

Beyond Ourselves

A course which explores the wider meaning
of our lives

Leader's Manual

Beyond Ourselves is Book 1 of *The God Who Is There*,
a discipleship course for small groups

by Roger Morgan



The Mathetes Trust

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This course is edited by Roger Morgan. We are grateful to the following people who contributed to the writing of the individual sessions: Anita Benson, John Benson, Ian Bishop, Pete Greaves, Mike Harrison, Alison Morgan, Richard Morgan, Michael Selman, Karin Silk, Elaine Sutherland, Lauren Wicks, and Angela Zvespar.

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Beyond Ourselves

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Preface

Welcome to the first book of our series on discipleship *The God Who is There*. Each book provides a course of ten sessions suitable for small groups. This book, *Beyond Ourselves*, asks the question 'Is there anything beyond ourselves?' or in other words 'Is God there?'. By the end of the course the course members should be able to say 'Yes – I am sure God is there, because I have experienced him for myself.' The second book, *The New Community*, is about continuing to find God to be there whenever a group of Christians meet and search for him together. The third book, *Shining Like Stars*, is about finding God to be there in ordinary day to day life.

The God Who is There takes its inspiration from *Rooted in Jesus*, a discipleship course written sixteen years ago for rural Africa. *Rooted in Jesus* has been highly successful, having been translated so far into 45 African languages and adopted in 16 countries. It has been used to transform many lives as well as whole churches and communities. Because of its success in Africa many people have asked us to release *Rooted in Jesus* for use in the West, believing, as we do, that discipleship is needed here too.

The God Who is There series is our response to that request. *The God Who is There* has the same aims and a similar style to *Rooted in Jesus*, and also has much overlapping content. At first we thought we could keep the same structure and chapter headings and just make a few revisions, but we found that this did not work and decided to do a complete rewrite. The illustrations and examples used in the two series have had to be very different because the issues and problems westerners face in their daily lives are mostly quite different from those people face in Africa. And in *The God Who is There* we have tried to relate to western moral and philosophical assumptions. For example, to most people in rural Africa it is obvious that God is there. But in the West to live by faith in God is to live in a way that stands out from the norm.

For each of the three courses in the series there is a Leader's Manual and an accompanying Coursebook for each group member. Books 2 and 3 also involve music, and come with a worship CD. The series is suitable for groups of any size. It will work well with just three people, but it could equally well be used by a large church with many groups meeting together at the same time.

The series was written by a team of contributors and edited by Roger Morgan, working in this first book with Anita Benson. The Mathetes Trust is able to offer training to churches or to group leaders using the course. If you would like to find out how we can support you, please do get in touch with us by emailing admin@mathetestrust.org or calling 01749 679865. Or visit our website, <https://mathetestrust.org>.

How the course works – notes for the leader

Beyond Ourselves envisages a group of between three and twenty people who will meet together for a series of ten sessions, each lasting an hour and a half. The session can be preceded by a shared meal or a simpler form of refreshment, or by a time of worship.

This book, the Leader's Manual, is for the leader only. It gives minute by minute suggestions for how to spend the time. You will need to prepare carefully and come up with your own detailed plan for each session. Some leaders will prefer to follow the book in every detail. Others may wish to adapt the course to suit their own style or to suit the composition of the group.

In each session the sections are carefully timed; you will need to keep your eye on the clock and stick more or less to these times. If you get behind on one section you should try to make it up on the next. With some groups this will be quite easy but with others, where people are more talkative, keeping to the timings will be more difficult. If this happens, you may wish to over-run a little, or you may prefer to complete one session in two meetings or even two sessions in three meetings. If you start the sessions late you are bound to run into

problems. Better would be to start early and allow more time for the session.

Each session contains a key verse from the Bible for group members to write out on cards and keep with them. In the African version of the course, where it is normal for the groups to memorise the verses, our experience is that those who take the memorisation most seriously make the most progress. The same will be true for those who work through *The God Who is There* series. So suggest to the group that it would be a good plan for them to memorise these key verses. If they do decide to memorise they will benefit greatly from the experience, but if the group is opposed to the idea it is wise to go along with their wishes.

There is a separate member's coursebook which you should give to each of the group members during the first session. This coursebook contains exercises, four for each session, which are designed to help group members work out the practical implications of what they are learning. Three of the exercises follow on from the session, and one is there to help them prepare for the next session. There are various ways of introducing the exercises for groups of different kinds (see below), but do bear in mind that if the exercises are omitted, the impact of the course will be greatly reduced.

