Our 2017 Lent Study Guide has six sessions which all include Bible study, prayer, information, ‘Life at the margins’ monologues and actions. Each session will introduce you to a different part of God’s big story in the Bible and illustrate how it demonstrates His transforming love towards those who are marginalised. It will then bring you face to face with individuals from the Middle East today who are being restored to hope-filled lives through Embrace’s work.

You can use this resource individually or as a small group, or extract particular sections (such as the case studies, ‘Life at the margins’ monologues and prayers) to include in your main church services each week. You might even want to explore inviting a different person from the congregation to dramatise each week’s imaginative monologue. But however you choose to use this study guide, you’ll find lots to inspire and challenge you and other members of your church.

This Lent, join God’s love-inspired movement; embrace those on the margins in the Middle East.
Embrace the Middle East is a Christian charity with over 160 years’ experience helping people of all faiths and none to free themselves from a life of poverty and injustice.

Together with local Christian communities we’re bringing lasting change to the Middle East through education, healthcare and community development projects.

Join us this Lent, and together we can Embrace those on the margins in the Middle East.
Chapter 1: Created to flourish

ENTER THE STORY:
Can you remember a time when you were making a new start? How did you step into it? And what did you have to leave behind?

JOURNEY WITH: THE ANCIENT ISRAELITES

1. **Read:** Psalm 136.

2. **Use** some of the following thoughts to explore the passage:
   
   • Psalm 136 paints a broad canvas: creation, Egypt, the Red Sea and more…
   
   • It’s a recounting prayer – designed to build faith by remembering God’s larger story and listing what He has done before. How many examples of rescue can you find in it?
   
   • Think about your faith journey. What statements would you add?
   
   • Revisit verses 1-9. God didn’t create marginalised people – exclusion and injustice are a human creation.
   
   • Read verses 10-15 again which reference God delivering the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Exodus 2:23-25 describes Him hearing their ‘zeach’ and having mercy. This Hebrew word means raw longing rather than conscious prayer. How does this encourage you when you think about people being oppressed today?
   
   • Some of this psalm doesn’t make easy reading! But Pharaoh was offered mercy if he would let the people go. How might this affect your prayers for people practicing injustice today?
   
   • Look at verses 23-24. The Psalms (and whole Bible) are full of similar statements so we forget how radical they are. The Israelites’ contemporaries’ gods were on the side of the strong. What does it mean to you for God to align Himself with the weak?
   
   • One phrase is repeated 26 times! How does it underline the consistency of God’s character and priorities throughout history?
   
   • As followers of God – who created people to flourish, who hears the cries of the oppressed, and brings freedom – how should we respond to those who are exploited?

3. **Imagine yourself at the margins.** To think about what it might have been like to live through the Exodus, see page 7. Our ‘Life at the margins’ monologues can be used for personal reflection, read aloud in small groups or dramatised in church.
FREEING: SOFIA IN EGYPT

If you travel along the hot desert road from Cairo, eventually you reach Anafora, a Coptic Christian retreat centre. Embrace supports a project run from the centre – Soteria.

The project – aptly named from the Greek word for safety and deliverance – is as an oasis for women like Sofia from Upper Egypt (the southern region of Egypt). They stay for a week receiving trauma counselling, exploring their talents, developing self-worth and learning about their rights.

Sofia explains the need in general terms. It is too painful to speak of specifics:

‘Sexual harassment and abuse are an issue for many women in Upper Egypt, and they often don’t have words to describe the shame they feel. Oftentimes a girl’s house is open to neighbours and family so they don’t have a safe space.’

Accepting the invitation to Soteria takes huge courage – it means standing up to the men in their families, traveling to the centre and then returning home to live differently. The project supports women when they return home to share their learning, so more women can experience freedom from abuse. (It also delivers training to the men in each village.)

Sofia says Soteria helps ‘women have a voice and discover who they are and how to love themselves.’
Delivering God, 
thank you that your story is full of rescues 
and your heart is always to move towards 
those who are abused or marginalised – 
bringing them out from their desert 
to a lush land of promise 
where they can thrive as you created them to. 
Lead us in your ways Lord 
so that – together with Soteria and Embrace – 
we also choose to hear the heart-cries of women like 
Sofia. 
And use us to help them step out into freedom, safety 
and a new life of championing change in their 
communities, 
throughout Upper Egypt and across the Middle East. 
Amen

**CONTINUE WRITING THIS CHAPTER...**

- Did you know it is the Women’s World Day of Prayer this week? (Men can join in too.)
- Could you consider attending an event locally or gathering people to pray with you at home or in church on Friday 5 March?
- You’d be reaching out with people all across the world to pray for transformation...

Find out more at [www.wwdp.org.uk](http://www.wwdp.org.uk)
I’ve spent most of my life standing on the edge, looking on. But this time, where land gives way to sea, it’s different.

I grew up watching the Egyptian girls from a distance – knowing the difference before being told. A Hebrew among Egyptians – pushed down and out.

