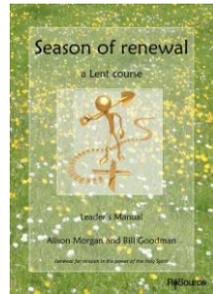


# Season of Renewal – A Lent course

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## Sample session - Week 1 : Seasons of change

### Welcome

20 minutes

Begin by welcoming people to the group. It is best if you establish an informal atmosphere from the start; you may want to have music playing in the background, or to offer members something to drink as they arrive.

When everyone has gathered and made themselves comfortable, invite them to introduce themselves briefly to one another. If the group has fewer than 10 members it's easiest to do this by asking them to share their name and something about themselves in turn. If there are more than 10 members you may prefer to divide them into threes.

### Introducing the course

10 minutes

People may have different understandings and expectations of what this course is all about, so it will be helpful to start by giving them some background information and an overview of the things you will be doing together.

Explain that you want to begin by offering a brief summary of what we understand by the season of Lent. The main points to make are these:

- Lent is a particular season

The early Christians fasted for one or two days just before Easter. This developed into

a regular season of preparation for Easter, which became known in English as Lent (from the old English word for 'Spring').

Many people today sense a real need to slow down, to rethink their commitments and priorities, to make time for reflection and prayer – but somehow they never get round to it. Lent offers an opportunity to do just that. It's in the calendar; the dates are already set, this course is being provided. Let's say to ourselves: 'Come to the spiritual feast – all is now ready!'

- Lent is a limited period

The traditional aim of Lent is to help believers rehearse the life of Jesus through their own prayers and actions, as a seasonal spiritual exercise which will draw them closer to God. It runs from Ash Wednesday, when we offer prayers of penitence and faith, to Easter Sunday, when we celebrate the new life which is ours through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The fact that Lent is a limited period is also challenging. This group will not simply offer a warm, fuzzy experience; nor will it just drift aimlessly along. The aim is to allow God to change us for the better – both as individuals and together as a group or church. We seek a practical outcome by the end of this period. We look to God with eager expectation, at the same time as we look forward to the life-changing events of Easter.

- Lent is for all

From earliest times, Lent has been linked with baptism. New believers were instructed and prepared during Lent for their baptism at Easter. Lent also became a season for established believers to put on the armour of God and renew their spiritual life in disciplined prayer and repentance, leading to restoration of those who had fallen into sin and to a deeper level of fellowship and spiritual growth.

- Lent is a gift

Some people may remember the idea of 'giving up something for Lent' – a faint and rather feeble echo of the tradition of penitence. We may prefer to challenge people to 'take up something for Lent', and particularly to take up this Lent course. Here is a gift which they can take hold of. But doing so may, of course, involve putting down something else...

### **Things group members need to know about the course**

Explain to the group that in past centuries the observance of Lent was a

collective activity based on the core elements of prayer, fasting and the giving of alms – not unlike the modern Muslim observance of Ramadam. In meeting as a group we hope to be able to encourage and strengthen one another in this way. But it's good also to make space for private prayer and reflection, so in addition to the group meeting there is a booklet of spiritual exercises for each person to do at home, if they would like to (explain that they don't have to, but they will get more out of the course if they do!).

### **What is the outcome we are hoping for?**

The season of Lent runs for 40 days, modelled on the 40 days spent by Jesus in prayer and fasting following his baptism in the Holy Spirit. For Jesus, this period of prayer and fasting was a time of preparation for the three years of ministry which began immediately afterwards. So it is important for us to understand that taking Lent seriously may bring lasting personal change – Easter may be the end of a story, but it's also the start of a new and much bigger one. There's a lot more to Lent than giving up chocolate!

## **Group discussion**

**10 minutes**

Ask people to share their experience of Lent. What comes into their minds when they hear the word? Has Lent been an important part of anyone's spiritual journey? Have they ever given anything up for Lent? What effect did that have on their spiritual lives?

