Our 2019 Lent Study Guide has six sessions which all include Bible study, prayer, inspiring stories from the Middle East, an Inspired by the Vine meditation and a simple action. Together, we’ll:

- explore the fruits of the Spirit and other key New Testament passages on growing in Christ-likeness
- reflect on Jesus’ own character as demonstrated in the gospels
- be further inspired by meeting some of our partners and hearing just how fruitfully they are living in the Middle East today
- pray and act to grow in living differently, compassionately, exuberantly, courageously, generously, and expectantly ourselves.

You can use this resource individually or as a small group, or extract particular sections to include in your church services or to share through your magazine or email list. However you choose to use this study guide, you’ll find lots to inspire and challenge you and your church.

A note for leaders: Our series of six Inspired by the Vine meditations exploring the character of Jesus could be a powerful addition to your services through Lent. You could explore using a consistent slot in the service, and inviting the same person to come up and do a dramatic reading of the reflection each week; perhaps displaying a vine or fruit tree during it, or – if you have a screen – projecting suitable images that you have sourced.

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Please note that we change the names of children and vulnerable adults whose stories we include in this study guide. Pictures are for illustrative purposes only, unless otherwise stated.

Front cover photo: © Paul Jeffrey
Living fruitfully

For more than 160 years, Embrace the Middle East has been working with our Christian partners in the region to help people of all faiths and none to free themselves from a life of poverty and injustice. This work has been made possible by generation after generation of servant-hearted people – in the Middle-East and the UK – choosing to live fruitfully in the Spirit of Christ.

This Lent, let’s be re-inspired to do the same.

‘I am someone who has grown up and lived with the challenge of finding hope in dark times. I am talking to you as a Christian – and I come from a place of faith and of hope… In the Middle East Christians are not guests. They are at home. They have always played a part in the development of their societies and their country. Without them these countries would not be what they are… love urges us on.’

Dr Souraya Becheleany from our partner, the Middle East Council of Churches in Lebanon
Preparing the ground...
Ask yourself: to what extent is character development a priority within our society?
How much is it focused on within our education system, media, or even our church communities?

Rooting ourselves in the Word:
to find God’s vision for growth

2. Dig deeper:

- Consider how the type of fruit a tree will bear is set long before it grows, and the time it takes to mature… pray for vision and grace over your growth in Christ this Lent.
- Sometimes, especially when we consider verses 22-23 in isolation, we treat the fruit of the Spirit as if each aspect exists independently. How often is patience picked as hardest to grow?
- But this list is cumulative… capturing a glimpse of the indescribable by stacking up examples. The Spirit’s character doesn’t exist in pieces; where it is present, all its fruit will be present. The list is also not exhaustive; there are further qualities associated with Christ’s character growing in us… what would you add?
- The emphasis here is on whether we’re bearing fruit, i.e. living in the Spirit of Christ is markedly different; rooted in choosing God and others over ourselves. By contrast, the Greek word for ‘flesh’ is ‘sarx’; understood as decisions or actions taken independently from God. What does this suggest about this list in parallel to the fruit?
- Fruitfulness from being rooted in God is a recurring Biblical motif (see Psalm 1 and John 15:1-17). God is concerned with who we are becoming as well as what we do. But fruit is made to be consumed – Christ-like character isn’t abstract; it impacts others. How have you seen this demonstrated?
- Verses 13-14 set out a big picture command. Whose teaching do they echo?
- Reflect on Jesus. How many radically different things about how he lived can you think of? During Lent, we particularly remember His temptation. Read Matthew 4:1-11; what stands out today? Use Inspired by the Vine on page 7 to continue prayerfully reflecting on Jesus’ character.
- There are many situations – here and in the Middle East – which are the result of people not living for others. But we always have an opportunity to live differently and see the transforming fruit this brings. Embrace is constantly inspired by our partners’ example in this – because of their work, but also because of the spirit it’s done in and the character it reflects. Read Living differently in Egypt; how does Sara Hanna further inspire you?

Sara Hanna, who oversees the Soteria programme at Anafora, inspires us to live differently
Living differently in Egypt

Everything about the Anafora Centre on the desert road between Cairo and Alexandria contrasts with its surroundings. Because it was designed to, Bishop Thomas of the Orthodox Church established this retreat and training centre because he believes sometimes you need to go somewhere different to become different.

It’s a place of greenery on a dusty road… an oasis of freedom where young women who have experienced abuse benefit from its ground-breaking programme, Soteria – Greek for safe house or deliverance – which is overseen by Sara Hanna.

When we asked Sara what proportion of Egyptian women, including from Christian backgrounds, encounter some level of abuse, she heartbreakingly answered, ‘all’.

But Soteria shows a different way. They invite a pair of girls from each village in Bishop Thomas’ diocese; provide trauma counselling; and give them space to explore their talents, worth and rights. Then the girls return to become agents of change in their home communities, where Soteria also works.

Sara is an agent of change too. But it isn’t just what she does that inspires, it’s how she does it. She has a responsible role and, living on site, is constantly on call. But she is gentle even when she is being firm. The centre has a rhythm of prayer and you can feel its effects on her. The result is a remarkably different model for the girls, both in how they are treated, and in witnessing a woman lead. Karine, for example, now understands: ‘Things were better for me than my mother. They will be better still for my daughters.’
Session 1: Living differently

Pray for more fruitfulness:

... with words
Lord of all fruitfulness, thank You for showing us how to change Your world from the inside-out by living differently through Your Spirit. Bless and strengthen Sara Hanna and everyone you have planted alongside her at Anafora. Keep growing them in their service of You as they bring freedom to young women’s lives and change in communities across Egypt. And encourage us through Your and their examples, to prepare the ground of our own hearts again so, together with Embrace, we too can make a difference and bring fuller lives to girls growing up in the Middle East today.

