



World Vision®

From Exclusion to Embrace Bible Studies in Interfaith Engagement



Bible Studies in Interfaith Engagement

From Exclusion to Embrace

Chawkat Moucarry

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords,
the great God, mighty and awesome,
who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.
(Deut. 10:17)



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Author: Chawkat Moucarry

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Production Management: Katie Klopman Fike.
Copyediting: Micah Branaman. Proofreading: Melody Ip.

Cover Design and Interior Layout: Lara Pugh.
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Introduction

What is ‘interfaith engagement’?

Today, the British English language commonly uses the word ‘interfaith’ in the context of relationships between different faith communities. It does not imply any particular theological position. People of all faiths (and of none) have found the term useful when talking about relations between religious traditions. Like ‘dialogue’, different people can understand it in different ways. Some substitute it for ‘mission’, a term that, for them, has become outdated since they see all religions representing essentially valid paths to God. Others consider ‘interfaith engagement’ in itself a neutral expression, which may or may not infer a missional dimension, depending on who is using it.

For the Christian author of this document, ‘interfaith engagement’ means a respectful and positive approach towards those who have different beliefs. It means, first and foremost, respecting people of all faiths (and none) as human beings, loved by and created in God’s image. Each of us is endowed with a certain understanding of who the Creator is, and God allows us to enjoy the material and spiritual blessings God provides. It is important, therefore, to listen to others attentively, to consider carefully their ideas and religious beliefs and to appreciate any truthful insights they have, which ultimately derive from God. As a result, the hope is to remove many misunderstandings and replace them with bridges of mutual understanding. A genuine engagement with other faiths is also bound to acknowledge the discrepancies and contradictions that exist between different religious traditions. Explaining the Christian faith and its uniqueness, without denigrating other faiths, while seeking to extol the gospel in a way that fully honours people’s freedom and conscience is also part of this engagement.

Interfaith engagement is, therefore, not about proudly claiming the superiority of one faith over others but rather a humble witness to the truth. Christians and those of other faiths fail to live up to their convictions, including bearing

witness to their religious beliefs or moral values. We all need God's mercy and enabling as we endeavour to translate God's love, in words and deeds, in our communities, especially among those who are needy, marginalised and suffering.

What is the aim of these Bible studies?

World Vision is a global Christian humanitarian organisation. At the end of 2015, it had 38 offices in Christian-majority countries and 35 offices in other/multi-faith countries, including six support offices. Of these 35 offices, 21 were located in Muslim-majority countries, seven in Buddhist-majority countries and two in Hindu-majority countries. In many other-faith countries, the church is very small, and in some, there is no national church. In such countries, the staff of World Vision include significant numbers of employees from other faiths.

World Vision is a community-based and child-focused organisation. The Vision Statement highlights the centrality of child well-being in our ministry, 'Our vision for *every* child, life in all its fullness, our prayer for *every* heart, the will to make it so' (emphasis added). Child sponsorship is key to World Vision's work in most countries, and many of these are other/multi-faith countries.

For these reasons, it is critical that World Vision employees, especially Christians who operate in multi-faith or other-faith contexts, are equipped to relate adequately to communities, organisations and staff members who hold other beliefs.

We live in a world where people increasingly communicate with each other through social networks, satellite TV and other digital media while our societies become more diverse, culturally, religiously and ethnically. Exposure to other worldviews, faiths and ideologies is constant. Since Christians seek to walk in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ and follow the Bible's teaching, it is important to ask, 'What do the scriptures say about relating to people from other faiths? How can Jesus' life and mission inspire us in our attitudes towards people who are different from us in terms of language, culture, religion and ethnicity?'

The following 13 Bible studies have a threefold objective:

- 1) They aim to provide a theological basis for interfaith engagement by highlighting God's universal plan and purposes. Human history and the scriptures about the people of Israel from Abraham to Jesus Christ revealed these purposes.
- 2) The studies highlight the connection between World Vision as a Christian humanitarian organisation and the Bible's special concern for children and the poor – the suffering, vulnerable, underprivileged and strangers.
- 3) They point out biblical guidelines as to how Christians should relate to 'others'.

What is the focus of the studies?

The Bible studies focus on stories featuring significant characters. These characters belong to nations perceived as hostile (Melchizedek, Naaman and Cornelius) and represent despised people seen as heretical (Samaritans), vulnerable members of society (Hagar, the Phoenician widow and the Roman officer's servant) and defenceless children (Ishmael, Naaman's household servant and the Canaanite woman's daughter). The last story deals with a prestigious academic body of Greek scholars, who are members of the Areopagus council in Athens.

All of these stories put non-Jewish people (otherwise known as Gentiles in the New Testament) at centre stage. In a sense, they serve as corrective narratives to an age-old misperception that the Bible (especially the Old Testament) is an exclusivist book. Because it contains expressions such as 'chosen people', i.e. Israel (Deut. 7:6), and 'God's people', i.e. the Church (Eph. 4:4), the Bible is seen by some as unfriendly to outsiders, namely foreigners and those of different faiths.

It is true that the Bible contains several prophecies against Israel's neighbouring countries (e.g. Isa. 15:1-4; 17:1-3; 21:11-17; 23:1-5; 47:1-3). However, we should understand such texts in their historical context. When Israel's surrounding nations receive censure, it is because of their idolatry and opposition to the Jewish people. There are also texts in the Old Testament that speak positively about these nations and their eventual reconciliation with Israel (e.g. Isa. 19:19-25; 56:3-8; 60:4-14). God passed judgement against the people of Israel as well because of their non-belief and disobedience (e.g. Deut. 28:62-63; Jer. 25:1-11; Luke 19:41-44), including their oppression of foreigners living among them (e.g. Zech. 7:10-14; Mal. 5:5). In brief, God is not unfair; all nations and human creatures are treated justly, and no one is discriminated against, 'for God does not show favouritism' (Rom. 2:11).¹

How should we use these studies?

These studies are designed primarily, but not exclusively, for people (mainly Christians) seeking to explore what the Bible has to say about 'other' people. This otherness reflects many of the defining aspects of human existence: religion, ethnicity, culture, gender, education and social or economic standing.

Each study will take about an hour to discuss, and we suggest that you do not try to cover more than one study in a session. If possible, participants should come to the meeting having read the relevant Bible text and one or two commentaries. The group's facilitator should devote at least half the allotted time to the questions listed at the end of each study. Facilitators should use local context to reframe questions or create new ones that apply more directly to participants' specific circumstances.

With the exception of the four stories about the Samaritans each study stands alone. Participants may join at any time, even if they did not attend the previous sessions. It is not necessary for the facilitator to be the same for the whole series if participants choose to take turns leading the discussion.

¹ All Bible quotations are from the New International Version-UK (NIVUK), except those marked CEV (Contemporary English Version) or GNT (Good News Translation).

As these studies encourage us to treat all people with impartiality, it is important for the facilitators to be fair and give each participant the opportunity to express their opinions freely and respectfully as they lead the discussions. On sensitive topics, such as religious plurality and ethnic diversity, please remember what Jesus taught his disciples about their relationships, 'Do to others what you would have them do to you' (Matt. 7:12).

I

Melchizedek: The Canaanite King who worships God with Abraham

(Genesis 14:18–20)

Abraham as a victorious soldier

This text presents Abraham (though his name is still Abram at this point in Genesis) as an army chief, a role with which the patriarch is not usually associated. ‘The father of all who believe’ (Rom. 4:11) was prompted to go to war when he heard news that his nephew, Lot from Sodom, was captured and taken prisoner together with many other people from Sodom and Gomorrah. ‘When Abram heard that his nephew had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, three hundred eighteen of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan’ (Gen. 14:14). This text shows Abraham to be a great strategist and a successful warrior, winning the battle and freeing all of the captives, including Lot and his family (Gen. 14:15–16).

Abraham as a foreigner

At the time of this event, Abraham lived as a stranger in the land of Canaan. Although God promised him and his descendants land, he ‘was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite’ (Gen. 14:13) and owned no land property (cf. Gen. 23:4). Canaan’s inhabitants were notoriously sinful, so much so that God decided to give their land to the Israelites. However, this would only take place approximately 400 years after God made the promise to Abraham ‘because only then will the people who live here be so sinful that they deserve to be punished’ (Gen. 15:16 CEV). This tells us a great deal about God’s justice, patience and fairness.

Melchizedek, the priest of God Most High

Canaan was a place where the true God was unknown. Yet, in this same land lived Melchizedek [king of righteousness], king of Salem [peace].² Though there is no explicit link made between peace and justice in this text, it is safe to say that Melchizedek led a life worthy of his name and the name of the place under his reign. His kingdom was characterised by the twin values of justice and peace.³

Descriptions of Melchizedek as a ‘priest of God Most High’ (Gen. 14:18), provide evidence of his godliness and indicate he was a religious, as well as a political, leader. Melchizedek immediately identified Abraham as a man of God and a fellow believer. It is worth noting that Melchizedek described God as the ‘Most High, Creator of heaven and earth’ (Gen. 14:19). This was a common way for the ancient Near East peoples to refer to the Godhead. Though it is not the name that God chose when self-revealing to Moses (*Yahweh* or *Jehovah*), it is a genuine and appropriate depiction of God.⁴ The fact that God accepted the worship of Melchizedek, a Canaanite king-priest, shows that the Lord works in people’s lives, even in the most unlikely places on earth.

² Salem is a shortened form of Jerusalem (cf. Ps. 76:2) and related to *shalom*, the Hebrew word for peace.

³ The Old Testament says very little about Melchizedek’s background and provides no details about his life and death. The writer of Hebrews uses this lack of information to depict him as a prefiguration of Christ: ‘Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he [Melchizedek] remains a priest forever’ (Heb. 7:3; cf. Ps. 110:4). This has led some Christians to consider that Melchizedek was a manifestation of Christ before his incarnation (cf. John 8:56). This is an unwarranted conclusion as the figurative use of scriptures by the author of Hebrews to build his argument (about the eternal priesthood of Christ) does not undermine the fact clearly attested in Genesis 14 that Melchizedek was indeed a historical figure. The main point is that, to the extent that he was both priest and king, Melchizedek indeed pointed to Christ. The two functions that were clearly separate in the covenant that God made with Israel now unite in Christ in the new covenant.

⁴ God is described as ‘the Most High’ many times in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms (Num. 24:16; Deut. 32:8; 2 Sam. 22:14; Ps. 7:17; Isa. 14:14; Dan. 4:24; Hos. 7:16), and several times in the New Testament (Luke 1:32, 35, 76; Acts 7:48; 16:17; Heb. 7:1; 9:25).

Melchizedek had fellowship with Abraham, celebrating their encounter by sharing a simple and highly symbolic meal of bread and wine. He then called on God to bless Abraham and acknowledged that God gave Abraham victory over his enemies. Abraham responded to Melchizedek's blessing by giving him a tenth of all of his possessions, recognising Melchizedek's role as a legitimate political and spiritual leader of the land (Gen. 14:18–20; Heb. 7:1–4).

God reveals himself to both Melchizedek and Abraham

God promised to bless *all peoples* on earth through Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 12:3). Independently and simultaneously, God directly self-revealed to both Melchizedek and Abraham, and the two men met and had fellowship in the Promised Land, indicating that the God of all people self-reveals to and through special people (patriarchs, Israel, Christ and Church) throughout history. It also demonstrates that the sovereign God can choose to self-reveal, without human agency, to anyone who seeks the Lord, including those who are beyond the self-identified community of believers.

Jesus confirmed that God generously grants blessings to all people, regardless of their merits, beliefs or ethnicity, 'God makes the sun rise on both good and bad people. And he sends the rain for the ones who do right and for the ones who do wrong' (Matt. 5:45 CEV; cf. Acts 14:17).

Questions for reflection

1. The example of Melchizedek shows that the God of all nations moves among all people, even in the least expected places. What are the theological and practical implications of this?
2. When people refer to God differently than us, does it mean they do not worship the true God? How can we better understand the meaning of the words they use for God? Is it possible that people can know enough about the one and only God to worship, although they may not know him fully, as revealed in Jesus Christ?

3. In what ways can we see God's actions among people of other faiths? Should we praise the Lord for the good values, beliefs and practices in their communities? Without endorsing other belief systems as a whole, are we open and ready to learn from the positive aspects of other cultures?
4. Are there any reasons why we may not want to work with other faith communities and organisations that have similar agendas, values and ministry objectives to ours?

Prayer

God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth!

We praise you that you have created the whole universe and that you care for all human beings including those who do not know you as their gracious Creator and their loving Saviour.