When I was old enough, I learned why this line was drawn between where their people live and ours...

Our ancestors came to Egypt during the great famine because of Joseph – who God raised up to save their people as well as ours. We were all given sanctuary and status here. But honour turned to resentment and then privilege soured to...

Slavery.

I always felt ashamed to say that word which defines the difference... the one that voices how the world sees us.

How can anyone precious to God be a slave? How could those He once rescued so miraculously end up being so trapped and abused?

My people rehearsed our stories again and again to keep hope alive... not just stories of Joseph, but the ancient story of God calling Father Abraham to bravely step out from Ur. And the oldest story of all – how all people were made to know God and walk with Him.

All of this remembering kept prayer alive too. Sometimes purposeful and shouted, sometimes faltering and whispered, sometimes drowned out completely. But deep in our hearts always there... crying out to God.

How our prayers were answered when I stood at the edge of the Nile that day with the water lapping at my feet; I watched Moses gathered up in delighted rescue by Pharaoh’s daughter!

And now they are answered again. And in full. For I’m looking on from the edge of another body of water...

Not a river that moved in ripples, but a sea that parted in mighty walls to form a passage!

It was so frightening to take those first steps onto the sea bed... Pharaoh’s horsemen at our back and a wild ocean held in the air all around us...

But ahead? Beyond?
Freedom!
And now we have a new story.

This deliverance – the one we have seen with our own eyes, the one that has come for me and my people – now. In our time! I feel the new soil under my feet and I can’t keep it in:

‘The Lord is my strength and my might, and He has become my salvation!’
Chapter 2: Purposed for more

ENTER THE STORY:
Can you think of a time when someone believed in you more than you did yourself? What difference did it make to you or what you were doing?

JOURNEY WITH: GOD’S HEROES

1. Read: 1 Samuel 16:1-13
2. Use some of the following thoughts to explore the passage:
   • Our second study relates to a specific story in Bethlehem’s hill country.
   • David’s anointing – including the reference to God looking at hearts not outward appearances (verse 7) – is famous. What previous teaching on it has struck you?
   • A well-known passage can lose its revolutionary quality. This is a scene leading to a great king’s anointing, but he’s pushed out of the picture… Revisit David’s position in Jewish culture. He is the youngest son, set to inherit very little; a shepherd; and his own father overlooks him here (despite his bravery and talent). How surprised might David have been to be propelled from obscurity into significance?
   • This is a familiar pattern with God’s heroes. Remember some of the other ‘great’ Old Testament leaders – Moses, Gideon, Deborah, Esther – many don’t seem to have the right skills, background or circumstances… sometimes even their attitudes are questionable. But God raises them up to save others. Who is your favourite? How does their story encourage you?
   • In the New Testament, this pattern is not only evident in who Jesus surrounds Himself with, but also in the comparison of God’s church to a body. Each unique part is vital for the whole to flourish. How should this affect our view of each individual’s worth – in church and society?
   • Human patterns don’t often follow God’s approach. It is usually powerful, well-connected and favourably circumstanced people who get opportunities. As God’s followers, how might we be called to help the underprivileged fulfil their God-given potential?
3. Imagine yourself at the margins. To think about being in David’s shoes, see page 11. Our ‘Life at the margins’ monologues can be used for personal reflection, read aloud to small groups or dramatised in church.
REDEEMING THE FUTURE FOR: MOHAMMED IN GAZA

Mohammed is celebrating two very normal achievements for a 19 year old. He has just finished training and started his first permanent job.

But in Gaza, his achievements are far from normal because young people here don’t have many opportunities. 1.8 million Palestinians live pushed into a strip of land just 25 miles long and six miles wide. Once famous for fertile soil and beautiful beaches, the area is in ruins following a blockade and three wars in the last decade.

All of life is affected. Water, electricity and food are all in short supply – and work is exceptionally hard to find.

Gaza has the highest unemployment rate in the world. The present is bleak and the future precarious.

But Embrace’s partner, the Near East Council of Churches (NECC), are doing everything they can to redeem the future for young people. They provide exceptional vocational courses like the one Mohammed’s just completed in skilled metalwork. Now he has a permanent job at the aluminium factory and can bring home enough income to feed his family.

Mohammed keeps encouraging his friends not to give up. ‘I tell them to join NECC and get trained. It’s given me the chance of a future.’
RESPOND

PRAY ABOUT THIS WEEK’S CHAPTER...