... with symbols

You will need: coloured pens; paper

1 Draw a simple tree with roots going deep into the ground: Pray for Sara Hanna; everyone else at Anafora; and Embrace – thanking God that each is planted in him.

2 Using a coloured pen, draw water coming up into the roots, then extend the reach of your tree with new branches: Pray for Anafora and Embrace to keep drawing on the Spirit of Christ for sustaining growth.

3 Add some fruit to your tree: Thank God for the fruitfulness you already see in the individuals and groups listed above... pray for more.

4 Draw some stick girls around the tree: Pray for still more transformation for the young women who come through Soteria’s programme – and their communities.

5 Pray again with these symbols for your own rooting, growth and fruitfulness.

Increase the yield:

... by praying for Christians in the Middle East

Each session in this study guide includes a story about one of Embrace’s Christian partners. We pray you will be as inspired as we are by their strength of character and loving service, as well as recognising the challenges of their contexts.

Take some time this Lent to:

• buy or print a map of the Middle East (or use the one on page 3)
• find a place to display it to remind you to pray for Christians here throughout Lent
• add each specific partner Embrace introduces you to. (You could even represent each one with a tree ... located where God has planted them.)
Lord Jesus, graft us more closely into You. Draw us close to examine Your extraordinarily different life. For You are the Vine and we are the branches – grow us in the fruitful living that stems from You.

It’s Lent and so, again, we turn East… leafing through the pages of time and gospel; seeking to get closer to the truth of who Jesus was…

It’s as much about letting go of what we think we know as it is about discovering more; because the stories of Him grow so familiar that their very repetition clouds our view of just how startling they were to live through. How startling He was.

This is the Jesus who didn’t begin his ministry by consulting the sages of the day or by constructing a strategic plan, but by hiking out into the desert to be alone with His Father. The Jesus who refused every temptation or short-cut to fulfil his mission any other way than planned; or to turn aside in favour of a more comfortable approach.

The Jesus who spent his time wandering countryside, village and city to teach and heal strangers, relying on the gifts of friends rather than building a secure life or family for Himself; who challenged and crossed almost every prejudice and preference held by his contemporaries to pursue the good of each individual made in His image.

This is the Jesus who saved His best for outcasts but screamed blue murder at the religious leaders who judged them.

He had no interest in maintaining the status quo. The power-hungry were rejected; the powerless championed; the poor commissioned to lead His followers after him.

He taught in riddles and stories that said the beautiful life was to be found and built in the midst of mourning and meekness, persecution and peace-making… and that obedience to God and service to others always, only, counted if they came from the heart.

He was so incandescently different that He shone with the kind of scandalous grace that can get you into trouble. That did get Him into trouble.

He lived so extraordinarily that He made a difference to everyone who encountered Him; bringing transformation to many in need, but also exposing pride and hypocrisy wherever they had been hiding behind veneers of righteousness.

What would it look like for us to live even just a little bit more like Him today?
Session 2:
Living compassionately

Preparing the ground...
Remember: one of the kindest things someone has ever done for you. What was it about what they did, or how they did it, that felt extraordinary?

Rooting ourselves in the Word:
to overflow with life and love

1. Read: Philippians 1:1-11
2. Dig deeper:
   - Philippians is described as Paul’s most joyful letter; it brims with his delight in this fruitful church. What would it be like to receive such encouragement? Note verse 6. Paul is spurring them on, confident in further growth. His vision is for a full ‘harvest’ (verse 11; NRSV).
   - Depending on your translation, verse 9 may talk about love ‘overflowing’ or ‘abounding’. What do these words imply? How do they relate to the Spirit of Christ enabling us to love like Him?
   - What examples from Paul’s life can you think of which exemplify overflowing love? e.g. his missionary journeys, self-supporting ministry, continued teaching through letters when imprisoned.
   - Some translations choose ‘affection’ and some ‘compassion’ to describe Paul and Christ’s feelings in verse 8. The Greek is ‘splagchon’ – literally to be moved in the guts. Does the strength of this surprise you?
   - There are a number of instances in the gospels where this type of compassion is used to describe Jesus’ feelings for individuals and crowds. Can you remember any? (See Matthew 14:14 and 20:34; Mark 6:34 and 8:2; and Luke 7:13)
   - This feeling is always followed by action… the crowds are fed or taught; the sick are healed; the grieving have their loved ones returned to them. Love and compassion are doing words; they result in transformation. There are more stories of Jesus exhibiting – and teaching about – compassion than there are specific uses of the word. He constantly saw beyond boundaries or definitions to minister the specific response each individual and context needed. Think about which stories stand out to you. And then use Inspired by the Vine on page 11 to continue prayerfully reflecting on Jesus’ character.
   - What situations around you – and in the Middle East – cause you deep concern? What actions do – or might – these feelings lead you to?
   - Philippians 1:1-11 is the kind of letter Embrace could send to many of our partners across the Middle East. We have much reason to pray for their work in the midst of great need. But even more to celebrate through seeing the fruit of their overflowing love in action. Read Living compassionately in Lebanon; how does Serop Ohanian further inspire you?