We thank you for the blessings you bestow upon all people. You provide for all our needs, physical and spiritual, and discriminate against none of us.

You created us in your own image and placed us on this wonderful earth, which reflects your majesty, your power, your wisdom as much as your mercy, your goodness and your care.

Please help us see our fellow human beings the way you see them and listen to what you may want to teach us through them.

Help us to build bridges of understanding with people of faith and of no faith so that we may bear witness to your love for all your human creatures.

We praise you that you reach out to people who are beyond our reach, and you reveal yourself to those who seek you.

Help us to gain a fuller understanding of your all-embracing love, your sovereignty and your grace.

Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

2

Hagar: An Egyptian woman sees the Living One who sees her

(Genesis 16:1–16)

Who is Hagar?

In this story, Abraham (though his name was still Abram at this point in Genesis) is now 85 and 10 years have passed since God first promised him a child and a people through that child, yet he still had no children. Abraham and Sarah (her name was still Sarai at this point in Genesis) had an Egyptian maidservant, Hagar.⁵ According to Jewish tradition, Hagar was one of the Pharaoh's daughters born to one of his concubines.⁶ Hagar's father gave her to the couple to take back with them to Canaan as compensation for taking Sarah as his wife after he realised, through divine intervention, that Sarah was Abraham's wife, not his sister as Abraham told the Pharaoh (Gen. 12:10–20).

Conflicts in Abraham's household

One day Sarah pressured her husband into sleeping with Hagar in order to 'help' God fulfil the promise of a child. This practice was not uncommon at the time⁷ and, surprisingly, Abraham gave in to his wife's demand, instead of waiting for God to accomplish his promise. This misguided decision soon caused conflict

⁵ The name *Hagar* means 'migrant'.

⁶ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 'Hagar', VII, p. 1074 (Jerusalem: Ketter, 1972). Islamic sources also confirm this tradition (see in the Hadith, 'The Prophetic Tradition', Bukhari *anbiya* [prophets] 11; Muslim *fada'il* [virtues] 41).

⁷ Rachel gave Jacob her maidservant Bilhah when she could not conceive and Leah gave Jacob her maidservant Zilpah when she stopped having children in Genesis 30:1–13.

in Abraham's household when Hagar became pregnant. She started to despise Sarah for her barrenness and Sarah blamed Abraham for Hagar's wrongdoings. Abraham removed himself from the situation and let his wife mistreat Hagar. 'Each of the three characters displays the untruth that is part of sin, in false pride (4), false blame (5), false neutrality (6); but Sarai's mask soon slipped (6b), to show the hatred behind the talk of justice'⁸ (Gen. 16:4–6b). Hagar could bear Sarah's oppression no longer; she ran away, heading for her native Egypt.

God hears Hagar's cry for help

The angel of the Lord (presented as the Lord in Genesis 16:10) appeared to Hagar as she rested near a spring. The Lord was concerned for the life of this young pregnant woman travelling on her own in the wilderness, exposed to all sorts of dangers, and spoke with her in a very personal conversation. The angel asked her to return to Abraham's house for her own safety and made a promise to 'increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count' (Gen. 16:10; cf. Gen. 17:20; 21:13,18). The Lord comforted her and told her to name her son Ishmael [God hears], 'for the Lord has heard of your misery' (Gen. 16:11). What a meaningful and wonderful name, which reveals God's compassion for all who suffer, including Hagar and everyone else.

Hagar names God

The encounter between God and Hagar was so personal that she addressed God directly, naming the Lord as, 'You are the God who sees me' (Gen. 16:13). She went on to speak of her personal, awesome experience with God, 'I have now seen the One who sees me' (Gen. 16:13). The place was named for this extraordinary encounter, *Beer-lahai-roi* [the well of the Living One who sees me]. This name will stand forever as a testimony that God self-revealed to a young Egyptian woman to comfort, strengthen and protect her, as well as protect the life in her womb, and bless her with a son who will have many

⁸ Kidner, Derek, *Genesis. An Introduction and Commentary*. The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967) 126.

descendants. Abraham's son Isaac settled here years later, after Abraham's death (Gen. 25:11).

Hagar listened to God and obeyed, returning home and delivering a son. She gave him the name chosen by God: Ishmael. The child grew up in his father's house under the care of both parents, until he became a teenager.

Questions for reflection

1. What does this story teach us about the human plight? Discuss the shortcomings of (a) Sarah (b) Abraham and (c) Hagar.
2. What does this narrative tell us about God? Discuss God's attitude to Hagar as:
 - an Egyptian woman
 - an oppressed maidservant
 - a vulnerable mother.

Prayer

Lord God,

We praise you for the example of Abraham, a great man of faith, who trusted your promise to bless the nations through him and his offspring. We praise you for your trustworthy word, which does not conceal Abraham's weaknesses but exposes his flaws, his impatience and even his cowardice on certain occasions.

We confess that though we believe in you, we, too, fail you in many ways. Our faith does not always have a positive impact on our relationships with our fellow human beings.

Forgive us for the way we dishonour your name in our relationships with others.

We praise you for your mercy and your patience with us. You do not deal with us as we deserve, but according to your love for each one of us.

We praise you that you know each one of us by name. You deal individually with all people, regardless of our ethnic or religious background.

We praise you for revealing yourself sovereignly and graciously to us, particularly to those experiencing hardships in their lives.

We pray that you will meet the needs of those we cannot reach, and that you will bring them into a close and living relationship with you.

We pray especially for the oppressed, including all women who suffer abuse, in one way or another, and for all pregnant women, especially those who are not pregnant by choice.

We pray that you will come close to them, encourage them and reveal your compassion for them. Help them to cope with the difficulties they face.

Help us to discern our part in caring for those in need, as agents of your love and care.

Amen.

3

Ishmael: Abraham's son grows up under God's care

(Genesis 21:8–21)

Isaac is the promised son

God fulfilled the promise of a son (named Isaac) when Abraham was 100 years old, Sarah age 90 and Ishmael age 14. Several years after the birth of Isaac, Ishmael started abusing his younger brother. Understandably, Sarah was angry with both Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, and saw this as a good opportunity to get rid of both of them. Sarah demanded that Abraham send them away, making it clear to Abraham that she wanted her son to be his only heir, 'Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac' (Gen. 21:10).

Abraham felt sad and confused; he loved his elder son, Ishmael, and did not know what to do. However, God stepped in to overrule Abraham's feelings and asked him to dismiss Hagar and her son. Although God's unexpected directive seems very harsh, it highlights two things. First, it confirms that the promised son was indeed Isaac, not Ishmael, and he was to be the only heir to the covenant God made with Abraham (Gen. 21:12; cf. Gen. 17:19,21). However, secondly, God established that while Ishmael was not the heir, the covenant did not exclude him, and he was circumcised the same day as his father (Gen. 17:26). The Lord still intended to bless Ishmael, as well; he too would become the father of a numerous people as promised in the covenant (Gen. 17:20; cf. Gen. 21:13,18).

Hagar and Ishmael have to go

Why did Hagar and her son have to leave Abraham's house? Only God knows the answer, we can only speculate. Perhaps God's decision avoided a potential and much greater evil resulting from the increasingly tense relationships between the members of Abraham's household. In a similar way, in the old covenant God tolerated social evils, such as polygamy and divorce, to minimise the risk of greater ones (Deut. 17:17; 24:1–4).

Hagar and Ishmael's dismissal, seen from a broader context, shows that the separation of Abraham's children was only temporary. Isaiah told us that they would reunite one day in their heavenly Father's house.⁹ Finally, Sarah's demand (and God's endorsement of it) has an unintended spiritual meaning, 'Sarah spoke more truly than she knew; but the sequel shows how different was God's spirit towards the outcasts from hers'.¹⁰ Her words ('that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac' [Gen. 21:10]) hint at the truth that God's dealings with us result from undeserved grace, metaphorically represented by Isaac, God's promised son. When we stand before God, human achievements are worthless, as demonstrated by Ishmael's birth. Paul uses the story of Sarah and Hagar to illustrate, in a rather startling way, the incompatibility between two approaches to God: gospel-based divine grace and law-based human righteousness (Gal. 4:30–31).

God hears Ishmael crying

It is easy to imagine the pain Abraham felt when he sent Hagar off with their son, Ishmael, who is by then in his late teens. In the wilderness, they soon ran out of water. Ishmael was dying and his exhausted mother in utter despair. God

⁹ Isaiah 60:6–7 celebrates the manifestation of God's glory among the chosen people when Zion (i.e. Israel) is united with Abraham's other sons, including Midian, Abraham's son through his wife, Keturah (Gen. 25:2); Ephah, a son of Midian (Gen. 25:4); Nebaioth and Kedar, Ishmael's first two sons (Gen. 25:13); and Sheba, Abraham's grandson through Keturah (Gen. 25:3). The Queen of Sheba (modern-day Yemen) prefigured this eschatological reunion when she paid a visit to King Solomon (1 Kgs. 10:1–13).

¹⁰ Kidner, 140.

conveyed compassion for them through an angel, 'What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid. God has heard the boy crying as he lies there' (Gen. 21:17). This is the third time God 'heard' and responded: earlier God heard Hagar crying (Gen. 16:11) and Abraham pleading for Ishmael (Gen. 17:20).

God rescued Ishmael and his mother by doing two things for them. First, God comforted Hagar by renewing the promise to bless her son (Gen. 21:18), and then God opened her eyes to see the nearby well (Gen. 21:19). God provided moral and physical support to sustain the life of the mother and her child. Hagar is like a widow and Ishmael an orphaned son in an unfamiliar land. In these trying circumstances, they experienced God's presence and support, 'The Lord looks after strangers. He defends the rights of orphans and widows' (Ps.146:9 CEV; cf. Ps. 68:5). God's material and spiritual provision was always available to them. As for Ishmael, 'God was with the boy as he grew up' (Gen. 21:20). God was the caring Father of Ishmael, of all the fatherless and abandoned children as well as the protector of Hagar, of widows and all estranged wives. They lived in the desert of Paran in north-central Sinai and Hagar found a wife for her son from her native Egypt (Gen. 21:21).

God fulfils his promise to Ishmael

After Sarah died at age 127 (Gen. 23:1), Abraham married Keturah, who gave him six sons (Gen. 25:1-4). He sought to be fair towards all his sons, but he was fully aware of Isaac's unique position as the covenant's heir. 'Abraham left everything he owned to Isaac; but while he was still living, he gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them away from his son Isaac to the land of the east' (Gen. 25:5-6).

Abraham died 38 years after Sarah's death, at age 175. Isaac and Ishmael met at their father's funeral and together buried him next to Sarah (Gen. 25:7-10). Ishmael produced 12 descendants (Gen. 25:13-16), some of whose names sounded

Arabic.¹¹ They settled to the east and the south of Canaan where ‘They lived in hostility towards all the tribes related to them’ (Gen. 25:18). This comment echoes God’s prediction that Ishmael would lead a restless and non-conformist life in the desert, ‘He will live in hostility towards all his brothers’ (Gen. 16:12). This is a clear indication that God fulfilled the promise made to Ishmael shortly after Ishmael died at age 137 (Gen. 25:17).

Questions for reflection

1. What do you think about Sarah’s way of addressing Ishmael’s abusive behaviour towards his younger brother?
2. What do you think about God overruling Abraham, resulting in the dismissal of Ishmael and his mother? Was it inevitable?
3. Abraham’s decision to send Ishmael and Hagar away was certainly heart breaking. To what extent are we prepared to make difficult decisions in response to what God demands?
4. God cared for Ishmael as a child, ‘God has heard the boy crying’ (Gen. 21:17) and ‘God was with the boy as he grew up’ (Gen. 21:20). Who are the ‘unheard Ishmaels’ of today? How can we care for needy children, including those from different faith backgrounds?

¹¹ This hints at some links between Ishmael and Arabs. According to Islamic tradition, Isaac and Ishmael were both prophets and they are the respective fathers of the Jewish and the Arab peoples. Jesus was the last Jewish prophet and Muhammad the last Arab prophet. Abraham and Ishmael built the Kaaba temple in Mecca and prayed for God to send their offspring a messenger to lead them and ‘instruct them in scripture and wisdom’ (Qur’an 2:124–129). Muslims believe Prophet Muhammad was the fulfilment of this prayer. Though he was an Arab he was sent to Arabs and non-Arabs (3:20; 21:107).

Prayer

Our Father in heaven,

We admit that our foolish behaviour sometimes leads us into situations where life becomes almost unbearable for us and for others. We ask for your mercy and your forgiveness, as well as for your guidance, in such circumstances.