Here are three ways in which you could use the exercises:

- Agree with the group that each of them will choose one exercise and try to complete it before the next session starts. Those who are keen can do more than one. With most groups it will be best to work in this way. Make sure that time is allowed in the sessions to report back on the exercises.
- If your group lacks much formal education then it may work better if you choose one of the exercises for each session and suggest that you all tackle the same one. If reading skills are a problem it may be better to describe the chosen exercise orally and not use the coursebooks at all. Another idea which sometimes works well is for the group to divide themselves into pairs and then for each pair to meet up to do the chosen exercise together.

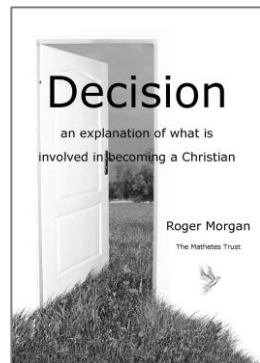
- As a third alternative you could choose to build the exercises into the group sessions themselves, and devote two meetings to each session. This will work extremely well if the group is happy to do the course over twenty sessions rather than ten.

There is more to leading a small group than just running meetings; a good leader will also care for the group members individually. So put time into developing a relationship with each group member. Do this in any way that seems appropriate, for example by meeting up for coffee, going shopping together, playing squash, doing something with your children, going to a film. If you show them that you love them, you will find that what you are teaching in the sessions will get across much more effectively.

Roger Morgan

Additional resources

If members of the group do decide to place their faith in Christ, you may find it helpful to give them a copy of *Decision: an explanation of what is involved in becoming a Christian*. *Decision* is a short and inexpensive booklet which summarises the steps on the road to faith and explains what to expect next. *Decision* is available from the Mathetes Trust website either singly or in packs of ten.



Beyond Ourselves

Session 1: God, creation and me

Please note that this session is divided into 6 sections. Timings are given for each section, with 90 minutes in all. You may decide to leave some sections out, but if you want to include them all you will need to stick carefully to the timings. With most groups it will only rarely be sensible to end the sessions late. If at all possible start the session early; this will give you a bit more time and added flexibility.

Things you will need for this session :

- A whiteboard or flipchart
- Spare Bibles (in case anyone does not bring one)
- A large sheet of paper with Psalm 23.6 written out clearly, displayed in a prominent place in the room
- Small cards (small blank name-cards are available in stationers) for the memory verses – you will need a fresh supply every week
- Pens and paper for group members
- If you can, ask everyone to bring with them a picture of themselves as a baby; if you aren't able to ask them in advance make sure you have one of yourself.

Introduction

(15 mins)

Begin by introducing the course and the title *Beyond Ourselves*. Use your whiteboard or flipchart to write up the following questions.

- Is there anything beyond ourselves?
- Does reality consist of what we can see, touch and measure – or is there something more?
- If there is something more, what is it like, and how can we be in touch with it?



If this is a group which has met before, ask the members one by one to respond very briefly to the questions on the board.

If it is a new group, explain that these questions are what the course is all about, but that before you get down to looking at them together it would be good to start by getting to know one another. Ask each person to share their name and to explain briefly why they have joined the group.

Next give each person a Member's Coursebook. Turn to page 6 and point out that the coursebook begins with a summary of today's session. This summary is then followed by the key verse. Explain that for each session there will be a key verse which tries to capture the essence of what that session is about.

Then look at the exercise on page 7 of the coursebook. Research shows that 3 out of 4 people in the UK have had a spiritual experience of some kind. This means that if you are a typical group many of the group members will say 'yes' to some of the questions in the exercise. Ask them to look at the exercise and one by one make their response to the questions.



Do not allow this to lead to a long discussion, but move on within the allocated time. Before you move on explain briefly from your own personal experience why you yourself believe in God, and say that you hope that everyone in the group will have begun to share your experience before the course is over.

God the creator and designer of the Universe (15 mins)

Explain that during the course you will often look at the Bible together; make sure everyone has a copy. Explain that for you the Bible is like a map which enables you to navigate your way through life. How are we to make sense of the supernatural experiences we have just been

discussing? Or more commonplace experiences like a family row, or an earthquake, or what's going on at a funeral? Say that in your experience the Bible sheds light on all these things.