Serop Ohanian, Director of the Karagheusian Medical Centre, inspires us to live compassionately
Living compassionately in Lebanon

Tucked away in the midst of the bustling, narrow streets of the Christian, Armenian quarter of Bourj Hammoud, on the outskirts of Beirut, is the Karagheusian Medical Centre. It runs a caring and high quality service providing primary healthcare treatment, medication for chronic illnesses and trauma counselling to as many as 6000 refugees and poor Lebanese families each month.

Serop Ohanian has been the Director here for six years, overseeing a team of 40 doctors. He’s young, passionate, full of energy and incredibly talented. But what impresses us most is how he always puts the people he serves first. On a recent trip, he paused a meeting with Embrace’s own Director – a key funder – to go and greet some Syrian refugee mothers who were going on an excursion; the kind of prioritisation we find deeply inspiring.

Like so many projects in Lebanon, where the population has increased by a third due to the influx of Syrian refugees, the need facing this centre has grown exponentially. But, as with so many of our partners here, the Karagheusian Medical Centre has gone out of its way to increase its response.

As Serop says, ‘the cost is always not met but if we focus on the empty half of the cup, we will never get any solution.’

Sometimes the refugees come to thank him and say, ‘we will never forget an Armenian doctor helped my child, we will always remember that when we go back home to Syria.’

Thousands of children and adults, including many Syrian refugees, receive vital medical care at the Karagheusian Medical Centre every month.
Pray for more fruitfulness:

... with words

Lord of all fruitfulness, thank You for enabling us to respond to need with free-flowing compassion when Your Spirit of kindness works through us. Resource and refresh Serop Ohanian and everyone You have planted alongside him in Bourj Hammoud; keep growing them in their service of You as the Kharagheusian Medical Centre brings healing to Lebanese and refugee families who need their care. And inspire us through Your and their examples, to keep drawing deeply from Your Spirit ourselves so, together with Embrace, we too can also pour out compassion to those who can’t afford treatment in the Middle East today.

... with symbols

You will need: a water source such as a tap or a jug of water; a glass.

1 Look at the water source and consider the huge supply available: Thank Jesus that He can constantly fill us by His Spirit so we can keep pouring out His compassion.

2 Fill the glass: Thank God for the compassion He has given to Serop Ohanian, the Kharagheusian Medical Centre and Embrace.

3 Drink some of the water: Pray for the people who receive this compassion expressed in transformative medical care.

4 Now look at the empty part of your glass: Pray for the full provision of resources needed to meet the hugely increased needs in Bourj Hammoud.

5 Pray again with these symbols for your constant re-filling and pouring out of compassion too – whether in continued prayer for, and support of, Embrace and/or in other areas of service.

Increase the yield:

... keep compassion flowing this Easter

Although we are still in Lent, we can never forget the joy Jesus has won for us… and of course, many of us are already making plans and preparations for celebrating Mothering Sunday and Easter with family, friends and church.

Perhaps you could help keep compassion flowing through these celebrations by choosing presents, cards and alternative gifts which support partners like Serop Ohanian and the Kharagheusian Medical Centre to carry on giving essential help?

Visit http://shop.embraceme.org to browse our range of Easter and Mother’s Day themed gifts and cards with meaningful Christian messages. Or request a copy of our catalogue by calling 01494 897950 or emailing trading@embraceme.org
Lord Jesus, graft us more closely into You. Draw us close to examine Your unparalleled compassion. For You are the Vine and we are the branches – grow us in the fruitful living that stems from You.

It’s easier to grasp just one aspect of Jesus’ character at a time, rather than try and comprehend all of Him… But even this is hard to do well. Because He wasn’t of course, ever, only just one thing; and because He embodies and exceeds each trait so utterly and uniquely as to render it almost incomparable to the concept we started with. But still, if we seek, we will find; we will see more of Him. And so…

Jesus felt. He was affected by each individual’s specific needs. In his gut.

Jesus was perhaps sometimes compelled to heal or speak truth for this very reason. Because love is compelled to bring beauty in place of the ashes that widows, bereaved parents and refugees are so often left holding.

He went towards those in need; touched the skin of those it was considered unthinkable to even hold at arm’s length; talked with and included others permanently defined as outrageous sinners and criminals; and wept over a whole city simply because its people refused to come under His protecting wing.

He cared holistically and practically; feeding crowds on hillsides and restoring loved ones to health; teaching those who had lost their way with symbols from their everyday lives. He was so wired for love He could take in at a glance the devastation of a life; then spend His energies restoring and rebuilding it; always drawing on the Father to keep pouring out whatever needed to be heard or received.

Jesus taught compassion as a way of life… he advocated the golden rule of love to welcome children, release women and prioritise the foreigner as if they were a neighbour. He knew his Father’s heart well enough to understand that love, not regulations, was the true law; that mercy should always triumph over judgement.

He even dared to make out that we could spend our lives claiming His name as our religion but miss the point if we fail to share a cup of water with someone in need.

What would it look like for us to live with more of His compassion today?
Preparing the ground...
Ask yourself: When was the last time you experienced wonder or irrepressible joy? What inspired it?