Help us to make the right decisions, even when they are tough.

We confess that we do not always understand your ways as you deal with us and others. Sometimes, you seem to be absent, silent, inactive and indifferent to our suffering.

Help us to trust you in those situations where we cannot see your hand.

Help us to believe that you are still in control when evil seems to be ruling our world.

We praise you that you are a compassionate God. You listen to us all, especially to the most vulnerable, including children, orphans, widows, and foreigners. We thank you that you care for the outcast and the persecuted. You support them, sustain them and provide for them.

Help us to consider our work as part of our Christian calling and to share your love with everyone, regardless of their colour, culture or creed.

For your name's sake we pray. Amen.

4

A Phoenician widow is rescued by the prophet Elijah

(1 Kings 17:7–24)

The prophet Elijah challenges King Ahab

After the death of Solomon in 931 BC, the kingdom of Israel split into two: the kingdom of Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital, and the kingdom of Israel, also called the northern kingdom. Omri, King of Israel (885–874), built Samaria as the capital of his kingdom. He made an alliance with the Phoenician kingdom of Tyre and Sidon (in present-day Lebanon) and sealed it with the marriage of his son, Ahab, to Jezebel, daughter of King Ethbaal (1 Kgs. 16:31).

Ahab succeeded his father on the throne of Israel (874–853) and followed in his father's ways. He built a temple and an altar for Baal, the Canaanite god of rain and fertility, in Samaria. His promotion of Baal worship profoundly displeased God, who sent Elijah to challenge him in a spectacular way. To demonstrate the futility of Baal worship, Elijah declared, 'There will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word' (1 Kgs. 17:1). Drought both discredited Baal's claims and displayed God's judgement against Israel's unfaithful people. The king would realise that the God of Israel had full control over creation and demonstrate that only the Lord, the God of Israel, was the true God, as Elijah's name illustrates, 'the Lord is my God'.¹² Ahab and his wife were furious and wanted to get rid of the prophet at any cost.

¹² The name Elijah in Hebrew derives from *El*, 'God' (*Eli*, my God), and *Jah* (short for Yahweh), 'the Lord'.

Elijah takes refuge in a pagan land

Whatever the circumstances, God takes care of faithful people and the prophets. He miraculously provided for Elijah's physical needs by sending birds to feed him. Surprisingly, ravens – considered unclean birds in Mosaic Law (Lev. 11:15; Deut. 14:12) – brought food for the prophet while he hid in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan River. Even more surprising, God commanded Elijah to move on and take refuge in the very land whose king was partially responsible for introducing Baal worship to Israel. Elijah did not question God's rather unexpected instruction; instead he travelled to Zarephath (present-day Sarafand), near Sidon where a poor widow became God's agent in caring for the prophet.

Elijah takes care of a widow and her family

After Elijah arrived in Zarephath, he met a starving widow, who was about to take her last meal with her son. He asked the woman to feed him first, and promised her that she would still have plenty left for her family. In a remarkable act of self-denial and faith in the prophet's words, she accepted Elijah's request. God honoured the Phoenician woman's faith through a miracle that provided everyone in her house enough food, despite the surrounding famine. God provided for Elijah, the non-Jewish widow and her relatives.

The widow acknowledges God

All seemed to be going well until the widow's boy became extremely ill and possibly dead. The mother was devastated; she thought (mistakenly) that the prophet's holy presence called God's attention to her sin, and that the death (or illness) of her son (and perhaps of her husband, too) was divine punishment. She blamed Elijah, who was also distraught. He cried out to God and pled for mercy for his distressed host, 'Lord, my God, let this boy's life return to him!' (1 Kgs. 17:22). God answered the prophet and the boy came back to life and went back to his mother. This new miracle deepened the woman's faith further. Earlier, she was not sure who God was really, 'As surely as the Lord *your* God lives ...'

(1 Kgs. 17:12 – emphasis added). Having twice experienced God’s power and compassion, her words now expressed a trust in the One who sent this prophet to rescue and speak to her, ‘Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth’ (1 Kgs. 17:24).

Questions for reflection

1. This story shows that King Omri and his son, Ahab, seriously compromised their faith in dealing with the kingdom of Tyre and Sidon as they did. However, King Solomon built his royal palace and the temple of Jerusalem with cedar, cypress trees and gold supplied to him by the king of Tyre (1 Kgs. 9:10–11). Non-Israelite workers provided the bulk of the labour force to build the temple (1 Chr. 2:2; 2 Chr. 2:17–18; 2 Chr. 8:7–8). Are there limits to interfaith cooperation? If so, what are they?
2. God sent the prophet Elijah to a country known for its idol worship in order to protect his life from King Ahab and to bless a non-Jewish woman and her family. What does this say about the mutual benefits of interfaith relations?
3. What does this story tell us about the widow of Zarephath, her hospitality and her faith?
4. Jesus refers to this story when he presents his own mission to his people (Luke 4:25–26) in the synagogue in Nazareth. What is his purpose? What does this story tell us about God’s care for outsiders, especially those who experience hardship in their lives?
5. Do you see any connections between this story and World Vision’s work in different faith contexts? How can we serve God as his faithful agents, seeking to demonstrate his healing love to all?

Prayer

God of the world and the nations,

We praise you for the privilege of knowing you as the One and only true God.

We exalt you for being a sovereign and living God, who intervenes in the lives of individuals and in the history of the nations.

We thank you for the impartial way you deal with us, your people, and with all your human creatures.

Help us as we work with people of other faiths. We pray for discernment so that we may acknowledge, appreciate and benefit from everyone's skills.

We thank you for the blessings we receive through people who do not share our faith.

Please protect us from any inappropriate collaboration with leaders of other faith-based or secular organisations.

We praise you for your care for all your creatures, especially those in need and those who do not fully understand who you are.

We thank you for providing for their needs, both physical and spiritual. Make us channels of your compassion and witnesses of your truth.

In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

5

Naaman: A Syrian army general healed by the God of Israel

(2 Kings 5:1–27)

Israel and Syria

This story is about peaceful encounters between the political and religious leaders of two nations that often (in the Bible and today) confront each other on the battlefield, Aram (Syria) and Israel. The narrator does not name their kings (although they were probably Ben-Hadad II and Joram, respectively). This suggests that the theological implications of this amazing story are not limited to the events the narrator relates, which took place in the second half of the ninth century BC.

A powerful and vulnerable leader

Naaman, whose name means ‘pleasant’, was a Syrian military general and a powerful and highly respected man. His enemies probably feared him ‘because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram’ (2 Kgs. 5:1). Yet Naaman had a potentially deadly skin disease. A young Jewish girl, a prisoner of war, lived in his household as a maidservant to his wife. She had such compassion for her master and faith in God that she selflessly and confidently suggested that Naaman ask the Jewish prophet, Elisha, to cure him (2 Kgs. 5:1–3).

After due consultation with the king of Syria, the army general took the bold, humbling step of going to Israel, his enemy, hoping to be healed. The king of Israel was very distrustful when Naaman came to him and suspected him and the king of Syria of having a hidden, hostile agenda. He did not think to ask Elisha for advice. However, God’s loving purpose for this mighty but vulnerable

non-Israelite was not frustrated. He sent Elisha, who gently rebuked the king of Israel for his distrustful attitude. Elisha then agreed to cure Naaman in the way God usually blesses people – by trusting the word and obeying the sometimes unexpected commands. At first, the prophet's unanticipated instructions perplexed Naaman, but he listened to his attendants and agreed to dip himself in the Jordan River seven times (2 Kgs. 5:4–10).

Naaman becomes a believer

Having recovered his full health and dignity, Naaman acknowledged the God of Israel, not just as the Great Healer, but as the one and only true God: 'Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel' (2 Kgs. 5:15). He wanted to show his gratitude to God by giving presents to the man who cured him but Elisha refused all gifts because God freely grants undeserved blessings to everyone, regardless of their ethnic, religious and social background (2 Kgs. 5:15–16).

Naaman committed to worshipping only the God of Israel once he returned to Damascus, but because of his high-profile position, he asked the prophet if he could worship God in a low-profile manner. Elisha entrusted the new believer to God's care without imposing any requirements on him, 'Go in peace,' (2 Kgs. 5:19) he told Naaman.

Gehazi, a cheating servant

Sadly, the story ends on a sober note. Gehazi, Elisha's servant, made an elaborate attempt to take advantage of God's intervention in Naaman's life. He deceived the unsuspecting, generous Naaman in order to extort material benefits from him (2 Kgs. 5:20–22). The contrasting behaviours of godly Elisha and his unscrupulous servant may have confused Naaman, but 'God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow' (Gal. 6:7). God punished Gehazi and his household for using his name for personal gain (2 Kgs. 5:27). God loves us, but does not condone sinful behaviour.

Questions for reflection

1. Consider each of the characters in this story and their respective roles, especially the young girl, Naaman, Elisha and Gehazi. What can we learn from them? Whom could they represent in our respective contexts?
2. How does God show sovereignty, compassion and holiness in these events?
3. Jesus refers to the story of Naaman when he presents his own mission in the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:27). What points does he want to highlight to his people about God and the gospel message?
4. Naaman lived as a secret believer after he returned to Damascus. Are there circumstances where followers of Jesus Christ may have to live secretly?
5. What connections can you see between this story and World Vision's work in other faith contexts? How can we faithfully serve God and demonstrate healing love for all?

Prayer

Our Father in heaven,

We praise you that long before you sent your Son to demonstrate your love for humankind, you cared for all, including those who were not your people. You used your servants to bring healing and salvation to them. We praise you that you are sovereign over nations and individuals. You fulfil your purposes through believers and others, mighty and ordinary people, the rich and the poor, the learned and the unlearned.

Like the young girl, help us to speak the right word at the right time. Like Naaman, help us to humbly acknowledge our wounds and earnestly seek your healing. Like Elisha, enable us to wisely support new believers and do good works, even for our enemies.

Help us not to be too sceptical about people's intentions when strangers, or even our enemies, approach us for assistance, and encourage us not to use your gifts for our own interests.

Without you, we cannot love people the way you expect us to do. Help us to serve all people with integrity and selflessness, and to share your unconditional love with everyone.

We pray for our brothers and sisters who do not enjoy freedom of belief and for those enduring discrimination and persecution because of their faith. We ask you to protect them, comfort them, strengthen them and encourage them. May their witness inspire other people to open their hearts to you and accept you as their Lord and Saviour.

Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

6

Jesus and his disciples are unwelcome in a Samaritan village

(Luke 9:51–56)

Who are the Samaritans?

The next four studies deal with the Samaritans, people who lived in Samaria, a province situated between Galilee in northern Israel and Judea in the south, during the time of Jesus. Shechem was Samaria's main town. Today, there is still a small Samaritan community in Jaffa and in the West Bank city of Nablus.

The gospel recounts four significant stories concerning Jesus and the Samaritans. The Gospel of Luke recorded three of them, which is perhaps not a coincidence, as Luke is probably the only non-Jewish writer of the New Testament.

The history of the Samaritans goes back to eighth century BC after the kingdom of Israel became the kingdom of Judah in the south and the kingdom of Israel in the north in 933 BC. The Assyrian army destroyed the kingdom of Israel (sometimes called the kingdom of Samaria) in 722 BC as divine punishment for the idolatry of God's people (2 Kgs. 17:7–18). Many Israelites who lived in Samaria were deported to Assyria (present-day Iraq) (2 Kgs. 17:5–6) where the Assyrian king brought foreigners to Samaria to better control the land (2 Kgs. 17:24–33). These foreigners married local Jews and adopted some Jewish customs and beliefs. However, in 400 BC, the Samaritans defied the Jewish people and built themselves a temple on Mount Gerizim.¹³ During the rule of the Jewish King, John Hyrcanus, a Jewish army attacked Samaria and destroyed the

¹³ The Samaritan text of Deuteronomy 27:4 references the temple's building site as 'Mount Gerizim' instead of 'Mount Ebal'.

Gerizim temple (129 BC), but the Samaritans continued to worship on Mount Gerizim.

Enduring hostility between Jews and Samaritans

Relationships between Jews and Samaritans were extremely antagonistic. Clashes based on ethnic and religious differences often occurred between the two communities because the Jews were proud of their ‘pure’ ethnic ancestry and despised the Samaritans for their mixed racial background. The Jews believed in all of God’s prophets from Moses to Malachi and all of the scriptures while the Samaritans accepted only Moses as a prophet and consequently their scriptures consisted only of the first five books of the Old Testament (i.e. the Pentateuch).