Now ask the group to turn to **Romans 1.19-20**.

Explain that this is the beginning of Paul's presentation of the Christian gospel which continues for the next 11 chapters of his letter to the Romans.

Tell the group that the course begins where Paul began – with the creation of the universe. Read verses 19-20

aloud, and then summarise along the following lines:



Paul is saying that anyone who looks at the universe objectively can have no doubt that behind it lies a great Creator or designer, and that by looking at creation we can learn a great deal about the Creator himself. In our day Paul's view has been challenged by some scientists who argue that everything we see can be explained by chance and evolution. Other scientists dispute this, arguing that it is so improbable that the universe could have arisen by chance that there must be a designer behind it. They also say that while science helps us to understand how the universe has developed since it began, science will never be able to explain *why* it began. The fact that things exist at all is not a scientific issue but a philosophical or religious one.

Ask the group: "What are your views about this?" Allow discussion, but make sure that you finish this section within the time allotted. In the discussion there are two traps into which you must not fall. These correspond to two things which people commonly but incorrectly believe are a necessary part of Christian belief:

- **Evolution:** It is not wise to query the theory of evolution; there is far too much evidence to support it. It cannot be denied that species do evolve over time in a way that enables them to adapt to their environment. What is much more controversial, even among scientists, is the theory that all species have evolved from other species by chance alone – that is, without divine intervention of some kind.

- **Creation:** It is not wise to suggest that the first chapter of Genesis is intended to be read as a historical account. In particular, we should not claim that all species were created in a single week. There is overwhelming evidence that species appeared on earth over billions of years – for example when the dinosaurs were here human beings were not. Most Christians regard Genesis chapter 1 as something akin to a poem or a painting; true, but not scientifically true.

Sharing thoughts about creation

(15 mins)

Your discussion should have helped people to see that they do not have to choose between Christian belief and the theory of evolution. Some may still not be confident that God exists, but ask the group to leave that for the moment, and move on to look together at the world.

Ask the group members to each share what is the most awe-inspiring thing they have ever seen (this could be anything from a beautiful rose to the Grand Canyon). Begin with your own answer and then invite each person in turn to share.

When each person has contributed, ask the group as a whole: “If we may presume for a moment that God really does exist, and that the creation really does have a designer, what do you think we might learn about God just by looking at creation?” If they are slow to get going, ask supplementary questions such as “How big is God?”, “How powerful is he?”, “How clever is he?”

Say to the group that one thing you find awesome about God is the sheer size of his mind. God is able to take in billions of years of history, all the mysteries of the universe, all the fish in the sea, all the detail of everyone’s DNA, and so on and so on.



Ask the group how many hairs they think you have on your head. Let them guess then say that Jesus said that God even knows this – for every single person. So where does he store all this information? God seems to be like a giant SATNAV system which knows where every

street and every car is and can communicate with all of them at the same time...

People – the summit of creation (25 mins)

Say to the group that you think that God must be interested in every detail of his creation and that he must derive great pleasure from all of it. But the Bible tells us that there is one part of his creation that delights and concerns him more than any other. Ask the group what they think this is. The answer is us. For God the central focus is on human beings. According to the Bible the creation of the universe, of the earth, and of all living creatures culminated in the creation of man and woman. And according to the Bible God knows us and loves us. He has a unique purpose for each of our lives.

If others have brought a baby picture of themselves collect them together now, and spread them on the floor. Play the game of guessing which picture belongs to each person. If you have only your own picture then put this on the floor and ask people who they think it is. Say that according to the Bible these babies are the apple of God's eye.



Turn to **Genesis 1.26-27**. Ask the group “Why according to these verses are human beings so special?” The answer is because they are made in the image of God. Ask them what they think that might mean, then turn together to **Psalms 8** and ask someone to read verses **3-6**. Ask the group “According to these verses, what is the place that human beings have in creation?”

Now turn to **Psalms 139** and ask someone to read verses **13-14**. Point out to the group what happened when each of them was conceived – inside their mother's body millions of sperm were racing towards a single egg. One particular sperm got there first; had it been any other, they would be an entirely different person. Ask the group, “According to the psalm, who oversaw this process?”, or, in other words, “Who designed you to be you?”

Group exercise: Who are you?