… with words

Redeeming God,
thank you that your story is full of unlikely heroes,
given fresh purpose and raised up from the margins
irrespective of their circumstances
and in spite of a world that judges
by outward appearances and connections.
Thank you for the Near East Council of Churches
and their willingness to go the distance
for young men like Mohammed.
Prosper their work so many more boys
in Gaza can find and fulfil their God-
given potential and continue to involve
us – and all Embrace’s
supporters – in redeeming the future
for all who have limited prospects across
the Middle East.
Amen

… with symbols

You will need: a fork

• Hold the fork in your hand.
• Thank God for the:
  • many simple things you use every day that other
   people have made, and the employment and
   stories that lie behind each one
  • solidity of Mohammed’s new skills
  • Near East Council of Churches and Embrace’s work
    in ensuring Mohammed and other young people in
    Gaza have training and hope for the future.
• Put a fingertip on each of the fork’s four points in
  turn, praying for:
  1 training for more of Mohammed’s friends
  2 resourcing and protection for the Near East
     Council of Churches and Embrace
  3 change in Gaza’s desperate situation
  4 God to help you use the tools He has given you to be
     one of His unlikely heroes for justice – for young
     people in Gaza and for people across the Middle East

CONTINUE WRITING THIS CHAPTER...

Supporting Embrace’s partners helps turn around individual stories like Mohammed’s. But speaking up about the injustice of the blockade could help change the plot for everyone living in Gaza.

One of the ways we can demonstrate rescuing compassion is to speak up for the voiceless. Could you write to your MP and/or the Prime Minister about the situation in Gaza?

You might like to share what has inspired you about Mohammed’s story and the work of Embrace. Please ask the government to ensure all the materials necessary for rebuilding homes and businesses in Gaza are delivered without delay. Essential reconstruction items like wood, cement, and water pumps are prevented by Israel from entering Gaza and innocent people are suffering the consequences.

Please ask to defend the rights of Gaza’s population to free movement, by ensuring Israel allows Palestinians to leave Gaza for work, study and medical care in the West Bank or abroad.
LIFE AT THE MARGINS... WITH DAVID

Have you ever had a day when your whole world turned upside-down?

You wake up with everything as it’s always been, and begin your day completely unaware of what’s coming.

And then…

...suddenly. Nothing will ever be the same again.

I had one of those days today.

I’m the youngest in my family, and you know what that means. Not much status or inheritance to look forward to in the future. And none of the best jobs or privileges now. Just out in the fields every day with the sheep making sure they’re safe. Miles away from any of the action, the last to find out about interesting visitors to Bethlehem, or to hear any significant news they might bring.

Not that it isn’t exciting in the fields sometimes. You have to keep your wits about you day and night… and your catapult close to hand. I may be young but I’ve seen off more wild animals than I can count to protect my dad’s flock. He’s trusted me with them, and I’m not about to let any of them come to harm.

And… don’t tell anyone… but the fields give me a lot of space to write my songs and sing them at the top of my voice to God without anyone else hearing!

So this is my life… day after day.

Until today.

Suddenly I’m sent for and hurried back to the house in a rush – with the flock all left behind as if there was something more important for me to do… somewhere else I should be.

And then Samuel the prophet is anointing me! Anointing? Me?!

Not Eliab, not Abinadab, not even Shammah or any of the others…

... but me.

It’s all happening before I even know what it’s about, but when it’s explained…

King? King?

I mean we already have a king… and he is powerful, rich and experienced with armies at his command… and the loyalty of his people – my loyalty too. How can this be? What’s it even about?

I’m just a shepherd who writes songs. I’m the youngest in a family of eight sons. This wasn’t supposed to be my future. This can’t be my future, can it?

But Samuel is sure. He says God has seen me, knows my heart, and has chosen me for something more. And so I will trust.

Blessed be the name of the Lord.
Chapter 3: Re-planted to blossom

ENTER THE STORY:
Has there been a time in your life where you needed – and received – particular care? What difference did people coming alongside you, or speaking up for you, make?

JOURNEY WITH: GOD’S MESSENGERS

1. **Read**: Isaiah 61:1-3

2. **Use** some of the following thoughts to explore the passage:
   - Study three visits Jerusalem to hear from the prophet Isaiah.
   - How does the idea of God sending messages to people underline His pattern of love-inspired movement towards people?
   - Isaiah 61:1-3 contains beautiful promises – which one speaks to you the most?
   - Ashes were put on peoples’ heads during mourning, whilst the ‘crown of beauty’ describes a turban typically worn by a bridegroom. (God’s kingdom promises to replace the deepest separation imaginable with the greatest unity and love imaginable.) Oaks are a particular symbol for stability and strength, whose presence is remarkable in a desert landscape like Israel’s.
   - Notice every aspect of life is transformable – physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. What does this suggest about God’s holistic concern for positive change in individuals and societies?
   - Isaiah has a lot to say about the marginalised – and God’s anger at those who oppress them. But it’s important to remember that prophets were usually marginalised too. Are those who champion counter-cultural justice today typically any more popular?
   - Look ahead to verse 8, where God Himself is quoted. What does He love?
   - Clearly Isaiah’s words are not just for his contemporaries. Jesus quotes the first portion of them in Luke 4. But He also lived them out and told His followers to do likewise. Read Matthew 25:31-46. How does this passage relate to Isaiah 61:1-3? What groups of people are mentioned in both?
   - Have you come across Christians, churches or organisations who successfully speak up for, or bring, similar transformation?