Documentation of the hostility between Jews and Samaritans is throughout historical texts. The Jewish writer Jesus Ben Sirach stated, ‘There are two nations that my soul detests, the third is not a nation at all: the inhabitants of Mount Seir [the Edomites], and the Philistines and the stupid people living at Shechem [the Samaritans]’ (Ecclus. 50:25–26).¹⁴ Similarly, the Gospel of John tells us that ‘Jews do not associate with Samaritans’ (John 4:9). The term ‘Samaritan’ became synonymous with an insult, as many Jews viewed Samaritans as the devil’s agents. One such example is found in the Gospel of John: infuriated by Jesus’ claims that they were not from God because they refused to accept Jesus’ word as truth, Jewish leaders insulted him, ‘Aren’t we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?’ (John 8:48).

Jesus rebukes his disciples

Jesus exercised his ministry in this deeply polarised country referred to by the Romans as ‘Palestine’ and by the Jews as ‘Israel’ (Galilee, Samaria and Judea).

¹⁴ Jesus Ben Sirach, who lived in second century BC, wrote the book of Ecclesiasticus, also known as the book of ‘Wisdom’ or the book of ‘Sirach’. It is a Deuterocanonical (or apocryphal) book of the Old Testament, found only in the Catholic Bibles (and some other editions). It is not to be confused with the canonical book of Ecclesiastes (found in all Bibles).

He spent most of his time in Galilee, a province in northern Israel much more multicultural and multi-ethnic than Judea. When Jesus knew the time had come for him to complete his mission, he resolutely decided to leave Galilee and travel to Jerusalem with his disciples, where he knew he would be sentenced, put to death and raised to life again (cf. Luke 9:22).

When travelling between Galilee and Jerusalem, many Jews chose to go around Samaria, but Jesus decided not to take this detour, but rather took the shortest, most direct route to Jerusalem through Samaria. The journey to Jerusalem could not be done in a single day, so Jesus and his disciples planned to stay overnight in a Samaritan village. When the villagers realised they were Jews heading for Jerusalem, they refused to let them stay. This enraged Jesus' disciples and they reacted immediately. The most outspoken among them, James and John, known as 'the Sons of Thunder' (Mark 3:17), wanted to enlist Jesus in their murderous anger against the Samaritans, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them, even as Elijah did?' (Luke 9:54).¹⁵ Jesus responded to his impulsive, incensed disciples unambiguously, reprimanding them for their judgemental reaction. He severely criticised their vengeful attitude, 'You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy people's lives, but to save them'.¹⁶

Jesus did not come to condemn people but to save, forgive and restore their relationships with their Creator. The difference between Mosaic Law and the gospel is very significant. The former is based on the principle of justice and retaliation, 'life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot' (Exod. 21:23–24). The latter is all about God's unconditional and saving love for all people, including evildoers. Not only does Jesus highlight the contrast

¹⁵ Several manuscripts show the words 'even as Elijah did' and a scribe may have inserted them. They refer to a spectacular action by Elijah that involved fire falling from heaven that occurred twice during the prophet's ministry. In one case, God's exclusive right to be worshipped by the chosen people was at stake (1 Kgs. 18:38). In the other, the prophet faced a clear and immediate death threat (2 Kgs. 1:10, 12).

¹⁶ Again, not all manuscripts include these words of Jesus. They probably represent the scribe's (fair) commentary on Jesus' indignant response to his disciples' vindictive behaviour.

between the law and the gospel, but he also calls his disciples to love everyone, including their enemies, ‘You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous’ (Matt. 5:43–45). In fact, the Mosaic Law does not call for hating one’s enemy, instead commanding the opposite, ‘Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself’ (Lev. 19:18) and, ‘When a foreigner resides amongst you in your land, do not ill-treat them. The foreigner residing amongst you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt’ (Lev. 19:33–34). In Matthew 5:43–45 Jesus was speaking against this misinterpretation by Jewish teachers.

Questions for reflection

1. Who are the Samaritans for us in our own context? Why is there animosity between their community and ours?
2. Do we sometimes feel these people are unkind and perhaps even hostile to us? What is our attitude towards them?
3. In our own community, are there misguided interpretations of Jesus’ teaching about how we should relate to our enemies? How can we help each other put Jesus’ teaching into practice?

Prayer

Our heavenly and gracious Father,

We worship you for you are a compassionate God, a God who loves immeasurably, who does not hold our sins against us, who forgives us and always welcomes us.

We thank you for Jesus Christ, your only Son, our Lord and Saviour. We

thank you for his perfect teaching and sinless life. We thank you that through him we returned to you and can now call you our Father.

We humbly confess before you that we often act as if we are not followers of Christ, as if we do not know his teaching. We admit that sometimes we do not even want to follow his teaching, and we seek revenge against our enemies instead of forgiving them.

Help us not to retaliate when people do us harm, not to be vengeful when they do us wrong. Help us to overcome our first and instinctive reactions.

Help us to walk in Jesus' footsteps, to see people as our fellow human beings, including those we might consider as our worst enemies.

Help us to forgive them as you have forgiven us.

Help us to be peacemakers, bridge-builders and hope-givers in our communities.

Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

7

The Good Samaritan: Our model for loving our neighbours

(Luke 10:25–37)

In the previous study, we saw that Jesus taught his disciples not to condemn their bitter enemies, the unwelcoming Samaritans, but instead to forgive them. In this study, Jesus goes further, presenting a Samaritan man as a model for those who are keen to comply with God's law concerning loving one's neighbour.

'What must I do to inherit eternal life?'

A Jewish expert in the law wanted to test Jesus' ability to answer an important and challenging question, so he asked, 'Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' (Luke 10:25).

The wording suggests that, for this lawyer, salvation had more to do with human achievements than with God's love and grace. Jesus answered him with two questions, 'What is written in the Law? How do you read it?' (Luke 10:26).

It is not enough to know what is in God's word; it is equally important to understand it correctly. The lawyer gave a remarkable answer that rightly linked loving God and loving our neighbour (Luke 10:27, cf. Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). On hearing his answer, Jesus commended him and exhorted him to be consistent by putting into practice what he just said. It is extremely important for us to translate our knowledge into action, 'Do this and you will live' (Luke 10:28, cf. Matt. 7:21).

Like most Jews in Jesus' day, the expert in the law was convinced that his neighbour was simply his fellow Israelite. Being a scholar, the man wanted to display his legal expertise further, putting another challenging question to Jesus, 'Who is my neighbour?' (Luke 10:29). Perhaps he hoped to excuse himself from following Jesus' order to implement his own response. However, the same chapter where the verse prescribing one to love one's neighbour (Lev. 19:18) also demands one to love non-Israelites, for they are our neighbours, too, 'When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not ill-treat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God' (Lev. 19:33–34).

'Who is my neighbour?'

Jesus appealed to the man's common sense and confronted him with a parable about personal relationships with fellow human beings.

A man was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho (a distance of about 25 kilometres/15 miles). Though Jesus did not disclose the man's identity, he was likely referring to a Jew. Robbers attacked and stripped this man of all his belongings, leaving him half-dead on the roadside. A priest and a Levite passed by, one after the other, saw him lying there, and neither rescued him. Instead, they crossed to the other side of the road, concerned about their ceremonial purity because, as religious leaders, touching a dead body would make them ritually unclean (Num. 19:11; cf. Lev. 21:1). A Samaritan man also happened to be travelling on the same road. He immediately stopped to help the wounded man. He cleaned his wounds with wine and eased his pain with olive oil. He then brought him to the nearest inn and took care of him. The next day, he entrusted the man to the innkeeper, telling him he would pay for any additional expenses upon his return (Luke 10:30–35).

At this point in the story, Jesus turned to the lawyer and asked him, 'Which one of these three people was a real neighbour to the man who was beaten up by robbers?' (Luke 10:36 CEV). The question was rhetorical and the man answered correctly, without explicitly acknowledging that the compassionate man was a

Samaritan, not a fellow Israelite, ‘The one who had mercy on him’ (Luke 10:37). Jesus then urged the Jewish law expert to follow the example of the Samaritan, ‘Go and do likewise’ (Luke 10:38).

What loving my neighbour really means

Jesus told this story in response to the question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ Jesus not only answered this key question, he also revealed how we should love our neighbour. We can summarise his answer as follows:

- 1) *Jesus showed that our neighbour is any person in need.* The neighbour we need to love as we love ourselves (Lev. 19:18) may well be a foreigner, a stranger, or someone who does not belong to our national, ethnic or religious community (Lev. 19:33–34). They may even be our enemy. The Samaritan did not care about the wounded man’s identity; he simply saw him as a person, a fellow human being in great need, and instantly stepped in to save his life.
- 2) *Jesus insisted that genuine love is love in action – serving people and caring for them.* The Samaritan man showed his love in practical, self-sacrificing ways. He took care of the victim, unreservedly spending his time, energy and money on him. He did not use this opportunity to impose his religious beliefs on the man, who was very vulnerable, physically and morally.
- 3) *There was no such thing as a ‘Good Samaritan’ until Jesus told this story because Jews considered all Samaritans to be evil people.* Jesus used this parable to teach us that goodness exists in everyone, including those whom we might consider as the worst human beings on Earth. Sin blurs God’s image in every human creature, but does not totally eradicate it.

In demonstrating his love for a man who belonged to his enemy’s people, the Samaritan is an excellent model for us to follow, ‘Go and do likewise’ (Luke 10:37) is what Jesus taught us through this story. This story also challenges us, as disciples of Jesus Christ, in at least two other ways.

It is *a call to action*. The way Jesus posed the question to the lawyer is very significant. The man asked, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ Jesus responded, ‘To whom am I neighbour?’¹⁷ In other words, the real question is ultimately, ‘What can I do to become a neighbour to those needy people whom God puts in my way, both in and beyond my community?’

Finally, *this story calls us to honestly examine our attitude towards people who are different from us*. Do we have prejudices against them? Do we look down upon them because they belong to a different religion, ethnic group or social, economic, or cultural background? If so, we urgently need to change our mindset and see these people, first and foremost, as fellow human beings, who are essentially very similar to us. We must stop ignoring or despising our enemies, let alone demonising them. Instead, we should open our eyes and look for God’s grace at work in their lives. Are we prepared to learn from, appreciate, and possibly imitate those who are different from us and allow them to challenge us?

Questions for reflection

1. Imagine someone asks you, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ You want to answer them with a challenging story, similar to that of the ‘Good Samaritan’. Share your story.
2. In today’s context, who are those left by the wayside? Who are the people we need to ‘neighbour’ in our own community and beyond?
3. Think of people who are different from you. Do you have prejudices against any of them? Do you need to confess and repent for an unfriendly attitude towards them?
4. Jesus challenged the Jewish lawyer by presenting a Samaritan man as a role model. Should we also challenge our faith leaders when they display unkind or judgemental attitudes towards people from other ethnic and religious backgrounds? If yes, how should we do it?

¹⁷ Leon Morris, *Luke. An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1974, 1st ed. and repr.) 190.

Prayer

Lord God,

We praise your name, which is above all other names.

We praise you for your word, which teaches us that you are a loving God and that before everything else you expect us to love you and to love our neighbours. What a privilege to have this personal and intimate relationship with you.

We praise you for you have loved us first. You reached out to us by sending your own Son Jesus Christ to be our master, our teacher and our Saviour. We praise you for you have enabled us to respond to your love through your Holy Spirit working in us.

Help us to love our neighbour, regardless of who they are, especially those who are needy.

Help us to demonstrate our love in action to those around us.

Help us to have a positive attitude towards people who are different from us. Help us to challenge our fellow Christians sensitively and respectfully, including our faith and community leaders, about their attitudes to foreigners and people of other faiths, when appropriate.

Please forgive us for our uncharitable behaviour, thoughts and feelings towards others. Deliver us from our prejudices of all kinds.

Help us to see the best in every person we meet and to relate to them in a Christ-like way.

For your glory and the sake of your kingdom we pray.

Amen.

8

A Samaritan leper returns to praise God after being healed by Jesus

(Luke 17:11–18)

Jesus heals 10 lepers

Ten men with leprosy¹⁸ lived outside a village between Samaria and Galilee. Jewish law required that they be quarantined to protect the rest of society (cf. Lev. 13:45–46), making them outcasts, ignored and ostracised by the whole community. Some people believed their disease was a direct consequence or punishment for their sins.