Rooting ourselves in the Word:
to find a reason to blossom

1. Read: 1 Peter 1:1-9
2. Dig deeper:
   - How hard were things for the people Peter addresses in verse 1?
   - What does he cite (see vv. 3-6) as their reason to rejoice? How is joy therefore possible in every circumstance we face?
   - See verses 6-7. What new image is used for developing character and how does it parallel the process of growing fruit?
   - Concepts like ‘refinement’ and ‘not gratifying the desires of the flesh’ (Galatians 5:16) can lead us to misinterpret living fruitfully as a heavy call, as can our collective Christian understanding of ‘joy’ as different to happiness – despite this being true to a point. Perhaps that’s why Eugene Peterson replaces it with ‘exuberance about life’ in The Message interpretation of Galatians 5; because heaviness is far removed from the passages we’re studying, and even more so from the person of Christ. How do the words ‘refinement’ and ‘exuberance’ each relate to your experience of following Jesus so far?
   - The Greek word translated ‘joy’ in Galatians 5:22 and verse 8 here is ‘chara’, which also means ‘delight’. And the word for ‘rejoice’ in verse 6 is ‘agalliaō’ which literally means jumping up and down with uncontainable happiness! Does this surprise you? How did Peter himself embody this kind of enthusiasm in the gospel accounts of him?
   - There are plenty of specific examples of Jesus’ exuberant living but they may be harder to remember, as we perhaps don’t focus on them enough. Can you think of some? (E.g. Matthew 18:3; Jesus regularly feasting, relating deeply with friends, telling stories; and being the creator of all creation (Colossians 1:16) – the inventor of all laughter and play!) Use Inspired by the Vine on page 15 to continue prayerfully reflecting on Jesus’ character.
   - A fruitful life rich in Christ’s Spirit will live sacrificially for others, but it will also be delighted in God and full of wonder in people and creation – even amid difficulty. It will bring more colour to others. The UK and the Middle East both need this. Is wholehearted ‘delight’ something you would like to fuel, and characterise, your life and service more? Pause to pray.
   - Now read Living exuberantly in the West Bank; how do Simon Azazian and his team further inspire you?

Maha loves everything about coming to the Palestinian Bible Society’s Centre
Living exuberantly in the West Bank

Jericho is quieter and more rural than most of the West Bank and there’s not much to do for young people growing up in its poorest communities. No wonder the Palestinian Bible Society’s Centre stands out a mile as a noisy, colourful beacon of activity that children here love so much they self-refer themselves to it, arriving on their bikes from all over the city. It’s so popular it’s oversubscribed and there are usually children who are too tiny to come trying to pretend they’re old enough just for the chance to get inside!

A visit here for adults might not always be relaxing. But for children experiencing the very adult pressures of poverty, abuse or alcoholism at home – or simply the constraints of a very conservative society – this centre is indescribably special. It provides bright, vibrant hope for children like 12 year old Maha, whose home was very quiet and difficult after her father died. She says, ‘Everything is nice here. I love everything about it. When I come here… all the children are my brothers and sisters.’

The irrepressible joy of the atmosphere – with its pizza, puppet animators and play equipment – is fuelled by Simon Azazian and his team’s love for, and delight in serving, the children here. Their vision is to restore something of God’s design for childhood by affirming good character qualities, teaching principles of forgiveness and managing anger, and giving the young people fun experiences to bring them bucket loads of joy and laughter.

Every member of the team at the Palestinian Bible Society’s Centre inspires us to live exuberantly
Pray for more fruitfulness:

... with words

Lord of all fruitfulness, thank You for designing us to live and share lives full of joyful, child-like wonder as Your Spirit of delight moves in and among us. Inspire and rejuvenate Simon Azazian and all You have planted alongside him at the Palestinian Bible Society; keep growing them in their service of You as they restore a taste of true childhood to children facing very adult challenges at home. And envision us through Your and their examples, to grow in bright and colourful strength so, together with Embrace, we too can bring more joy to disadvantaged children living in the Middle East today.

... with symbols

You will need: paper; coloured pens.

1 Look at the blank sheet of paper: Think about the absence of safe, carefree and vibrant childhoods many children in the West Bank face. Lift this need to God in prayer...

2 Then, thank God for, and pray for more of, the growing joy and colour that can be given to them because of:
   • Simon Azazian and his team at the Palestinian Bible Society: Colour in a third of the sheet.
   • Embrace: Use a different colour to bring to life the second section.
   • all who pray for or give to support this work: Colour in the last section with a third colour.

3 Turn over the page and repeat this prayer, using a different colour for each area you feel God already is – or might be in the future – calling you to grow in joy to bless others in need.

Increase the yield:

... by involving others in growing more joy

Perhaps you or your church could organise a colourful gathering later in the year. You could:

• prepare and serve Middle Eastern food
• tell joyful stories about the Palestinian Bible Society and Embrace’s other partners across the region living fruitfully to bring more colourful lives to children and families
• raise money by collecting donations or holding a promise or talent auction. Or think about other colourful ways to raise money with other people. Perhaps you could hold an art and craft, cake or plant sale, or organise a concert or play.

Find lots of ideas and all the support you need at http://embraceme.org/fundraise
Inspired by the Vine:

... Jesus’ wildly exuberant life

Lord Jesus, graft us more closely into You. Draw us close to examine Your wild exuberance. For You are the Vine and we are the branches – grow us in the fruitful living that stems from You.

Why is it that we often overlook some elements of Jesus’ character? Are we still making some of the same religious assumptions Jesus challenged two thousand years ago? Yes, He is holy and pure; His purposes cannot be trifled with and we must never stray far from the reality that following Him will always lead us to pick up a cross.

But neither should we neglect exploring the playfulness of the One who said He came to give us life to the full; and who, in the beginning, had brought to life all the needless extravagance of unseen flowers on mountaintops and strange creatures in ocean depths. The One who issued the invitation, ‘come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest’ and celebrated Mary using up all her time, energy and perfume on simply adoring Him rather than serving Him or anyone else.