3. **Imagine yourself at the margins.** To get inside Isaiah’s skin, see page 15. Our ‘Life at the margins’ monologues can be used for personal reflection, read aloud to small groups, or dramatised in church.
GOOD NEWS FOR: SAJA IN PALESTINE

Saja’s family are Bedouins who live in a tent just north of Jerusalem and still practice many of the traditions of this ancient, nomadic people, whose name literally means ‘desert wanderers’.

But eight-year-old Saja has never been able to walk. Instead, she moved around by crawling on the floor, because her family could not afford a wheelchair to lift her out of the dust. She has multiple physical and learning disabilities, and her mother Reema was worried about her survival.

Bedouins were given full Israeli citizenship in 1948, but the land available to them has been significantly reduced and relocated, making their traditional lives, and their access to specialist services, challenging.

Thankfully a local healthworker identified Saja and informed her mother about Embrace partner Four Homes of Mercy in Bethany, who lovingly care for 70 individuals like Saja, including many who were rejected by their families. Reema was eager for her daughter to receive the care she desperately needs, and Saja was given a new home – initially for three months’ assessment and rehabilitation. Although a difficult decision for Reema, she rejoices Saja will now survive and blossom:

‘I was afraid she was going to die. This is her place… the professional staff will be able to take care of her. Saja will be safe here.’
Chapter 3: Replanted to blossom

Chapter 1: Created to flourish
Chapter 2: Purposed for more
Chapter 4: Searched out
Chapter 5: Paid for at great cost
Chapter 6: Loved beyond limits

RESPOND

PRAY ABOUT THIS WEEK’S CHAPTER...

... with words

God who is always good news to the poor, thank you that your story is full of merciful interventions as you send prophets to every generation to speak and act for justice that raises people out of the ashes.

Thank you for bringing Saja into safety and specialist care through Four Homes of Mercy and Embrace. Empower us to align ourselves with those on the margins too – until society heeds our messages and actions of defiant hope and no one anywhere in the Middle East, is left outside of the safety that proclaims their true worth.

Amen

... with symbols

You will need: A4 paper, a table and a pen

• Fold your sheet of paper in half, then stand your ‘tent’ on the table. (It may not stay up.)
• Pray for the survival and flourishing of the Bedouin people.
• Fold the paper in half again into a smaller, stronger tent.
• Thank God for Four Homes of Mercy. Pray for Saja and other residents to thrive in their ‘safe place’.
• Fold the paper one more time.
• Thank God for Embrace, its supporters and the many layers of people coming together to protect Saja and other residents’ futures.
• Decorate your tent’s roof with some of the good news phrases from Isaiah 61.
• Hold your finished tent.
• Thank God that He involves you in writing His ‘good news’ stories. Ask Him to continue showing you how to raise up people like Saja with Him.

CONTINUE WRITING THIS CHAPTER...

Many people came together to change Saja’s story for good: her mother, a local healthworker, staff at Four Homes of Mercy, Embrace and our supporters. Could you encourage even more people to get involved with making a difference this Lent by:

• spreading the word about Saja to your friends, family and church?
• holding a fundraising lunch with a Middle Eastern flavour? (See www.embraceme.org/lent for some irresistible recipes.)
• organising an abilities auction to celebrate all the different gifts God gives that can bring positive change? (Find out more at www.embraceme.org/lent)
LIFE AT THE MARGINS... WITH ISAIAH

This is the life of the prophet. To walk amongst the people. But also to be separated from them because of what you see and hear. Speaking the truth in love doesn’t win you many friends.

I am no better than them. When the Lord called me and revealed Himself, I felt I could not possibly speak for One so holy. I felt separate from Him too – for He is pure and spotless, and I am Isaiah… a man of unclean lips.

But there is joy in being God’s messenger and in coming alongside those whom others have rejected; the ones invisible in the market square or the halls of power, or even the temple. Jerusalem and Judah’s homeless, poor, broken-hearted, forsaken, forgotten, sick and bereaved…

So often He asks me to simply remind His people about these precious ones. To outline again who He is and the wonderful, larger story He created for them to live in; to repeat His love-inspired rules for life that ensure no one is left out or exploited.

But they are so quick to forget His covenant of love, His endless forgiveness, His clear words, His incredible rescues, and the whole way He designed His community to work. They want to write their own stories with themselves at the centre, and God – and anyone else in the way – pushed out.

The results are shattered lives; people falling through the cracks even whilst the religious ceremonies are happening?! I am outraged too! Just like Him…

What a price to pay for forgetting the Author and the other, precious characters He has placed in His story!

How can I keep quiet about such injustice?

But I also get to speak such precious words of hope to these marginalised ones. For God has not forgotten them. He is on their side, constantly planning good things for them; He is moving towards them to raise them up. He promises love and restoration for now and for when the Messiah comes.