When the lepers realised Jesus was walking towards the village, they shouted from afar, ‘Jesus, Master, have pity on us’ (Luke 17:13). Jesus immediately responded to their plea for mercy. He did not move closer to them or touch them, as he did on a previous occasion (Luke 5:12–16); he just told them to go and show themselves to the priests. Once cured, this is what lepers must do *after* so that the priests can verify the healing (cf. Lev. 14:2–3). However, in a test of faith, Jesus sent them to the priests prior to their healing. He essentially asked them to act as if they were cured, and by not objecting and doing as they were told, they received cleansing, ‘And as they went, they were cleansed’ (Luke 17:14).

¹⁸ The Greek word traditionally translated *leprosy* was used for various diseases affecting the skin – not necessarily leprosy (Luke 17:12, note in NIV-UK Bible).

The grateful Samaritan

When the men realised that the leprosy was gone, one of them was so full of joy and gratitude he did not wait to see a priest for confirmation, but immediately returned to Jesus ‘praising God in a loud voice’ (Luke 17:15). He came very close to Jesus and threw himself at his feet in an act of lowly homage. Luke noted that the man was a foreigner, a Samaritan (Luke 17:16). Ordinarily, Jews and Samaritans kept away from each other (John 4:9; Ecclus. (Sirach) 50:25–26), but suffering seemed to have broken down religious and ethnic barriers between the two communities.

Jesus could have ignored the fact that the man was a Samaritan. After all, it may just be a coincidence. Instead, Jesus took advantage of this fact to drive home a point he made previously in the parable of the Good Samaritan. He deliberately highlighted the ethnic identity of this man, who belonged to a community loathed by the Jewish people. He expressed his disappointment in the Samaritan’s nine companions, ‘Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?’ (Luke 17:17–18). Jesus was again keen to challenge his people’s prejudice against the Samaritans, including his own disciples. He wanted to turn their negative attitude around by pointing out the exemplary conduct of the grateful Samaritan.

The blessed Samaritan

Jesus then turned to the grateful Samaritan and encouraged him, ‘Rise and go; your faith has made you well’ (Luke 17:19). The other lepers likely had the same faith in Jesus’ words, but they lacked the Samaritan’s deep sense of gratitude that compelled him to turn back and thank Jesus. They probably went to the priests, like good Orthodox Jews, but did not bother to return and thank God for restoring their health and dignity through Jesus.

Only the Samaritan heard Jesus’ reassuring words, which, when closely examined, may well have had a deeper meaning, ‘It is possible that we should

take the verb [made you well] to mean more than cure: it is literally “have saved you”. It may be that Jesus recognised an attitude in this man that brings salvation, sending him off with the assurance that his soul as well as body was well. Full restoration means a saved soul as well as a sound body.¹⁹

Questions for reflection

1. Are there people who live on the edges of our community? Who are they? Who/what marginalises them?
2. Think about our community: do hardship and suffering tend to bring people together who would otherwise live apart?
3. Does Jesus have a bias for foreigners because he praises a Samaritan again and contrasts his exemplary attitude with the healing of the ungrateful Jewish lepers?
4. What can we learn from this text about our role as Christians and the underprivileged in our community?

Prayer

Our great and merciful God,

We worship you for sending Jesus Christ, who revealed to us your vast mercy for all people.

We praise you that you do not discriminate against outsiders, and that they even seem to attract your attention more than others.

We praise you that you care for all our needs, both physical and spiritual.

Please have mercy on us. Too often, we care little for people who are not part of our community. We rarely welcome them in our midst. We discriminate against them, willingly or unwillingly, and are prejudiced against those who are different from us.

¹⁹ Morris, 259.

Please forgive us and help us to become more like Jesus.

Help us to reach out to those whom our societies keep apart for all sorts of reasons.

Help us to support them, speak on their behalf, welcome them and befriend them.

In the name of Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

9

A Samaritan woman discovers that Jesus is the Messiah

(John 4:1–42)

Jesus and his disciples in a Samaritan village

The mission of Jesus and his disciples in Judea went well and many people were baptised as a sign of their new religious allegiance. This success made the Pharisees – members of a strict religious party – very unhappy. They wanted to thwart Jesus’ mission so Jesus decided to move back to Galilee with his disciples, taking the shortest route via Samaria. They arrived in Sychar, a village close to Mount Gerizim where Samaritans worshipped God, at midday, tired and hungry. The disciples went to purchase some food while Jesus sat by a place known as Jacob’s well. He was very thirsty, but did not have a jar with which to draw water from the well (John 4:1–8).

Jesus reaches out to the Samaritan woman

A lone woman approached the well while Jesus sat nearby. She came at a time of day when most people stayed indoors to escape the heat in order to avoid potentially humiliating encounters with other villagers, who despised her because of her lifestyle. Jesus initiated a conversation with her with a simple, direct request, ‘Will you give me a drink?’ (John 4:7).

The woman was shocked, realising the man speaking to her was a Jew by his accent or clothes and asked, ‘How can you ask me for a drink?’ (John 4:9).

Jews and Samaritans usually would not have anything to do with each other,²⁰ let alone eat or drink from the same vessels and Jewish men would not normally speak with women, especially when no one else was around. ‘Jewish piety warned men not to talk much with women (some rabbis added, even with one’s own wife!), both because of temptation and because of what others might think’.²¹

As a religious leader, Jesus was expected not to engage with sinful people, especially women with bad reputations (cf. Luke 7:39). However, Jesus behaved as if he did not really care about social norms and was much more concerned with people than customs and rules. He reached out to this woman in a way that crossed ethnic, religious, gender and social boundaries. Even his disciples were shocked when they returned and found him talking with her. However, they trusted him enough not to question him about this perplexing situation, which could potentially undermine his ministry (John 4:27).

Jesus offers the woman life-giving water

To the woman’s bewilderment, Jesus responded to her by speaking about ‘the gift of God’ (John 4:10) and offering her ‘living water’, i.e. running, fresh or flowing water, as opposed to stagnant or well water. The woman was even more baffled at Jesus’ offer, which she interpreted literally, ‘You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?’ (John 4:11).

Jesus then explained to her that the living water he was speaking about was life-giving water that would quench her thirst once for all. The woman was now very excited thinking Jesus had magical powers and could supply her with supernatural water. She definitely wanted to receive this water, whatever it was, if it would quench her thirst forever and mean not drawing water from the well any longer (John 4:13–15).

²⁰ John 4:9 (‘For Jews do not associate with Samaritans’). Only some manuscripts include this information in the scripture (note in NRSV Bible).

²¹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary. New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 274.

So far, Jesus talked to the woman about basic human needs, both physical (water) and spiritual (life-giving water). He brought a more personal tone to the conversation, with details about her private life, past broken relationships and present adultery, as God's precious gift of eternal life is an individual gift. Nevertheless, he did not condemn her, but rather commended her for her honesty, 'What you have just said ['I have no husband'] is quite true' (John 4:18).

What true worship is about

Because of his insight into her life, the woman realised that Jesus was a prophet. She immediately asked him a pressing, theological question. Although Jesus was a Jew, she wanted to know his opinion about the age-long dispute between Jews and Samaritans, was the temple of Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim the proper place to worship (John 4:19–20)?

Jesus replied, revealing that his coming would usher in a radically new era where it was no longer relevant where people worshipped God. What was imperative now was to worship God as the Father 'in the Spirit and in truth' (John 4:23). Our Creator wants us to worship truthfully, knowing who God really is, and spiritually, since we can only truly know who God is through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' response disclosed three key divine attributes. First, 'God is spirit' (John 4:24), hence the question about the right place to worship is irrelevant. We can worship anywhere in the world. Second, God is the Father, not in a biological sense but spiritually. The Creator and the Lord of the world is a loving and gracious God. Finally, God is the Saviour ('for salvation is from the Jews'). God chose the Jewish people to prepare the way for the coming of the One who would bring salvation, not only to the Jewish people, but also to all human beings.

The Messiah has already come

On hearing Jesus' astounding words, the woman recognised that the conversation had taken a turn far beyond her reach. These words, however,

awoke in her the belief in the promised Messiah, who would bring God's ultimate revelation. She expressed her messianic hope in this end-of-time event, 'I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us' (John 4:25).

The Samaritan woman did not need to wait until the Messiah came to receive an explanation that would settle the dispute between the Jews and the Samaritans; Jesus told her immediately, 'I, the one speaking to you – I am he' (John 4:26). What an extraordinary revelation he made to this woman, the first person to hear from Jesus' lips that he is the long-awaited Messiah.

When the disciples came back, the woman returned to her village, leaving her water jar near the well (John 4:28). She shared her story boldly with the other villagers, pointing them towards Jesus, 'Come, see a man who told me everything I've ever done. Could this be the Messiah?' (John 4:29). She was no longer afraid of what they might think of her, and was right to be fearless. Many trusted her testimony and hurried to see Jesus for themselves. Not only did they listen to Jesus and accept him as the promised Messiah, but they also urged him to stay in their village for a while. Jesus warmly accepted their invitation (John 4:39–40).

What a contrast with these Samaritans were those who did not want Jesus and his disciples to stay overnight in their community (cf. Luke 9:51–56). The people of Sychar had an exemplary attitude towards Jesus, 'Their faith, and the faith of many others who met Jesus during his two-days' stay in the village, becomes based on a first-hand experience of Jesus, not as a national leader of the old Israel, but as the Saviour of Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles, in fact as *the Saviour of the world*'.²²

²² R. V. G. Tasker, *John*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1960, repr. 1994) 78; italics original.

What true dialogue is about

Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman is a model of how to engage with people from other faith and ethnic backgrounds. Let us consider how the conversation progresses between them.

Jesus first looked at the woman as a human being and reached out to her, despite all the barriers that separated them. With humility, he told her that he was thirsty and asked for help.

Once communication was established, Jesus told the woman about her own thirst – her spiritual needs and God's readiness to fulfil them through him. Then, Jesus sensitively brought a personal, non-judgemental tone to the conversation by revealing the woman's tumultuous past and present illegitimate relationship. Realising that Jesus was no ordinary man and that he accepted her as she was, she moves the discussion to the religious realm with a vital question about the controversial issue of worship locations.

Jesus revealed the newness of his mission, compared to the ancient Jewish and Samaritan faiths. Yet this mission, he observed, was the fulfilment of the message God entrusted to the Jewish prophets throughout Israel's history. While Samaritans did not acknowledge any prophets after Moses or scriptures apart from his, they worshipped God but without full knowledge of who the Creator was, unlike the Jewish people, 'You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews' (John 4:22). Thus, Jesus did not shy away from telling the woman a truth, which, as a Samaritan, may well offended her, but did so only after he built a friendly rapport with her.

Far from rejecting Jesus' challenging message, the woman asserted her faith in the still-to-come Messiah. Jesus sensed that she was ready to receive the ultimate revelation about who he was. He confidently and unambiguously told her that she was talking to the Messiah in person (John 4:25–26).

In brief, the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman shows us that for genuine interfaith dialogue to happen, we need boldness to break down

cultural walls. We also need inner strength to overcome deep-seated prejudices, as well as profound respect for all people. We must have humility to express our needs candidly, compassion to support each other, transparency about our convictions and, last but not least, confidence in our faith.

Such dialogue engages the whole person, not just the mind or the heart. It comes from our common humanity and our shared needs, values and beliefs. It does not gloss over differences and conflicting claims of truth, but considers them in an informed, fair and respectful way.

Questions for reflection

1. Are we prepared to break the rules in order to reach out to others?
2. Are we willing to admit our vulnerability and seek help from people outside our own community?
3. Can believers from other faiths worship the true God, although they do not accept Jesus Christ? Is it fair to say that people either know God through Jesus Christ or do not know him at all? Are Christians the only ones who worship the true God?
4. Are we confident enough about the gospel that we are prepared to share its message with people from other faiths, or those without faith, when there is a good opportunity?
5. Is dialogue the best form of Christian witness, especially in interfaith contexts?
6. When is it appropriate for World Vision staff to engage in interfaith dialogue?

Prayer

Lord God,

We praise you that through Jesus Christ that you have broken down all dividing walls between people. Through him, you demonstrated that you

love all peoples and every person. You show no favouritism for anyone and you discriminate against no one.

We thank you for Jesus Christ, our Saviour, who is our great model in reaching out to people from other faith and ethnic backgrounds.

We confess that we are prejudiced against others and we find all kinds of excuses to explain our attitudes.

We are sorry that we often look down on people who we believe fall short of our moral standards. We forget that we, too, fall short of your moral standards.

Help us to be compassionate, not judgemental, towards our fellow human beings.

Help us to respect, understand and appreciate them.

We also confess that we do not always have enough confidence in the truth of the gospel, or that our confidence sometimes leads to pride and complacency.

Help us to be both humble and bold.

Help us to be both sensitive and eager to share your greatest gift to humankind, Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world.

