like iron sharpens iron (see Proverbs 27: 17) Apollos has been sharpened and is ready to go toe to toe to powerfully promote the Messiah! What happens when we sharpen each other (while keeping the kind spirit of Priscilla and Aquila)?
- 7. 1 Corinthians 3: 5-9 The gift of watering....** In Paul's beautiful analogy Apollos waters what Paul has planted but it is ultimately God that makes it grow. A gardener can tend a garden but they cannot force the plants to grow, they can only nurture an environment where growth can happen. There's a strong note of humility here. God stop us when we think we are responsible for making things grow — we can only work towards environments of growth, the growth itself always comes from you. Apollos' mission is in fact of course Jesus' mission. Let's get into the garden with our humble, holy watering cans and get watering!