Oh yes, the life of the prophet is complex. But I know that:

‘The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord…
…has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor…
…to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
Chapter 4: Searched out

ENTER THE STORY:
When have you felt different from, or left out by, people around you? Have you ever experienced someone going out of their way to include you?

JOURNEY WITH: JESUS AS HE WELCOMES IN

1. Read: Matthew 8:1-4
2. Use some of the following questions to explore the passage:
   • Study four introduces God as Jesus entering His story alongside people. We are on earth rather than in heaven, and specifically, somewhere near the Sea of Galilee and Capernaum.
   • Matthew 8:1-2 is short and factual, with little detail or colour, but with just a bit of contextual knowledge, carries great weight. Can you think of any disease today that is viewed like leprosy was in biblical times?
   • Lepers were sent beyond the borders of settlements and considered unclean – contact with them meant you couldn’t take part in religious observances. They were contaminated and contaminating – to be avoided at all costs. How does Jesus choose to heal this leper, and why do you think this would have mattered?
   • What extra significance do you think it adds that the crowd are following Jesus and so many people are present?
   • Lepers weren’t the only marginalised people Jesus chose to move towards, touch and restore. He crossed every divide to search out those who were looked down on or despised… women, children, tax collectors, prostitutes, the disabled, uneducated people such as fishermen, the demonised, Samaritans, criminals, occupying Roman centurions… The only people He seemed to not enjoy spending time with were those who had power and used it to oppress others, especially when they were religious. Who do you think Jesus would seek out today?
   • Who do you find it difficult to move towards? How does considering Jesus – who left heaven, not just for earth, but for the margins – inspire you to be braver?

3. Imagine yourself at the margins. To think about the leper’s experiences, see page 19. Our ‘Life at the margins’ monologues can be used for personal reflection, read aloud to small groups, or dramatised in church.
The Zabaleen have been pushed to the edges of Cairo and the margins of Egyptian society. A group of predominantly Coptic Christians, their name means ‘garbage people’ and has come from their work collecting and sorting the city’s waste. Many construct shelters from material found in the rubbish, so living conditions are unsanitary and dangerous; many turn to substance abuse as a coping strategy.

Mariam struggled to feed her family, and her husband’s addiction led to abuse. She was terrified that her children’s future would be ruined by the same cycle.

But there is a beacon of hope in the midst of Ezbet-el-Nakhal’s slums – the convent containing Embrace-funded project, the Salaam Centre. The centre is a place of safety and care where sisters live alongside women like Mariam seeking to gather them in with a transforming compassion which can change their stories. They know short-term assistance isn’t enough so they offer women’s rights training and addiction counselling.

Mariam explains: ‘I get support and counselling from the Salaam Centre. But I am also happy because my husband can get help to overcome his addiction. Through the seminars I know there is a way for healing; I can now get food, find a job, and know that I have rights and an important role.’
Chapter 4

RESPOND

PRAY ABOUT THIS WEEK’S CHAPTER...

... with words

God who left perfection to put on human skin and walk your beautiful story back into the chaos of our broken narratives; thank you for moving towards lepers, Samaritans, prostitutes, tax collectors – and everyone else labelled outsider – with practical love that gathers in. Bless the Salaam Centre’s presence in Cairo and all it does to mirror you in bringing heaven’s value to the Zabaleen. Continue to use them – and Embrace – to search out and help more families like Mariam’s. And lead us all to follow you in leaving our comfort to reach out to all in need across the Middle East.

Amen

... with symbols

You will need: three items from recycling, sticky labels, a pen

- Reclaim three items from your recycling bin.
- Thank God for the UK's recycling services and for all those who work to ensure the worth of materials is recognised, re-used and recycled. Thank Him too for the Zabaleen’s hard work in running a highly efficient service (which recycles 80% compared to 17% here).
- Look at your ‘rescued’ items.
- Think about the difference perspective makes in assigning value.
- Write each of the following words on a separate sticky label and attach it to a different item: ‘seen’, ‘loved’, ‘helped’.
- Take up each item and use it to pray for the individuals, group and organisation below, giving thanks for how these words are true for each:
  - yourself, friends and family
  - Mariam’s family
  - the Zabaleen
  - the Salaam Centre
  - Embrace

CONTINUE WRITING THIS CHAPTER...

Last week, we asked you to think about involving others in supporting Embrace’s work in the Middle East. This week, we’re coming back to you.

We’re so thankful for everyone who spreads the word, prays or gives. It takes lots of people at different levels to change the story for those at the margins. Your generosity means we can be generous to the Salaam Centre so they can search out families like Mariam’s.

Could you consider making a gift to Embrace’s Lent Appeal this year?

Visit www.embraceme.org/lent-appeal or call 01494 897950 to find out more.
LIFE AT THE MARGINS...

WITH A LEPER HEALED BY JESUS

There are some words that carry fear. Some words you never want to find yourself on the wrong side of. ‘Leprosy’ is one. When the unspeakable is spoken, a life sentence gets written over you.