In his name we pray. Amen.

10

A Roman officer is commended by Jesus for his humble faith

(Matthew 8:5–13)

Palestine under Roman occupation

In the first century, Palestine was part of the Roman Empire, located in the province known as Syria (cf. Luke 2:2). The empire conquered and occupied the entire Middle East region. All Jews resented the abusive presence of the Roman army in their land (cf. Matt. 5:41) and loathed the oppressing occupier. Jews considered the Roman soldiers pagans and idol worshippers, who were so devoted to their emperor that they saw him as a god. An insurmountable wall separated Jews and Romans for political, ethnic and religious reasons and prevented any common ground, e.g. if a Jew entered a Roman's house he was defiled.

Jesus meets an atypical Roman officer

In this passage, Jesus just arrived in Capernaum, a city built near the shores of the Sea of Galilee where an unnamed army officer described as a centurion came to him. Centurions were professional officers in the Roman military overseeing a regiment that consisted of groups of centuries numbering about 100 men. Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army, although they may or may not be Romans themselves. The Roman army often recruited soldiers from neighbouring countries, so this centurion was perhaps from Syria or Lebanon. The man was certainly a non-Jew, in other words, a Gentile, who must have lived in the country for quite some time because he had a servant (or slave), who

was unwell and close to death (Matt. 8:5–6; cf. John 4:47). The army officer was an unusual soldier on several accounts.

He is compassionate

First, he was a compassionate, humble man who cared so much about his servant that he considered him like a son (cf. John 4:46). Unlike most soldiers, he showed no sign of arrogance and humbled himself to beg Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus responded immediately, saying he will come to see the servant and heal him. Jesus was not worried about defilement by entering a pagan's house when this would be a cause of concern for most of his contemporaries, especially fellow religious leaders, because of their strict observance of ceremonial purity rules.

He is trustful

Second, the Roman officer showed a remarkably perceptive faith in Jesus. For him, Jesus was much more than a miracle-worker; he was God's representative on earth. As such, only Jesus' compassion matched his sovereign authority, which exceeded that of both the centurion and the emperor. The centurion believed that Jesus could not only heal the servant, but that it was unnecessary for Jesus to enter the house to do so because he could heal from a distance. 'Most of the centurion's contemporaries would have balked at such faith. Even Jewish people considered long-distance miracles especially difficult and rare, the domain of only the most powerful holy men like Hanina ben Dosa.'²³

He is humble

Finally, the centurion was fully aware of his unworthiness, 'Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed' (Matt. 8:8). As a Gentile, he knew he was not entitled to ask Jesus for a favour and was mindful that, as a great man of God, Jesus was holy,

²³ Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*. The IVP New Testament Commentaries Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 173.

and he was unworthy to invite Jesus into his house. As an army officer, he was certainly a highly respected man, but he was conscious of his moral and spiritual bankruptcy and did not dare come too close to Jesus. In Luke's version of the same story, the centurion sent Jewish intermediaries to plead his case with Jesus rather than approach Jesus himself because he knew he was unworthy (Luke 7:3).

Amazed at the officer's faith, Jesus declared, 'I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith' (Matt. 8:10). Once more, Jesus used a non-Jewish person to challenge his own people, 'No one challenges our prejudices – and sometimes provokes our antagonism – more than a "good" member of a group that has unjustly treated people we love'.²⁴

Jesus issued a serious warning to his fellow Jews when he announced that in the glorious heavenly celebration of God's kingdom, many people from all over the world would take part in the messianic banquet, together with the patriarchs (Abraham, Jacob and Isaac), who first received God's covenant and promises (cf. Isa. 25:6–9). The subjects of the kingdom (the Jewish people) would be refused admission because they did not accept Jesus as their long-promised Messiah (Matt. 8:11–12; cf. Matt. 21:43).

Jesus was not discriminating against his own people, but he wanted to make it clear that in the new covenant there is no automatic advantage in being born into a Jewish (or a Christian) home. The only thing that matters is what we make of God's ultimate revelation in Jesus Christ, 'An individual's faith, his or her response to the authority claims of Jesus, will prove decisive. The alternative to entrance into the kingdom is painted in horrible colors'.²⁵

²⁴ Keener (1997), 172.

²⁵ D. A. Carson, *When Jesus Confronts the World. An Exposition of Matthew 8–10* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1995), 28.

Questions for reflection

1. Think about people from other faiths whom you know. How is God at work in their lives? Do you expect at least some of them to have a high view of Jesus, and perhaps even to believe in him as God's supreme messenger?
2. Are there times when we feel challenged by believers from other faiths, e.g. the way they treat others better than we do, or by their perception of God?
3. Do we consider ourselves to be the kingdom's rightful citizens or its unworthy subjects? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being born into a Christian home and growing up in a Christian environment?

Prayer

Our heavenly Father,

We worship you for who you are, the sovereign and compassionate God. You use your power not to destroy, but to heal and to save. You care not only for your people, but also for all your human creatures.

We praise you that though we are unworthy to fellowship with you, you have called us to be your sons and daughters.

We confess that we sometimes take for granted your grace and your love for us. We are delighted to be your children, but we often forget what it means for us to be disciples and servants.

We confess that we do not always live as your people. We sometimes judge others because they do not worship you the way we do. Please forgive us.

We pray that you will open our eyes to see your goodness in all people, including those who belong to a different faith and those who have no faith at all.

Help us to be humble enough to allow them to challenge us.

Help us to love you more and serve you better by loving and serving our fellow human beings.

Amen.

II

A Canaanite woman is praised by Jesus for her persistent faith

(Matthew 15:21–28)

Jesus takes his disciples to Tyre and Sidon

Jesus and his disciples were very popular, partly due to their healing ministry in Galilee. Jesus decided to retreat with his disciples to rest and allow them to have extended quality time with him. They headed north to the region of Tyre and Sidon (modern-day southern Lebanon) on the Mediterranean coast (Matt. 15:21) – a region profoundly influenced by Greek culture whose diverse population worshipped many gods. This is the same place where God earlier sent the prophet Elijah, where the Phoenician widow hosted him (1 Kgs. 17:7–24).

Despite their corrupt religious beliefs, Jesus declared to the unrepentant cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida in Galilee that had the people of Tyre and Sidon received Jesus' ministry, they would have been more open to the gospel than Chorazin and Bethsaida citizens. Thus, on Judgement Day, treatment would be more lenient (Matt. 11:20–22).

'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!'

We do not know much about the woman who approached Jesus, except that she was a descendant of the ancient Canaanites forced out of their land because of their idolatry and replaced by the Israelites (cf. Deut. 18:12).²⁶ Although she was not Jewish, she addressed Jesus in an astonishing way, 'Lord, Son of David, have

²⁶ The Gospel of Mark identifies the woman as 'a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia' (Mark 7:26). Phoenicia, like Palestine, was part of the Roman province of Syria (cf. Luke 2:2).

mercy on me!’ (Matt. 15:22; cf. Matt. 9:27). Given that ‘Son of David’ was one of the Messiah’s titles (Matt. 22:41–42), her confession of Jesus’ unique identity was astounding as Jesus’ own disciples had not even come to understand this fully yet.²⁷ So how did the woman come to know Jesus and his unique mission? Was it by divine revelation or by word of mouth? We do not know, but we do know that this Gentile woman was the beneficiary of God’s amazing grace.

The woman was in deep pain and anguish because an evil spirit tormented her young daughter (Mark 7:25–26). She threw herself before Jesus, imploring him to set her child free of the demon and end her suffering. Surprisingly, Jesus remained silent (cf. Matt. 8:24) and he appeared to have his own plan of action to rescue the woman’s child by testing the mother’s faith. His uncaring disciples became impatient and exasperated by the woman’s persistence and asked Jesus to send her away. Jesus does not agree with their request; he will rescue the woman, but first he wants to test her faith and bring out the best in her.

‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel’

Jesus responded to his disciples in an unexpected way. Although he did not comply with their request, he seemed indifferent to the hurting woman. His words sounded unkind and hard to understand, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel’ (Matt. 15:24). Was Jesus’ mission really limited to Israel? Did he not come for all nations?

Initially, Jesus was sent to the Jewish people, chosen by God to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. Jesus specifically told his disciples not to go to the Gentiles (‘nations’, non-Jews, pagans) or the Samaritans, but to reach out to ‘the lost sheep of Israel’ (Matt. 10:6). Therefore, the Jewish Jesus was to carry out his universal mission from within Israel’s human and geographical boundaries. Yet, Jesus was fully aware that his mission was not just for the people of Israel but for

²⁷ A little later in Matthew 16:13–16 Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah, after Jesus takes his disciples to Caesarea Philippi near Mount Hermon. Caesarea Philippi (present-day Banias) is located about 32 kilometres (20 miles) north of the Sea of Galilee on the east side of the Jordan River (in the Israeli-occupied, Syrian territory known as the Golan Heights).

the sake of all peoples without exception (cf. Matt. 8:11, 21:43; John 10:16, 12:32). As soon as his mission on Earth was complete, before he ascended to heaven, he sent his disciples to all nations, appointing them to be his witnesses ‘in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1:8; cf. Matt. 28:19; Luke 24:47).

‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted!’

The suffering mother insistently pled with Jesus to do something for her and her daughter. However, Jesus explained to the woman, in proverbial language, that it was inappropriate to upset his agenda by starting a new ministry among the Gentiles, ‘It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs’ (Matt. 15:26).

The woman refused to take Jesus’ ‘no’ for an answer and humbly acknowledged that she had no right to ask Jesus for a favour, especially as a non-Jewish person, but she did not give up, ‘When we recognize that we have nowhere else to turn, clinging to the only One who can answer us is an act of faith’.²⁸ Using the same imagery, the woman challenged Jesus, knowing that surely, his compassion did not end at ethnic and geographical boundaries and he was not indifferent to the suffering of a fellow human being, begging him, ‘Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table’ (Matt. 15:27). Jesus was amazed at the woman’s penetrating, daring reply. He was pleased with her bold attitude that displayed remarkable insight into Jesus’ personality, as well as great faith, deep humility and sound appreciation for Jesus’ kind-heartedness despite his initial apparent harshness.

Jesus commended the woman for her exemplary faith, ‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted!’ (Matt. 15:28), healing her child immediately. The disciples felt challenged when they heard these words exposing the lingering racism and religious prejudices against non-Jews. This was yet another miracle that Jesus performed at a distance (cf. Matt. 8:13; Luke 17:14).

²⁸ Keener (1997), 263.

Questions for reflection

1. Jesus seemed to expect more from his own people than from people who had not witnessed his ministry (Matt 11:20–24). How should this affect how we view ourselves versus people from other ethnic and religious backgrounds?
2. What is our understanding of God's work in individuals from other religious and ethnic communities? Do we believe that God works in individuals from other faiths or ethnic backgrounds?
3. Are we annoyed when outsiders disturb our peace with their demands, or do we listen to them and ask God to intervene on their behalf?
4. Do we feel sometimes that God is silent in the midst of human suffering? Do we resent his silence or earnestly seek his intervention?
5. How does your faith compare with that of the Canaanite woman?

Prayer

Our loving God,

You are the God of heaven and earth, the God of all nations and all people. We worship you for the privilege we have of knowing you.

We praise you for the way you reveal yourself in the scriptures and in Jesus Christ.

We thank you for your Holy Spirit, who enables us to come before you and address you as our Father.

We thank you for loving us and forgiving our sins.

We thank you for the example of the Canaanite woman. We often take your grace for granted. We know so much more about you than she did, but we do not trust you as much. We still doubt your goodness towards us. We question your sovereignty when we see so much violence and suffering around us. We live comfortable lives when so many people are coping with sickness, war and death. Please forgive us and lead us to take action that

demonstrates your love for everyone, regardless of who they are and where they come from.

We pray for all those who are suffering, especially for physically, emotionally and spiritually abused children.

We pray for more people to commit themselves to help those who are facing hardship of all kinds.

We pray for your Holy Spirit to strengthen all social and humanitarian workers. May they all know your power and your blessing in their lives and in their work.

We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and for his sake. Amen.