Now ask them to share one hope they each have for the course. Why have they come? What are they looking to find? Is there anything they are worried about? Affirm everyone's answers, and explain that we will return to this question at the very end of the course when we look back over our time together.

### **Beginning with prayer**

Ask someone to pray, for you as leader and for the group as a whole, that God would be with you as you travel together.

## Seasons of change

15 minutes

If you can, find four pictures or photographs, or four objects which represent the four seasons. Put them on a table where everyone can see them, or prop them on a mantelpiece or against a wall.



Point out that when God made the world, he made it according to a seasonal pattern.

Ask someone to read **Genesis 1.14**.

God's relationship with the living world is governed by the seasons. Psalm 104 is a poem celebrating this.

Ask someone to read **Psalm 104**.

Ask the group why they think God chose to build this seasonal pattern into the life of the world he made?

What would it be like to live in a world with no seasons? Would it make any difference to our relationship with God?

You may get some interesting and creative answers, particularly if people have experience of living in places where the seasons are not clearly delineated. But the main thing you need to tease out is that life itself depends on the existence of the seasons – can we imagine the fulness of the autumn harvest without a preceding summer of flowers and insects, or the green growth of spring without the cleansing cold of winter to prepare the Now point out that Jesus often taught by drawing attention to the pattern of the natural world around him. Ask them why they think this was. Was it just because that was what was there, in the same way that we tend to use illustrations from our own technological and urbanised environment?

Help them to see that there is a link between the created world and the spiritual world. When Jesus was explaining the spiritual life he chose to use stories about farmers sowing seed and getting a harvest, about nesting birds and knowing plants by their fruits, not just because these things were there in

front of him, but because there is a natural affinity between the spiritual life and the life of the world around us - both are created by and depend on the same Holy Spirit. (You may like to point them to Genesis 1.2 or Psalm 104.30, both of which suggest that the physical world is 'breathed' by the Spirit of God. The words 'spirit' and 'breath' have the same root in both Hebrew and Greek).

Ask the group if they think the spiritual life can be seen in seasonal terms, with patterns of growth and of inactivity, with times of sowing and times of reaping?

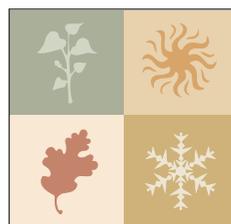
Which is their favourite season, and why?

Now explain that Lent is a season which goes from the barrenness of winter to the new life of spring, and that you hope that for everyone in the group it will be a time of growth. Some members of the group will be in tougher places than others - for some the ground will be already ploughed and prepared for the growth to come; for others there will be a hard crust to soften, or a tangle of weeds still to be cleared. But you are confident that just as the Lord provides for the material needs of his creatures in Psalm 104, so he will provide for your spiritual needs as you meet and pray together during the coming weeks.

## A practical exercise

20 minutes

Explain to the group that you would like them now to think about the pattern of their own spiritual lives, and to reflect on where they are at the moment. Different people like to reflect in different ways, so it's good to offer a choice of activities to facilitate this (the suggestions which follow can all be done at the same time). Encourage people to feel free to move around the room as they do this, and invite them to choose one of the following options:



1. Provide sheets of paper (A4 is a good size), glue sticks, and saucers containing lots of little pieces of paper or tissue paper in four colours, chosen

to represent the four seasons (for example, yellow for spring, green for summer, brown or red for autumn, and grey for winter). Invite people to make a collage representing their own spiritual life as it is at the moment. Perhaps they have experienced different seasons in their relationship with God, times perhaps of blessing and fruitfulness, times of pain and dryness, times of growth and times of inactivity. Where are they at the moment? How would they represent this pictorially?

2. Play some music, chosen to stimulate thoughts of seasonal patterns, either natural ones or spiritual ones – for example, Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, or a CD of Gregorian chant or music from Taizé to represent the liturgical seasons of the church, or a piece of contemporary music such as Green Day's 'When September Ends', or Coldplay's 'We Never Change'. Invite people to pray individually about their own relationship with God as they listen to the music. Do they recognise any kind of pattern as they look back over their spiritual lives?