Leprosy might even be the worst word imaginable. Only don’t imagine it… you can’t, unless you’ve experienced it. I pray you never do.

There’s the disease itself… and all it leads to physically. But its consequences affect every area of your life.

Silent, frightened recognition in seeing eyes followed by muffled, hasty retreats from fleeing feet. Separation. Exclusion. All these things become familiar when you’re ‘unclean’.

You represent danger to those you love, and questions are asked about you: ‘Exactly why are you like this anyway?’ And ‘what did you do to bring God’s judgement on you?’

The questions get inside you. The longer you spend on the outside, the harder it is to keep a sense of ever having belonged inside.

That’s how I felt anyway…

But something inside me wouldn’t give up on the possibility that someone would look at me with love again… that one day people might move towards me, instead of running away… that I would be touched again.

Perhaps that belief was what turned into the faith to approach Jesus. The crowded hillside was the last place I should have been, mingling among people as if I didn’t have… …that word again.

I fell to my knees before Him and the simple words tumbling out of me voiced prayer and statement together, ‘Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.’

And what love. Even if there was no doubt in His mind as to what would happen… He reached out and He touched me.

He touched a leper.

He didn’t say much. ‘I will; be clean’. Just four, short every day words. But what love. Because He touched me. Do you understand? He valued me even when I was still unclean. It was like He could see through what everyone else couldn’t.

And immediately that word was erased!

The disease was gone. My exclusion had ended and a completely new chapter was beginning… the chance to start all over again. The whole world opening up and inviting me in!

Jesus told me not to tell anyone, just to get the necessary confirmations from the priest and make my thanksgiving offering. But I couldn’t keep quiet. I just couldn’t.

Would you have been able to?
Chapter 5: Paid for at great cost

ENTER THE STORY:
Have you ever received – or given – generosity which made the difference between doing or not doing something… or going or not going somewhere?

JOURNEY WITH: JESUS AS HE REDEEMS

1. **Read:** Philippians 2:1-11

2. **Use** some of the following thoughts to explore the passage:
   - In study five we imagine three scenes: the believers’ homes in Philippi (situated in today’s north eastern Greece, but part of Macedonia in biblical times); the prison where Paul is writing; and the events of the crucifixion and resurrection.
   - What is Paul urging the church in Philippi to do?
   - What is he urging them not to do? Why would doing this be tempting?
   - What sort of generosity does it require to value others in the way Paul describes?
   - Read verses 6-11 again… what stands out to you today? Pause for a moment to thank Jesus for His incredible sacrifice.
   - How would you try to describe Jesus’ generosity in coming to earth and going to the cross? We were ourselves separated from God, and therefore at the margins, until He came…
   - What could you do during the rest of Lent – and over the Easter weekend – to newly consider Jesus’ sacrifice, and respond to it in a fresh way?
   - From your knowledge of Paul’s life and/or what he says about his experiences later in Philippians (see 4:12-13), how does he reflect Jesus’ generosity in putting others’ needs before His own?
   - Radical generosity – the kind of giving, service or sacrifice that really costs – is challenging. But the early church set the bar high (see Acts 4:32-37). What examples have you experienced of Christians and churches being radically generous? And where do you feel there is room for more of this?

3. **Imagine yourself at the margins.** To get inside Paul’s perspective, see page 23. Our ‘Life at the margins’ monologues can be used for personal reflection, read aloud to small groups, or dramatised in church.
GOING THE EXTRA MILE FOR: TARIQ AND NAHLA IN LEBANON

Tariq is 13. His family sold falafel, humus and other delicacies to restaurants in Syria... until the war came and he was nearly killed making a delivery.

They fled to Lebanon – which now hosts 1.5 million refugees – but as with 53% of Syrian children here, there was no government school place for Tariq. Instead, he earned a few coins carrying other children’s schoolbags.

But now, thanks to Embrace’s partner, Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD), Tariq can study again, because everyone is welcome at their education centre. Fadia is relieved her son can learn whilst they wait for ‘love to return... bloodshed to stop’ so they can return home.

Refugees like Nahla are even more vulnerable to marginalisation.

Nahla was diagnosed with a brain development disorder when she was seven, and at 20, has complex needs. But she is flourishing through the speech and movement therapy offered by Embrace’s partner, the Zvartnotz centre in Beirut. She has even discovered a talent for embroidery! But this help comes at an extraordinary cost... the centre only receives government funding for Lebanese beneficiaries. At the time of writing, 10 of the 40 beneficiaries are Syrian refugees. Zvartnotz pay this extra price of welcome themselves. That is what love does.
Chapter 1: Created to flourish
Chapter 2: Purposed for more
Chapter 3: Replanted to blossom
Chapter 4: Searched out
Chapter 5: Paid for at great cost
Chapter 6: Loved beyond limits

Chapter 5: Paid for at great cost

RESPOND

PRAY ABOUT THIS WEEK’S CHAPTER...

... with symbols
You will need: a needle, thread and some fabric.