The One who was much more often to be found outside on the hills, streets and lakes than He was inside the synagogue… He had close friends He loved spending time with as well as followers He was teaching. He had a reputation for feasting… and often kept colourful company when he did.

He turned water into wine… and drank it. He even made it a priority to cook a fish barbeque on the beach for his disciples after His resurrection!

Suddenly, we find we’re beginning to see Him more… unique, unpredictable, personal and thoroughly alive.

Yes. Let’s never forget Jesus was fully human as well as fully God, and also that as God, He created humanity to laugh as well as cry; play as well as work; create, discover, explore, relate, grow, appreciate and thrive… His vision for us hadn’t changed then and it hasn’t changed now.

After all, He left an over-excitable fisherman in charge of God’s holy church! And urged us to relate to Him with the unquestioning trust a small child has for their parent.

What would it look like if we were to live with even just a little bit of this kind of delighted enthusiasm today?
Preventing the ground...  
Reflect on: what it means to be truly brave... when in your life have you overcome fear or challenges. What helped you step up?

Rooting ourselves in the Word:  
to weather hard seasons

1. Read: Romans 5:1-5
2. Dig deeper:

- Today's passage focuses on some of the challenging areas of living fruitfully... bringing to mind the more uncomfortable words in Galatians 5:22-23 alongside its own. How do you feel about some of these qualities?
- The Greek word translated ‘suffering’ here – ‘thlipsis’ – is specific and intense; it's about persecution, affliction or distress and carries the sense of pressure that comes from being hemmed into a narrow place externally or internally. And the word, ‘endurance’, ‘hupomoné’ is literally a remaining behind; steadfast and patient waiting. Finally, in all our passages about growing ‘character’, we have the word itself. ‘Dokimé’ emphasises being found to be genuine and true after testing. Do any new insights open up to you through understanding these original meanings?
- It's vital we don’t forget ‘hope’ is the start and end of this cyclical process – both the fuel and the goal. Still though, Paul's words are strong, suggesting we 'boast' or 'glory' in this process too (vv 2-3); because an element of our hope is becoming like Christ, and therefore echoing his endurance. This is courageous living... and Paul practices what he preaches. How does his story – shipwrecked and imprisoned multiple times – reflect this?
- What about Jesus? When we think of His suffering, we naturally think of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, which is entirely fitting. But we are not quite there in our journey together this Lent... and Jesus endured much before this point. He had to be courageous every day. Think through each stage of His life leading up to Holy Week – incarnation; childhood; temptation, teaching and ministry – what examples come to mind? (See John 8:1-11 and Matthew 21:12 in particular.) Then use Inspired by the Vine on page 19 to continue prayerfully reflecting on Jesus’ character.
- Where does it feel difficult for you to persevere in your walk here, or in your prayer and support for the Middle East? Pray for more courage.
- Embrace is particularly inspired by our partners who choose to steadfastly remain where they are hard pressed. Read Living courageously in Gaza; how does Suhaila Tarazi further inspire you?
Living courageously in Gaza

There’s not much hope in Gaza where 1.9 million Palestinians live pushed into a strip of land just 25 miles by six that, according to the World Bank, holds one of the highest unemployment rates in the world at over forty per cent*. It’s a stressful and restrictive existence. People say a bright light stands out even more in the darkness; and that’s our experience of our partner, Al Ahli Hospital. Everything feels different here. Its inspirational director – Suhaila Tarazi – describes it as ‘an oasis of love’. Certainly it has beautiful trees and flowers in its courtyard but its atmosphere of peace is also actively cultivated against all odds. But then, almost everything Al Ahli does seems to be against all odds; this is an extremely hard place to serve.

This Christian hospital has been here for more than a century, steadfastly helping all in need. And Suhaila resolutely ensures it isn’t co-opted into any political stance, but stays bravely focused on continuing to provide free medical services to anyone who can’t afford them… whatever comes.

And this is vital; because it’s desperately needed. Imaan, a mother of two who lives with ten other members of her extended family in just one room, says it best – ‘No Ahli, no treatment.’ Most recently, ‘no treatment’ would have meant her four year old son, Yusef, would still be suffering with tonsillitis and scabies. The hospital goes out into isolated and poor communities to identify those most in need, and provides free transport to bring them to the hospital for treatment. The result is expert diagnosis and help. This courage saves lives.

Yusef (on the right) has received vital treatment from Al Ahli Hospital. His mother says, ‘no Ahli, no treatment’

*Statistic taken from Palestine’s Economic Outlook – April 2018, worldbank.org
Pray for more fruitfulness:

... with words

Lord of all fruitfulness, thank you for empowering us to stand with courage – no matter what comes – by surrendering to Your Spirit's strength in us. Build up and support Suhaila Tarazi and everyone You have planted alongside her at Al Ahil Hospital; keep growing them in their service of You as they minister life-saving care to people in Gaza who would otherwise not receive medical attention.

And challenge us through Your and their examples, to faithfully weather long seasons of struggle so, together with Embrace, we can stand for freedom in the Middle East today.

... with symbols

You will need: three tealights; matches; a cardboard box with no lid.

1 Light a candle: Thank Jesus that by His Spirit, He gives us strength to shine His light.

2 Place the cardboard box on its side so the larger open space faces you; and put the candle into it (being careful to keep it away from the sides). Watch how defined the light becomes when the space around it is more restricted: Pray for Suhila Tarazi and Al Ahli Hospital as they continue bravely providing hope and healing in Gaza.