12

Cornelius: The first Gentile to embrace the gospel

(Acts 10:1–48)

The Jewish Pentecost

After he rose from the dead, Jesus appeared to his apostles over a period of 40 days, teaching them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3) before ascending to heaven. Ten days later, his disciples received the Holy Spirit in fulfilment of Jesus' promise (cf. Acts 1:4–5). This key event in Church history happened in Jerusalem, where tens of thousands of Jewish pilgrims had come from all around the Mediterranean Sea to celebrate the festival of Pentecost.²⁹

Each member of the crowd (made up of native Jews and proselytes) heard the apostles preach the gospel in his or her own language, thanks to the Spirit's gift of languages (Acts 2:1–11). On that same day, about 3,000 people embraced the gospel message, received forgiveness of their sins and the Holy Spirit, and were baptised in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38–41). Weeks, or perhaps months later, the apostles Peter and John travelled to Samaria, and many Samaritans were baptised in the name of Jesus and received the Holy Spirit in response to their faith and entered the kingdom of God (Acts 8:4–17).

The Gentile Pentecost

What about the Gentiles – people who did not belong to Israel but were from other nations? Would the kingdom admit them, too?

²⁹ The day of Pentecost took place seven weeks after the Passover (Lev. 23:15–16). It is also known as the Feast of Weeks (Deut. 16:10), the Feast of Harvest (Exod. 23:16) and the day of first fruits (Num. 28:26).

Acts 10 tells us how the first non-Jews were introduced to the gospel and baptised in the Holy Spirit, ‘This was the Gentile Pentecost in Caesarea, corresponding to the Jewish Pentecost in Jerusalem’.³⁰ Luke reported the event in detail, indicating that it was a significant step in Peter’s understanding of the universal dimension of the gospel and the opening of God’s kingdom to all peoples.

The story highlights that Peter, like his contemporaries in the Jewish Christian community, was not yet prepared to welcome Gentile believers. Although the Holy Spirit now dwelt in the disciples, Peter still wrestled with his own prejudices, despite Jesus’ positive attitude towards non-Jews (the centurion, Canaanite woman and Samaritans). ‘The principal subject of this chapter is not so much the conversion of Cornelius as the conversion of Peter’.³¹ Later, Peter would have to explain himself and account for his actions towards the Gentiles before he could win the trust and support of the Christian leaders in Jerusalem (Acts 11:2). Eventually the leaders acknowledged that ‘even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life’ (Acts 11:18).

The Gentile Pentecost took place in Caesarea, a harbour city located some 48 kilometres (30 miles) north of Joppa (present-day Jaffa), rebuilt by King Herod and named in honour of the Emperor Augustus Caesar. It was the headquarters for the occupying Roman forces in Palestine.

God responds to Cornelius’ prayers

Apart from Peter, the major actor in the story is a man named Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian Regiment. A Roman regiment consisted of six ‘centuries’ (six times 100 men), each commanded by a centurion (captain). Though not Jewish, Cornelius was a religious man, described as ‘devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly’ (Acts 10:2) and was ‘respected by all the Jewish people’ (Acts 10:22). This depiction shed a

³⁰ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*. The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990) 196.

³¹ Stott, 186.

positive light on this Roman officer and his household despite being an outsider among God's chosen people. Through his mission, 'Christ has made peace between Jews and Gentiles' (Eph. 2:14 CEV), replacing the broken dividing wall with a bridge.

God brought to reality the reconciling mission of Christ, orchestrating everything to achieve the plan, working in both Caesarea and in Joppa. God first intervened in Caesarea and sent an angel to Cornelius at about 3 p.m., a Jewish hour of prayer (cf. Acts 3:1). The army officer was unused to seeing angels and was scared, but the heavenly messenger reassured him, God was pleased and would respond to his prayers in a way he had never anticipated. God instructed Cornelius to call for Peter in Joppa, and gave him all the necessary details to find him. As a man under authority himself, Cornelius obeyed and sent two of his servants and a 'devout soldier' to fetch Peter (Acts 10:3–8).

God sends Peter to meet Cornelius

The next day, about midday, God intervened in Peter's life. Peter was in Joppa at the house of Simon the tanner, a Jewish man who regularly touched dead animals, seen as unclean under Jewish law (cf. Lev. 11:39–40). While Peter is hungrily waiting to eat, he received a heavenly vision of a huge sheet (perhaps a symbol of the Christian community) held up by its four corners, holding all kinds of clean and unclean animals. A voice summoned Peter to kill and eat them. Despite Jesus' declaration that 'all foods [are] clean' (Mark 7:19), and can be eaten, Peter refused to comply with the shocking order, 'Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean' (Acts 10:14). God challenged Peter about his views concerning ceremonial purity three times before the vision disappeared, leaving Peter profoundly confused. He did not know (yet) what to make of this experience.

Suddenly, the delegation from Caesarea arrived and the Spirit of God encouraged Peter to listen to the non-Jewish visitors, and so Peter invited them to stay with him overnight. At last, he made the connection between his vision and the non-Jewish visitors, understanding that his vision meant that he had no

choice but to fellowship with all people, regardless of their ethnic or religious background. Sadly, this was not the last time Peter had to acknowledge his failure to live up to the universal calling of the gospel (Gal. 2:11–14). Let us examine ourselves and make sure we are true to the gospel and its far-reaching implications.

The Holy Spirit comes upon Cornelius and his household

The next morning, Peter headed for Caesarea, together with the three men and six fellow Jewish believers (Acts 11:12). They arrived the following day and Cornelius was so excited to meet Peter that he knelt at his feet and started worshipping him. Peter rebuked him for this well-meaning, but inappropriate, gesture, ‘Stand up. I am only a man myself’ (Acts 10:26). Peter explained to his host the taboos he had to overcome before he could accept his invitation and Cornelius told him the purpose of the invitation. Peter came to a fresh and fuller appreciation of the truth, telling those gathered, ‘God does not show favouritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right’ (Acts 10:34–35).

Peter presented a remarkable exposition of the gospel based on Jesus’ life and ministry, death and resurrection and supreme role on Judgement Day to his host and his host’s household and friends. While he was still talking about the forgiveness of sins promised to those who believe in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit took control of *everyone* who was listening.

The uncircumcised Gentiles started ‘speaking unknown languages and praising God’ (Acts 10:46 CEV), just as the circumcised Jews did on the Day of Pentecost. This special miracle was ‘a type of the reconciliation between Jew and Gentile, whose alienation had for ages been secured and symbolised by differences of language’.³² No one could doubt any longer that God now accepted Gentiles into the kingdom. Their baptism in the Holy Spirit only needed to be symbolised through a water baptism so Peter asked them to be

³² J. A. Alexander quoted in Stott, 192.

baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. They invited Peter to stay with them for a few more days to teach them about their newly found faith, and he was more than happy to oblige. ‘Peter’s acceptance of their hospitality demonstrated the new Jewish-Gentile solidarity, which Christ had established’.³³

Questions for reflection

1. Are you or your community hindered from building bridges with outsiders because of any religious or cultural taboos (or unwritten rules)?
2. How do you understand Cornelius’ godliness and commitment to the poor even before he heard the gospel (Acts 10:2, 4)? Should we praise God for such people and commend their lifestyle? To what extent should World Vision staff partner with such people in humanitarian work?
3. ‘God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right’ (Acts 10:34–35). To what kind of divine acceptance does this statement refer? Is it:
 - based on people’s Christian faith and resulting deeds, irrespective of their ethnic background
 - about God’s approval of people’s monotheistic faith and corresponding deeds
 - just about people’s moral lives, regardless of their faith and ethnicity?
4. How does God’s acceptance of godly people show itself in practical terms? Does it always lead to Christians being God’s agents in communicating the gospel?

³³ Stott, 192–193.

Prayer

Lord our God,

We praise you for you are a great and mighty God. You know each one of us personally, and you call each of us by name. You know us much better than we know ourselves. You are aware of our sins and of our desire to please you, though we often fail to do what you expect from us.

We confess that like Peter, despite what Jesus teaches us in the gospel, we struggle to relate to people the way Jesus does. Our misunderstanding of your word, together with our human and religious traditions, erects barriers between 'us' and 'them'. We forget that we are all the same in your sight and you favour no one.

We thank you for the good news of the gospel. You do not condemn us because of our sins, but you promise to forgive all those who trust in your all-embracing mercy, irrespective of their backgrounds.

Help us to overcome our prejudices.

Help us to break down all kinds of walls in ourselves and in our community.

Help us to be alert to the prompting of your Spirit so that we may joyfully take part in the fulfilment of your saving purposes for people in our own community and beyond.

For the glory of your name and the extension of your kingdom we pray.
Amen.

13

Paul reaches out to all people and the Areopagus council of Athens

(Acts 17:16–34)

Who is Paul?

Paul, formerly known as Saul, came from a rigorous religious upbringing in a Jewish home (Phil. 3:5–6; Gal. 1:13–14) in Tarsus, Cilicia (in modern-day Turkey), but was raised in a culture influenced by Greek language and philosophy. He was a prominent religious leader in Jerusalem who persecuted the Christian community and endorsed the murder of Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Acts 8:1–3). He went to Damascus to arrest Christian leaders and bring them to Jerusalem, but as he approached Damascus, Christ spoke to Saul (Acts 9:1–4). He was later converted and called to be a witness ‘to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel’ (Acts 9:15; cf. 26:17). After his conversion, Saul became Paul, the ‘apostle to the Gentiles’ (Rom. 11:13; cf. Gal. 1:16; 2:7–8). He spent the rest of his life sharing the gospel wherever he went, with Gentiles in particular.

Athens, the enlightened city

Athens was no longer a political power when Paul arrived in AD 50 and was now part of the Roman Empire. However, five centuries after Socrates, Athens was still a prestigious intellectual centre. Among the competing philosophical schools, Epicureanism, founded by Epicurus (d. 270 BC), and Stoicism, by Zeno (d. 265 BC), were the most popular. Epicureanism said that the gods were too

far away from humans to take interest in their lives and advocated happiness as the greatest good, based on the absence of physical pain, limited desires and a simple life. They did not believe in an afterlife or judgement. Stoicism promoted a virtuous lifestyle voluntarily chosen by individuals after careful negotiation between universal determinism and individual freedom. The supreme god was the soul of the universe, and taught that people must live in harmony with both nature and reason to achieve moral well-being. The two belief systems shared fundamental rationalism and human self-sufficiency.

Paul in Athens

Athens was full of temples, statues and altars. The statue of Athena dominated the Parthenon, but the Greek Pantheon included many other gods such as Apollo, the city's patron, as well as Venus, Jupiter, Bacchus, Neptune, Diana, etc.

While waiting for his companions, Silas and Timothy, to join him, Paul spent a lot of time visiting Athens and observing its people (Acts 17:16, 22, 23). The city stood in sharp contrast to his beloved Jerusalem. As a monotheistic believer, he was 'greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols' (Acts 17:16). He was unimpressed by the beauty of its temples and statues, rather upset by such a display of deep but misguided religiosity. 'He was oppressed by the idolatrous use to which the God-given artistic creativity of the Athenians was being put.'³⁴ The daily, overwhelming spectacle aroused grief and indignation in Paul's soul.

Paul did not seek to escape the unavoidable and painful sight of idolatry in Athens. Instead, he decided to engage people in the city, 'He reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there' (Acts 17:17). The apostle engaged in conversation ('dialogued') with Athenians, regardless of their social or religious status. On the Sabbath, he went to the synagogue and met with the Jewish community and other monotheistic believers. During the week, he had discussions with ordinary people at the *agora*, public square or

³⁴ Stott, 278.

civic centre. Paul did not seek confrontation, but rather a genuine dialogue with people. 'He seems deliberately to have adopted the famous Socratic method of dialogue, involving questions and answers; he was, in fact, a kind of Christian Socrates, although with a better gospel than Socrates ever knew.'³⁵

Paul before the Areopagus council

Epicurean and Stoic teachers, who also taught and argued in public, noticed Paul's public activities and, unimpressed with his arguments, started debating him. Some looked down on him and used derogatory language to disqualify him as a debater, 'What is this ignorant show-off trying to say?' (Acts 17:18 GNT). Others listened to Paul, but misinterpreted his message believing he was talking about Jesus and a separate divinity called 'resurrection' (Acts 17:18). Greek philosophers did not believe in the resurrection of the body, although many accepted the survival of the soul after death. They summoned Paul before the Areopagus council (Acts 17:19), the city's highest academic panel. At that time, the council's meetings no longer took place at the Areopagus, the Hill of Ares (the Greek god of thunder and war), but instead were held at the Royal Porch at the northwest corner of the *agora*. Paul was happy to accept the challenge and excited by the opportunity to provide an account of his beliefs and share the good news with the distinguished assembly as Christ himself designated Paul for this mission (Acts 9:15).