Offer pens and paper and suggest that some people might like to write a poem or a prayer on a seasonal theme, either looking back over their lives and thinking about the different phases of them, or thinking about 3. their relationship with God and which season would best describe it at the moment.

## Looking at scripture

15 minutes

After about 15 minutes invite them to go back to where they were sitting, and explain that you are going to look at a passage of scripture together, and that you will come back to what they have done after that.



Turn to **Ecclesiastes 3** and ask someone to read verses 1 to 15.

This is a well known passage. The author Ecclesiastes calls himself 'The Teacher'. He is either King Solomon, or a later writer trying to look at the world from Solomon's perspective. The whole book is a reflection on life, the way we live it and the values we hold.

Verses 1 to 8 quote a poem. It's a simple poem, reflecting on the comings and goings of our lives. We live in a framework which is given to us, a framework of time which brings different experiences and circumstances.

- *What do they notice about the pattern of the poem in the first 8 verses?*

Help them to evaluate the repetition of the phrase 'a time' – time comes, it goes, it comes again, like waves crashing on the shore of our lives - and there is nothing we can do to influence it. It's a cycle in which our lives are embedded whether we like it or not, and over which we have little or no control.

Now make sure they pick up the contrast between this repeated opening and the rest of the verse. This second part of each verse is our part, the part where we choose our responses. Time flows ever onwards, like waves on the beach; but we have to learn when and how to ride them.

Now invite them to look at verses 9 to 15. Here the Teacher reflects on the poem. He changes the perspective from ours to God's.

- *What strikes them about this reflection?*

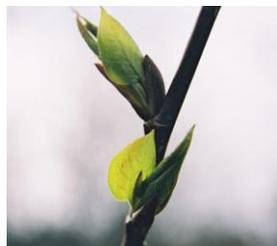
Be prepared to offer your own responses to help the discussion. One obvious thing is that God wants us to enjoy our work and our time off. But the main point is that he has made us with an awareness of time and eternity so that even as we live our busy lives and cope with the things that come to us (good and bad) we will know that in everything we depend on him. It is only when we learn to see our lives in the context of God's provision and purposes that we will find contentment. The trick is to stand back, and to look at the pattern of our own experience in this broader context.

Now explain that this is what the group is all about. Tell them that it is your hope and prayer that as you together offer yourselves to God for this season of Lent, he will help you to see the bigger picture, to understand more clearly where you are in your own lives and in your relationship with him. Help the group to see that you are looking forward to this journey!

## Praying for one another

15 minutes

Now say that you hope to end each meeting with a time of prayer. It may be hard for people to pray together, particularly if they are not used to informal prayer of this kind, or if they do not know one another very well. Explain that you hope they will take the risk of trusting one another, because it is as we take risks that we find blessings. If people are happy to pray but not confident to pray aloud, you might like to suggest that they pray silently but say 'Amen' aloud when they have finished, so that the others know they have prayed.



Invite them to go into threes and to share with one another the picture, poem or prayer which they have made, and then to pray for one another. The prayers they request of one another may arise out of the exercise; they may be things prompted by some other part of the evening, or they may be simply a desire that they would be able to meet with God during the week ahead.

After they have finished praying, give each person a copy of the course member's booklet and suggest that they might like to follow some of the spiritual exercises given for this week. Some people may like to do all the exercises; others may prefer to choose one or two and repeat them throughout the week - different people prefer to do things in different ways.

Ask them to make sure they bring the booklet with them next week, along with anything they would like to share from their experience of following the exercises. Make sure that you are able to share something yourself to start them off.

***Season of Renewal* is published by [ReSource](#) and is copyright. We hope that this sample session from the Leader's Manual will give you a taster of the course. There is a supplementary Member's booklet for each participant; this contains a summary of the session and practical and spiritual exercises for use during the week.**

***Season of Renewal* can be ordered from the ReSource website – please click [here](#).**