3 Light the other candles – one to represent Embrace and one our supporters. Place them in the box alongside the first: Thank God for the inspiration given by Al Ahli; and the encouragement received by them as Embrace and our supporters come alongside them.

4 Pray again with these symbols for areas where you need courage, thanking God for those He has placed around you to help.

Increase the yield:

... by inspiring and encouraging others

Although Christians live in different places and are called to serve in different ways, we are all connected to the same Vine; bearing consistent fruit for the same purpose. This knowledge in itself is encouraging, but specifically taking the time to honour and spur each other on – and to share each other's stories – is hugely strengthening.

How could you spread the word about Al Ahli to encourage others to live courageously; and to speak up about the situation in Gaza? Could you:

• share a notice at church or send an email round?
• write to your MP to raise awareness of how desperate the situation is? You’ll find a template letter to help at http://embraceme.org/gaza
... Jesus’ unprecedented courage

Lord Jesus, graft us more closely into You. Draw us close to examine Your unprecedented courage. For You are the Vine and we are the branches – grow us in the fruitful living that stems from You.

Sometimes, somewhere in the midst of remembering Jesus as being fully God, we forget just how fully human He was too. But we need to remember this.

Every time He chose the narrow path before Him, that decision would have been as costly, risky or potentially terrifying for Him as it would have been for us.

Every time He faced opposition, rejection, suffering and loss, His body, mind and emotions would have reacted humanly. But He did it. Every time. He chose to keep bravely walking forward.

This is the Jesus who spoke up about the true meaning of the scriptures to those pronounced experts when He was just twelve years old. And who continued to challenge these religious leaders when He grew up, despite having no educational or cultural credentials to do so.

This is the Jesus who talked to – and confronted – people from very different backgrounds to a poor but upstanding carpenter from Nazareth… a rich young ruler; a Roman Centurion; Pontius Pilate… prostitutes; tax collectors; a Samaritan woman.

The Jesus who stood on hillsides and addressed thousands of people at a time; who trusted His Father enough to speak out forgiveness, healing and deliverance; to walk on water; and to boldly claim He would feed the crowds.

The Jesus who kept risking reputation, livelihood and security to keep reaching out to the least, teaching the lost and healing the sick.

The Jesus who bravely walked in and through the story of Holy Week in real life… as we are soon to remember again. The Jesus who knew He was going to the cross but didn’t leave the path that led Him there once; from birth to ministry to death.

What would it look like if we lived with even just a fraction of His courage today?
Preparing the ground...
Think about: true generosity… what does it look like? And when have you experienced it?

Rooting ourselves in the Word:
to share our fruit more fully

1. Read: Philippians 2:1-11
2. Dig deeper:

- We’re back in the same joyful letter as session 2. In this second section, Paul now builds on his prayer for the Philippians’ ‘love to overflow more’ (1:9) by unpacking just what loving like Christ looks like. What parallels do you see between the first four verses of Philippians 2 and Galatians 5:13-26?

- Along with the Spirit working in us, we are urged to have the ‘mindset’ of Christ (v 5)… i.e. the attitude of valuing others above ourselves – really paralleling the Greek word for humility – ‘tapeinophrosune’ – which emphasises a state of lowliness of mind. What is the relationship between what we think, who we are and what we do? Pause to pray for the further renewing of your mind.

- There can be no teaching more transformational than meditating on Jesus’ example. For each stage of humility that Paul lists in Christ’s work, what was the cost? Pause again to thank Jesus for His incredible generosity to us, especially at the cross.

- What other examples from the gospels spring to mind as shedding light on Christ’s servant-hearted character? (John 13:1-7 is one but there are many others.) Use Inspired by the Vine on page 23 to continue prayerfully reflecting on Jesus’ character.

- What type of behaviour does our world usually exalt and reward? Verses 9-11 reflect the upside-down nature of the kingdom. Jesus is not only exalted after He has given His life, through His resurrection and ascension restoring Him to the Father’s right hand; but because He has loved so extraordinarily.

- In John 12:24 Jesus talked of the need for a seed to fall to the ground in order to bear much fruit… most fruit contains many seeds, leading to potential for an exponential multiplication. What might you have in your life which could potentially grow even more fruit if you surrendered it to seed?

- At Embrace, we’re inspired by just how many of our partners and supporters pay extraordinary personal costs to follow the call on their lives to humbly serve others in the pattern of Christ. Read Living generously in Lebanon; how do Hussein and Nadine Ismail further inspire you?

Hussein and Nadine Ismail, founders of the Learning Centre for the Deaf, inspire us to live generously
Living generously in Lebanon

Hussein and Nadine Ismail have sacrificed a lot to pioneer and grow the Learning Centre for the Deaf for nearly twenty years. But they give so freely that what comes across most when you meet them is their joy and thankfulness.

The result is a warm, nurturing environment at their centre which serves deaf children on three, crucial levels, in order to restore their connection to the world and help them flourish in it. The early years programme helps each one adjust to living life with this disability through a tailor-made approach. The high school project gives a unique opportunity in Lebanon for 20 deaf young people to study academic subjects over the age of 14 so they can go on to university. And the centre’s campaigning fights for better rights for every deaf person in their society.

The centre receives a small government subsidy for each Lebanese child, but none for Syrian refugees. But Hussein and Nadine would never close the door, so they always find ways to meet this shortfall.