- Take the thread in your hands and thank God for Nahla's life:
  - Hold the left end, celebrating the fact that she has been kept safe through many past struggles.
  - Hold the middle, knowing that she is safe now, and enjoying mastering embroidery!
  - Hold the right end, thanking God He cares even more than you, Embrace and the Zvartnotz centre about Nahla’s future.
- Thread the needle. Just as it isn’t always easy to do this, give thanks for the sacrificial generosity of Zvartnotz welcoming Nahla and nine other Syrians.
- Pass the threaded needle through the fabric. Pray for all refugee children like Nahla and Tariq to be stitched into the fabric of society wherever they are now living across the Middle East who are waiting for someone to pay the price of welcome for them.

CONTINUE WRITING THIS CHAPTER...

Could you go the extra mile for refugees by buying an Alternative gift? The numbers of refugees and internally displaced people have reached record highs. The situation is desperate: for those forced to flee countries such as Syria and for those handling the extra strain of so many more people in nations like Lebanon.

One of the ways Embrace raises funds to support refugees is through our Alternative gifts. Visit www.embraceme.org/alternative-gifts to find out more.

Or call 01494 897950 to request a catalogue.

PRAY ABOUT THIS WEEK’S CHAPTER...

... with words
God who gave your very self for us, thank you for changing history forever through the reckless generosity of the most precious life ever lived laid down – and broken – for us. We can never match or repay you; but inspire us to reflect you. Grow in us a radical generosity like Paul’s, and like LSESd’s and Zvartnotz’s in Lebanon, so that together with all Embrace’s supporters and staff, we too can go the extra mile for Tariq, Nahla, and many more refugee children across the Middle East who are waiting for someone to pay the price of welcome for them.

Amen
I know what it’s like to be raised up high and singled out for praise. I had everything going for me.

I was circumcised exactly right and born into the best tribe. I was a Pharisee in my knowledge and practice of the law; faultless in adhering to it; and so zealous that I was even persecuting the church. I was at the top and centre of everything I held dear.

But I hit the ground suddenly and dramatically. My whole life interrupted by God on the road to Damascus.

The light was so intense, and I heard the Lord identify Himself as Jesus and ask why I was persecuting Him.

I had been accepted by all the religious leaders but had separated myself from the only one that mattered. I was persecuting the Lord!

Knocked to the ground. Brought low. Blind for three days. Unable to eat or drink.

It was the greatest gift. For the Lord Himself came close and gave me revelation. He reached out to help me – even while I was persecuting His own – then sent Ananias to set me straight on how to live and share Christ’s grace.

How could Jesus care so much that He would come after one?

But then this is our Lord. He is generosity incarnate.

I know that now. Before He met me on the road to Damascus, He had humbly served in Bethlehem and Galilee and Jerusalem. Before He reached into my story, He had rewritten history at Gethsemane and Golgotha and on that glorious first Easter morning in the garden.

He – who in His very nature was God Himself – left it all and made Himself nothing. He came as a servant and took on human skin. Then He humbled Himself still more and died on the cross…

… to pay for us. To pay for me. And it’s all a gift. We can never repay Him.

But through His Spirit in us, we can look to the interests of others not ourselves; we can value their needs above our own like He did. We can lay down our selfish ambition, privilege and power and count it as nothing to also go after each one; to prize their worth as Christ prizes theirs – and ours.

So make my joy complete. Join me in being of the same mind as Christ – and in having the same love.
Chapter 6: 
Loved beyond limits

ENTER THE STORY: 
What are your experiences of being given a second chance by people… and of offering this same opportunity to others? How about a third, fourth or fifth chance?

JOURNEY WITH: JESUS AS HE CALLS AND RESTORES

1. **Read:** John 21:15-19, John 23:25

2. **Use** some of the following thoughts to explore the passage:
   - Our last study invites us to a barbeque on the shores of Lake Galilee…
   - What does Jesus ask Peter and how many times?
   - How does Peter feel about this questioning?
   - Jesus may simply be making sure Peter means what he says. But something more redemptive is likely. Jesus predicted Peter would deny Him and he did, three times in a row (Luke 22:54-62). Now, Peter gets the chance to affirm devotion three times.
   - There are further confirmations of Peter’s calling and value here. How many can you spot? (See Matthew 4:18-22, Matthew 16:18 and John 13:38.)
   - Jesus is definitely moving towards Peter in reconciliation. But it’s not comfortable! Peter has perhaps marginalised himself, but Jesus confronts their damaged relationship to bring healing and ensure Peter can move forward. How might this have then influenced how Peter led the early church in radical grace and generosity?
   - Verses 18-19 make difficult reading, referencing Peter’s martyrdom, but Christians can be oppressed for playing their part in Jesus’ story. What is your reaction to this?
   - God gives so many chances. How does this inspire you to keep loving, praying and working for transformation in challenging situations?
   - This is not the end of God’s story! There is more coming... one day there will be no marginalisation; in heaven, relationships between people will be perfect. This is the hope set before us. But until eternity’s never ending chapter embraces us into no more injustice, let’s keep moving to the margins with God to restore those still experiencing exclusion.