Paul's speech: Convergences and divergences

Paul started his speech by building bridges with the eminent council and commending his audience for being 'very religious' (Acts 17:22). They were so deeply religious that they dedicated an altar 'to an unknown god' (Acts 17:23) to ensure their worship did not miss any divinity. Paul told the assembly that this unknown divinity was the God of Jesus Christ (Acts 17:31). He used the same Greek word for God that was used for all gods, *theos*. To back up his claim, Paul quoted from Greek literature, once from the sixth century Cretan poet,

³⁵ Stott, 280.

Epimenides of Cnossos, in his *Cretica* ('In him we live and move and have our being' [Acts 17:28]), and once from the third century Stoic poet, Aratus (who was from Paul's native Cilicia), in his *Phaenomena* ('We are his offspring' [Acts 17:28]).

Paul showed great audacity in quoting these pagan poets; he was prepared to accept and use any insights people had that resonated with biblical truth. Aratus' quote echoed the Bible on the creation of human beings in God's own image (Gen. 1:26–27). John Stott (a leading British Evangelical Bible teacher) asks, 'But is it right that all human beings are God's offspring (*genos*)?' and replies with an emphatic positive answer, but not without a caveat, 'Yes, it is. Although in redemption terms God is the Father only of those who are in Christ, and we are his children only by adoption and grace, yet in creation terms God is the Father of all humankind, and all are his offspring, his creatures, receiving their life from him.'³⁶

Having made every effort to meet the cultured members of the Areopagus on their own territory (literally and metaphorically), Paul disclosed the identity of this unknown god. The apostle highlighted seven attributes of the God of the gospel, which were at variance with several aspects of Greek beliefs:

- 1) *God is one and personal.* There is only one God, unlike what most Greeks believed.
- 2) *God is the only creator and the Lord of the world* (Acts 17:24–25). God created the universe, it did not emanate from him. God is transcendent, above the universe and radically different from it, unlike Stoic teaching. No one place of worship confines God.
- 3) *God is the sustainer of life* (Acts 17:25). God provides for all our needs, not the other way around as in pagan religious practices. God is not subject to or domesticated by human will or desires.

³⁶ Stott, 286–287.

- 4) *God is the ruler of human history* (Acts 17:26). God is at work in humanity and in the world. Because all humans originated from Adam and Eve, they all belong to the same human family (as taught in Stoic philosophy).
- 5) *All human beings are the offspring of God, and God is very close to them* (Acts 17:27–28). God is not remote from his human creatures (unlike Epicurean teaching), and in fact, wants to enjoy an intimate fellowship with us.
- 6) *God is unlike any human representations* (Acts 17:29). Human pictures cannot make God in our image, for God made us in his image. Therefore, we must neither identify God with human images nor worship him in any object.
- 7) *Last but not least, God is the judge of humankind*. God raised Jesus Christ from the dead and appointed him as our supreme judge on the Last Day (Acts 17:30–31). We failed to know God truthfully and worship him rightly (Rom. 1:18–23). While God tolerated our inexcusable ignorance in the past, he calls everyone to turn back to him now, in other words, to repent.

The idea that God raised Jesus from the dead deeply upset Paul's audience. Their reaction was immediate; some people burst out laughing at this ludicrous suggestion and others invited him back for another hearing, but their genuineness was doubtful. Paul did not insist – he left the council, never to return. However, some people warmed to Paul's speech, including Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus. They turned from idol worship to put their faith in God and Jesus Christ. This small group becomes the first church in Europe's intellectual capital (Acts 17:32–34).³⁷

Questions for reflection

1. As an apostle to the Gentiles, Paul was familiar with the Hellenistic culture in which he operated. How familiar are we with the society in which we work, including its values and worldview?

³⁷ For a detailed analysis of Paul's speech before the Areopagus, see Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary. Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 168–182.

2. The apostle appreciated some aspects of people's beliefs and used these to communicate with them. How can we establish religious and moral bridges with the communities we serve?
3. Paul engaged in genuine dialogue with all people living in Athens. As a community-based organisation, World Vision is called to partner with all members of society; how far is our reach to members of the community? Do we listen and respond to members of the community? What activities can we undertake to build genuine dialogue with our partner communities?
4. Is it fair to say that every human being is somehow a God-seeker, including those who claim to be nonbelievers or agnostics?
5. When invited by community leaders to give an account of our faith, do we present the uniqueness of the gospel message, or do we highlight only the commonalities between our faith and theirs?
6. Some people believe Paul's mission in Athens was unsuccessful because he compromised the Christian faith in his presentation of the gospel. Others suggest that Paul's limited success was because the Areopagus council members were intellectually proud and not open to his message. What do you think?

Prayer

God of history, God of every nation,

We worship you as the God of all people, rich and poor, illiterate and well educated, religious and non-religious, Christians and people of other faiths, community leaders and ordinary citizens. You discriminate against no one. You want everyone to come to know you and to experience your love.

We praise you for the respect you have for the dignity of all human beings and for their freedom to trust you or to follow their own beliefs.

As you have called us to be your servants, we pray that you will equip us to be humble yet bold servants.

Help us to respect the dignity and freedom of our fellow human beings in all circumstances.

Please enable us to engage genuinely with people. Enable us not to confront them arrogantly, but to share your love and truth with them. Help us to be courageous, faithful and wise when we bear witness to Jesus Christ.

Guide us as we appropriately support those who have responded to your call and have decided to follow our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

In his name we pray. Amen.

14

Conclusion: Witnesses to God's love for everyone

The 13 stories we studied are remarkable encounters between God's representatives (Abraham, angels, prophets, Jesus, apostles) and those who do not belong to God's people, at least not outwardly. We can draw several conclusions from these encounters.

- 1) *God discriminates against no one and loves all human creatures.*

If God ever seems to favour one group of people, it is often those who were suffering or in difficult circumstances, such as widows, children (especially orphans) and strangers, as well as those who were sick, oppressed and outcast. Jesus' healing ministry exemplifies this, as well as his teaching about the need to care for children in particular, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me' (Matt. 18:5; cf. 19:13-15). World Vision's Vision Statement captures the importance of protecting and nurturing children, 'Our vision for every child, life in all its fullness. Our prayer for every heart, the will to make it so'.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus highlighted his solidarity with all suffering people. 'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me' (Matt. 25:35-36). The main point Jesus made in this parable was that genuine faith, like genuine love (cf. Luke 10:25-37), is faith in action towards those in need, regardless of their religious or ethnic background. The Old Testament already underscored God's preferential and practical love for the

downtrodden, including orphans, widows and immigrants, 'The Lord your God ... shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt' (Deut. 10:17-19).

We have here a remarkable correspondence between the Bible teaching, in both the Old and New Testaments, and one of World Vision's Core Values, 'We are committed to the poor'.

2) *God calls his people to reach out to 'others'.*

The sad reality is that we are the main obstacle to reaching out to 'outsiders' in a Christ-like way as we do not like living outside our comfort zone. Often our ignorance combined with prejudice, suspicion, fear, and mistrust of other people and their worldviews prevents us from approaching them.

We saw how biased the disciples of Jesus, Peter included, were against the Samaritans and Gentiles. Despite the teaching of the Old Testament and Jesus' example, the disciples found it extremely hard to rid themselves of their national preferences, religious pride, and ethnic prejudice. Peter's life-changing experience when he met Cornelius in Caesarea did not even set him free from prejudice once and for all (Acts 10:1-48). He and other Jewish believers continued to find it hard to accept the full implications of 'the truth of the gospel' (Gal. 2:5, 14) and welcome non-Jewish and Jewish believers in the Christian community as equals. Paul challenged Peter publicly in Antioch about his duplicity and unloving attitude towards Gentile Christians (Gal. 2:11-14).

We cannot claim to be God's people if we discriminate against people because of their creed, colour or culture. We need to know more about people's religions and cultures, and examine ourselves as well as our attitudes towards people who are different from us. Experience shows that humans are biased and sometimes hostile towards people with whom they are not familiar. We also need to challenge members of our own community

when their attitude seems to be determined by human traditions and cultural values rather than by the greatest command of the gospel message – loving God wholeheartedly and loving our neighbour unconditionally. This command applies to religious and ethnic minorities who are members of our faith community and those who live in society-at-large. One of World Vision's Core Values states, 'We value people. We regard all people as created and loved by God, each with a unique claim to dignity, respect and intrinsic worth.'

3) *Loving our neighbour is about reaching out holistically to people in need.*

The Bible takes a holistic approach to human needs starting with our physical needs (food, clothing, health, shelter, etc.). The gospel tells us that human societies will not achieve their full potential unless they take into account the spiritual dimension of human existence, 'No one can live only on food. People need every word that God has spoken' (Matt. 4:4 CEV). Our spiritual needs consist of knowing God as our loving Father and worshipping our sovereign Creator as our merciful Saviour. Jesus Christ ushered in God's kingdom during his earthly mission and called his disciples to extend it among all nations.

As a Christian relief and development organisation, World Vision endeavours 'to promote human transformation, seek justice and bear witness to the good news of the kingdom of God', in partnership with churches and other faith communities. We seek to respond to people's immediate needs when manmade or natural disasters strike and are also involved in long-term work with communities from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Through its ministry, World Vision aspires to implement kingdom values in the community (e.g. love, justice, peace, freedom, hope, non-violence, solidarity) and address people's needs both contextually and holistically.

As faith is a defining part of people's identity in many, if not most, developing societies, we must be well prepared to engage spiritually with people. Building bridges with faith and community leaders is critical for the

success of our ministry. In most cases, common moral values and shared religious beliefs will enhance our cooperation. Whenever opportunities exist for deeper interfaith engagement, we need to explain sensitively about the uniqueness of Christ. Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman and Paul's discourse in Athens represent two inspiring examples for Christian dialogue with people of other faiths. Once one establishes personal friendships, verbal witness to one's faith is part of human interaction and an integral aspect of Christian witness, which comprises other key components. World Vision is committed to bear 'witness to Jesus Christ by life, deed, word and sign that encourage people to respond to the Gospel' (World Vision Mission Statement).

Questions for reflection

1. What new insights have you gained through this Bible study series?
2. Are there any lessons that you can start putting into practice in your own context (e.g. family, relationships, community, church and work)?
3. Do you have any unaddressed questions about interfaith engagement? If so, what are they?

A final prayer

Father God,

We praise you for who you are, a great and loving God. You created us in your own image so that we may come to know you personally, worship you, love you and enjoy fellowship with you and with one another.

We praise you for your immeasurable love for all your human creatures. We thank you for welcoming each one of us as we are, irrespective of our nationality, age, culture, beliefs, achievements and wealth, and despite all our wrongdoing. We praise you for Jesus Christ who has made you known to us.

Please forgive us that we often look at people with our own sinful eyes. We favour those who are similar to us in their faith, ethnicity, education, language and nationality. We neglect those who are different from us, ignore those who are unfriendly, condemn those who do evil, consider ourselves better than others, and demonstrate little compassion for those who seem unlovable.

Fill us with your Holy Spirit so that we may see everyone as you see them.

Help us to recognise your presence and goodness in every person, and to consider our fellow human beings as our brothers and sisters.

Enable us to accept people as they are, honour those who feel unimportant, care for the needy and listen to those whose voices are unheard.

Let us learn from those who are illiterate, forgive our enemies and welcome the stranger.

Help us to further your kingdom among all nations and to witness in words and deeds to the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In his name we pray. Amen.

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About the author

Chawkat Moucarry was born in Aleppo (Syria) and grew up a Roman Catholic in a predominantly Muslim society. He holds an MA in Christian theology and a PhD in Islamic Studies from the Sorbonne University (Paris). Since 2006 he has been on staff at World Vision as an interfaith specialist.

He wrote several articles and books including *The Prophet & the Messiah: An Arab Christian's Perspective on Islam & Christianity* (IVP, 2001), *The Search for Forgiveness: Pardon and Punishment in Islam and Christianity* (IVP, 2004), and *Two Prayers for Today: The Lord's Prayer and The Fatiha* (CSS Books, 2007).

He is fluent in Arabic (his mother tongue), French and English. He and his wife have four adult children, and they live in the UK.

INTERNATIONAL OFFICES

World Vision International Executive Office

**1 Roundwood Avenue,
Stockley Park
Uxbridge, Middlesex UB11 1FG
United Kingdom
+44.20.7758.2900**

World Vision Brussels & EU Representation

**18, Square de Meeûs
1st floor, Box 2
B-1050 Brussels
Belgium
+32.2.230.1621**

World Vision International Geneva and United Nations Liaison Office

**7-9 Chemin de Balexert
Case Postale 545
CH-1219 Châtelaine
Switzerland
+41.22.798.4183**

World Vision International New York and United Nations Liaison Office

**919 2nd Avenue, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10017
USA
+1.212.355.1779**



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