Embrace is proud to know this remarkable couple, and honoured to support their sacrifices with the funds lovingly given to us by our supporters in turn. It’s all the same fruit of generosity grown in different places by the same Spirit, working together to bring transformation. As Nadine says: ‘Just when we found out our funding from elsewhere was going to be cut, Embrace committed to supporting us. God answered our prayers through you – He has perfect timing.’
Pray for more fruitfulness:

... with words

Lord of all fruitfulness, thank You for giving us Your very life – and Your generous Spirit too. Honour and sustain Hussein and Nadine Ismail and all You have planted alongside them at the Learning Centre for the Deaf in Beirut; keep growing them in their service of You as they educate and advocate so children struggling to hear can flourish in Lebanese society. And humble us through Your and their examples, to offer freely what are all gifts and growth from You so, together with Embrace, we too can open up new possibilities for children living with disabilities in the Middle East today.

... with symbols

You will need: a handful of loose change

1 Hold a few of the coins: Think about the riches of heaven. One by one, lay them down: Thank Jesus for His extraordinary generosity in coming to earth; serving us; enduring hardship; and going to the cross.

2 Pick the coins up. Hold them again: Think about the gifting, resources and character God has given Nadine and Hussein Ismail. Lay the coins down: blessing each area in turn of the time, resources, energy and opportunity they have laid down to help children and families through the Learning Centre for the Deaf.

3 Leave the coins down but add extras. Bend the line into a smile! Pray that Embrace and our supporters would keep giving cheerfully to help transform individual lives and the place of deaf people within Lebanese society.

4 Repeat the second stage of this prayer, using it to lay down some of your own ‘riches’.

Increase the yield:

... by sowing more seed

Could you be part of extending that special smile of support for Embrace’s partners?
As you make your preparations to celebrate Easter with friends, family and church, perhaps you could:
• make a special thanksgiving offering as part of this
• take the decision to become one of our Futuremakers (people who commit to give regularly, each month, to provide vital ongoing security to partners such as the Learning Centre for the Deaf).

To find out more, visit http://embraceme.org/donate or call one of our Supporter Care Team on 01494 897950.
Inspired by the Vine:

... Jesus’ extravagant generosity

Lord Jesus, graft us more closely into You. Draw us close to examine Your extravagant generosity. For You are the Vine and we are the branches – grow us in the fruitful living that stems from You.

Re-tracing the steps of Jesus through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday is a re-treading of holy ground. In re-telling its events – imagining ourselves there – we seek to honour Christ by trying to appreciate what He gave for our sake. But we can’t ever really take it in. It’s both too cosmic, and too personal, for us to ever manage.

This is the Jesus who gave and gave and gave; who sacrificed His glory for our brokenness continuously; leaving perfection to risk being born as a vulnerable baby; and living daily amid the heart-breaking reality of the suffering and injustice we create every time we reject His best plan.

This is the Jesus who spent the peak of His ministry serving people day after day in the heat; giving freely whatever personal words, healing or deliverance they required; travelling long distances, usually on foot; facing the criticism of the religious leaders and scholars who should have been the first to recognise Him; dealing with the petty squabbles of His followers – then kneeling to wash their road-dirty feet.

This is the Jesus we follow into the garden this week, weeping and sweating blood at the thought of what lies ahead, but surrendering anyway; the Lord we see enduring betrayal at the hands of one of His greatest friends and abandonment by most of the others; the King feeling the grief of separation from His Father and the weight of all humanity on His shoulders.

This is the Jesus who went to the cross for us. The Jesus who gave His whole life and His very life.

Nothing any of us can ever do will truly look even a bit like what He has done for us. How could it?

We’re not being asked to match the Passion. It is finished and it could only ever have been done by Him.

But we are asked to imitate His pattern, to share in His sufferings… to be ready to give our all.

This we can do. And this we can keep encouraging each other to do. For even just a glimpse of this kind of generosity could change everything.
Session 6:
Living expectantly

Preparing the ground...
Ask yourself: how hopeful you think you are… in your own life, and when you think about difficult situations around you, or in the Middle East?

Rooting ourselves in the Word:
to reach for new heights

1. Read: Hebrews 6:1 and 10-20
2. Dig deeper:

- Scholars aren’t sure who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. But its emphasis is clear; it’s all about faith, trust and hope.
- Verse 1 is a fitting call to pursue maturity for our last session. Verses 10-12 re-enforce it by urging us to actively imitate Jesus and those ahead of us in the faith. Yes, the Spirit grows Christ’s character in us; but we partner with this by also choosing to live differently, compassionately, exuberantly, courageously, and generously:
  - Which stories about Jesus – and Embrace’s partners – have inspired you this Lent?
  - How can you actively seek to imitate them?
- What is the ultimate sustaining power of growth and maturity (verses 19-20)? Is it what you would expect?
  - The Greek word used for hope is ‘elpís’, which emphasises definite expectation and anticipation… even confidence. Think about the image of the anchor; what does it provide for a boat?
- Verses 19-20 are deep in mixed, and temple-based, metaphors. But the key visual here is the anchor; the shape of which contains a cross. In fact, the early church often used the anchor rather than the cross as a symbol, bringing to mind the safety and certainty they found in the Resurrection’s extraordinary promise of complete transformation. To keep living fruitfully, we too need a stronger grasp on resurrection hope so we can remain expectant – children loved enough to love radically in turn; heirs to such extraordinary transformation coming in the future that we can give our all now.
  - This was what sustained Jesus throughout His ministry and final days – He focused on what was set before Him. What examples from the gospels demonstrate Him living with complete dependence on His Father? (eg Luke 2:46-49 and John 5:19). Use Inspired by the Vine on page 27 to continue prayerfully reflecting on Jesus’ character.
  - How certain is your hope? Pray your faith will reach new heights.
  - Unflinching vision founded on the promise – and reality – of certain hope is what fuels the tireless work and bravery of so many of our partners. Read Living expectantly in Egypt; how does Dr Morcos Boulos further inspire you?