3. **Imagine yourself at the margins.** To explore Peter’s perspective, see page 27. Our ‘Life at the margins’ monologues can be used for personal reflection, read aloud to small groups, or dramatised in church.
PERSEVERING WITH CHAMPIONING: TANYA IN ISRAEL

Sometimes people are so vulnerable, and have been exploited so often, they need long-term help and many chances before they can accept love. Tanya is one of these people.

She came to Tel Aviv when she was just 18, and after a brief time on a kibbutz then waitressing, she was persuaded into prostitution. 24 years have passed, characterised by considerable time on the streets and fighting addiction.

Thankfully, staff from Embrace’s partner, the Aviv Centre, regularly look for people like Tanya and bring them into their facilities. In addition to receiving a meal, it’s a safe place Tanya can go for advice, friendship and support from volunteers and staff, many of whom are reformed addicts themselves. Aviv also work with the women’s refuge where Tanya now lives.

Her road to recovery isn’t straight or easy. But each time she uses, our partners are there, seeing Tanya through withdrawal and working to find her specialist treatment. They could give up and let her disappear into the company of those who will abuse her. But time and again they offer another new beginning.

Tanya is beginning to believe their love enough to imagine a different future: ‘I want to rent an apartment, start working and put my documents and official status in order. I want to help others like me.’
RESPOND

PRAY ABOUT THIS WEEK’S CHAPTER...

... with words

God of the second, third and seventy-seventh chance, thank you for repeatedly giving us fresh starts to our stories through your limitless love and persistent belief in every one you created and seek to restore. Thank you for the Aviv Centre in Israel, for Embrace and for everyone who refuses to give up on the people they work relentlessly to serve in love. Give us all hearts that persevere with courageous hope through each setback, disappointment and tragedy so we continue to champion each Tanya, and every nation in the Middle East. God of the second, third and seventy-seventh chance, keep us serving these people and lands you so love. Amen

... with symbols

You will need: a dice

Spend some time repeatedly throwing the dice, offering to God your repeated, short prayers for each topic every chance you get, as the relevant number comes up again:

1 = Tanya
2 = peace in the Middle East
3 = Embrace’s work
4 = the Aviv Centre
5 = those struggling with addiction
6 = your prayer and support of Embrace and the Middle East going forward

CONTINUE WRITING THIS CHAPTER...

Think back over our journey this Lent – tracing God’s big story of love-inspired movement towards people from its early beginnings right through to today, as Jesus’ disciples still seek to move to the margins with Him...

…and remember some of the individuals you’ve met as we’ve travelled across the Middle East.

If you’d like to lovingly persevere with Embrace, you could explore:

• becoming a futuremaker
• inviting a speaker to your church
• receiving our magazine or email updates
• becoming a volunteer
• following up on ideas you have had to encourage others to get involved

Visit www.embraceme.org/lent or call 01494 897950 to find out more.
It’s no secret amongst the disciples – I’m quick to speak and act… often before I’ve fully thought things through. And life following Jesus certainly put the spotlight on that!

I had my greatest highs with Him – I was the only disciple to have the faith to walk on water you know? And the first to recognise He was the Messiah. These were the moments when I felt at the centre of everything God was doing!

But they were invariably followed by crashing lows. I fell in the water of course, because I took my eyes of Jesus. And, well, I was also the only disciple Jesus said ‘Get behind me Satan’ to.

But even that didn’t come close to my most epic failure. I was so ashamed. I was sure I’d never betray Jesus – that I’d never deny Him, and then within a few hours I did. Not just once either. Three times; and to a servant girl who was no real threat.

It was so awful then to remember, as I heard the cock crow, that I’d done just what He said I would… and whilst He was going through so much more for my sake as well.

That’s why today meant everything to me.

Every resurrection encounter with Jesus has been amazing for all of us. To see Him again – to know everything He said was true. To understand fully who He was… no, who He is. Who He is and always will be!

But today, after everything, Jesus singled me out and we talked. He asked me three times whether I loved Him. The first two I just answered straight away, but the third time rankled somehow… He knows I love Him. He knows. So why?

Then I remembered… three times denied – and now, three times affirmed.

And each time that calling was reissued – to pastor those who would follow my Lord. And then, that initial command repeated… just like after the first time He caught miracle fish for us! ‘Follow me’.

Anywhere Lord, anywhere.

I’ll keep making mistakes of course, but He’ll keep forgiving me and giving me new chances. And having known this grace, I can teach this grace – and it will welcome so many more back into the fold.

I known I’m forgiven. Wanted. Included. I’m going to make sure I lead His church to go after the lost and isolated too.
God’s big story has always been about love-inspired movement towards those who are marginalised to bring them hope and transformation. Join Embrace during Lent to explore how we can do the same in the Middle East today.