Dr Morcos Boulos, founder of Shams El Birr, inspires us to live expectantly
Living expectantly in Egypt

Dr Morcos Boulos, founder of our partner Shams El Birr in 6th October City, just outside Cairo, is a man of irrepressible vision. When you enter his office you’re greeted with an extraordinary sight; a wall full of wedding photos in which he is always there, together with a blind couple he cared for when they were children.

Trained as a medical doctor in a country where many live in poverty, his sense of God’s call and heart for people living with disabilities – so often excluded from marriage and work – led him to found this residential centre in the 1980s. He’s devoted his life to serving and innovating here ever since; grabbing every opportunity to help more young people find hope-filled futures and persistently working towards his vision to integrate them into mainstream society.

Every nook and cranny at Shams El Birr is used for transformation... a photocopier in this corner so people can learn administrative skills; a bread oven over there so others can make and sell pastries...

Mikal is just one young man whose life has been turned around here; in his case at the loom. When he first arrived, he kept crying. But the team persevered because they were sure he had been neglected. And with care, some hearing aids and training, he blossomed.

Like many of our partners – and the God they serve – Dr Morcos never turns anyone away. He always trusts there will somehow be enough and meets every challenge with expectant hope – an inspiration to follow, as well as a work to support.

Lives are turned around at the loom, and every other possible, available place; but always, above all, through hope
Pray for more fruitfulness:

... with words

Lord of all fruitfulness, thank You for being our certain hope – resurrected, and resurrecting – invigorating us with fresh vision and confidence in You. Encourage Dr Morcos Boulos and everyone You have planted alongside him at Shams El Birr; keep growing them in their service of You as they bring hope and meaningful futures to children and adults living with disabilities in Egypt today. And enliven us through Your and their examples, till Your quickening hope stirs all our remaining dormancy so, together with Embrace, we too can keep living fruitfully and being part of Your transforming work in the Middle East today.

... with symbols

You will need: a timer with an alarm; a fruit bowl

1 Look at the fruit but don’t eat it. Set an alarm for two minutes: Use the quiet time before it sounds to pray for more hope for:
   • Dr Morcos Boulos and everyone serving at Shams El Birr
   • those finding new purpose through the centre
   • Embrace as they support transformation here and – together with all their Christian partners – across the Middle East
   • yourself.

2 When the alarm goes, enjoy your certain hope realised! As you eat, reflect on all you have discovered about living fruitfully this Lent. Thank God that as well as the future hope of His return and renewal of all things being certain … so is the fulfilment of His promise to complete the work He has begun in us (Philippians 1:6). Ask for help to keep surrendering to Him, so He can grow more and more good and transforming fruit through you.

Increase the yield:

... by growing more fruit with us

We’d love you to keep growing with Embrace … here are a few ideas. You could:

• receive our prayer diary to keep praying for specific partners like Dr Morcos and Shams El Birr – a great way to increase the number of Christians populating your Middle East map, if you used session 1’s Increase the yield suggestion.
• guarantee you regularly hear inspiring stories by signing up to get our Re:Action emails or magazine
• collect some fruit yourself by joining a trip to help with the Palestinian olive harvest.

Find out more at http://embraceme.org or by calling 01494 897950.
**Inspired by the Vine:**

... Jesus’ constant expectancy

Lord Jesus, graft us more closely into You. Draw us close to examine Your constant expectancy. For You are the Vine and we are the branches – grow us in the fruitful living that stems from You.

He is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah! It is finished. He has done it. Jesus has overcome. There aren’t enough adjectives to capture what His Resurrection has accomplished!

There’s something beautifully certain about things that can be written down in the past tense. Because they have happened. We no longer need to hedge our bets about them. There they are on the page for us. Solid; recorded; black and white.

He is risen. He is risen indeed.

But before Christ’s Resurrection came His life; a life charged with incomprehensible struggle and suffering. And a life characterised by greater, more unrelenting, hope than the world has ever seen.

Jesus lived with the kind of constant certainty in His present and for His future that we usually only manage about the past. He remained expectant that the Father would keep coming through for Him. That He would keep saying the words He was to say, keep doing the things He was to do. That He would provide the words and food the people hungered for; calm the weather system the disciples were hiding from; heal every diseased body and troubled mind He touched; find the strength to carry His cross; conquer sin and death forever as He rose to life again.

He kept focused on what was set before Him. He is the pioneer of our faith as well as its centre-piece. The model, as well as the focus for, our trust. He calls us to hope like Him as well as in Him.

And we can follow him; saying what he says and doing what he does. Because He Himself is our help – our constant, living, present hope.

We can be utterly sure He will complete the work He has begun in us; if we simply remain in Him, together we will accomplish all He has set before us too. In His Spirit, we will live fruitfully.

And we can be equally certain that He will finish everything else too. He will complete the transformation of all He has made. One day He will end all injustice and there will be nothing but fruitful flourishing forever.

What will it look like when we truly start to live like this is what we’re expecting?
Journey with Embrace this Lent using our six session study guide. Explore the Fruits of the Spirit and other key New Testament passages on growing in Christ-likeness; reflect on Jesus’ own character; and be further inspired by our partners as they live fruitfully to bring transformation to those experiencing poverty or injustice in the Middle East today.