Give each person a piece of paper and a pen and ask them to write a list of about 10 characteristics about themselves (these can be quite obvious things, eg *tall, dark haired, good at maths, musical, forgetful* etc.)



After a minute or so collect all the lists in and read them out in turn. Can the group identify the person in question?

Draw out the point of the exercise – each one of us is different but, according to the Bible, each has been designed by God to be who he or she is; we each have our own unique attributes and personalities. Say to the group that you would like to know what they think, especially if they have a handicapped child in their own family. Should we, do they think, abort babies because we know they will be handicapped?

Now summarise by saying something like this:

“You are different from me, you are tall and I am short, you are good with your mind and I am good with my hands, you can paint and I can sing. My DNA is different from your DNA. I am a unique person, and you are a unique person. The question is: why is this?”

Divide the group into pairs. Say that according to the Bible each of us has a unique purpose. Ask the pairs to share with each other what glimpses they have had so far of what that unique purpose is meant to be. For example, you might say, “If you know that you are meant to be a nurse, tell your partner that. If you know that you are a skilled musician, share that.”

Allow a brief time for sharing before you interrupt. Then summarise by saying that according to the Bible each one of us has a unique calling or purpose for our lives, and it is up to us to discover what this purpose is. Some people find that this search for meaning can take a lifetime. One thing the Bible does say is that the purpose of each one of us, the thing we have been designed for, is to give pleasure to God. One

person gives pleasure to God by the patient way that they cope with great difficulties. Another person gives him pleasure by the courageous way they set about achieving great things. This attitude to life, living in a way which pleases God, is fundamental to what it means to be a Christian.

God loves us – introducing the key verse (15 mins)

However you manage the time, do not leave this section out! Say to the group that in each week of the course you will be giving them one key verse from the Bible which you hope they will spend a lot of time thinking about.

This week's verse is **Psalm 23.6**. You will have already written it out on a large piece of paper; look at it together now. This verse, like all the key verses, is taken from the NRSV translation:

‘Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.’



Help the group to think about the verse by saying something like:

“All of us have been children, and many of us have children and so know what it means to create people. We also know that it is natural and normal for parents to love their children. It is just as normal and natural for God to love us – each and every one of us. This verse was written by someone who was convinced that God loved him.”

This is another of the most fundamental convictions of the Christian life. Christians believe that God exists, that he made us, and that the purpose of our lives is to please him. But perhaps most important of all, every Christian believes ‘God loves me.’ This is a possibility that group members may never have thought of before. This is what **Psalm 23.6** teaches.

There is a long tradition in the Church of memorising and meditating on verses from the Bible, and many, many people have been helped by doing it. Suggest to the group that it would be good to learn Psalm 23.6 by heart, and ask if they are all happy to do this. If they agree (they probably will) then go ahead with the memorisation. If not, skip the memorising and give them each a card on which to write out the verse.

The easiest way of memorising a verse is to say it out loud, just as children once used to learn their tables. Repeat the verse together as a group. Do this ten times, each time saying the reference before you say the verse, and repeating the reference again at the end. On the tenth time, cover the verse and let the group do it from memory. Try to make this fun and a source of laughter.

Now give people the small cards. Ask them to write the verse on the card and put it in their wallet or purse so that it is easily available. Tell the group that you would like them to set aside time during the week to meditate on this verse. To meditate simply means to think deeply. They will find that the more time they spend pondering the verse the more they will get out of it. Memorisation without meditation is a chore; memorisation with meditation is a joy.

Suggest that you all sit in silence for five minutes, and use the time to think about the verse that you have learned. Is it true? Could it be true that God loves me? Could it be true that his goodness follows me every day? If we believed that this is true, what difference would that make in our lives?

If you are confident that each person in the group has a faith in God, ask them to write out a one sentence prayer based on their meditation. Invite them to read out their prayers in turn. But skip this prayer exercise if you think it would be embarrassing for some.

Homework

(5 mins)

Finally, invite the group to turn again to page 7 in the coursebook. Explain that after each session there will be some homework in the form of 4 exercises. The exercises are there to help make practical the things that you have looked at together in the sessions. Give people a few minutes to browse through the coursebook and look at these exercises.



Then explain that the exercises can be used in one of three ways, and ask which they would prefer:

- As suggested in the coursebook you could each choose one exercise and try to complete it before the next session. Those who would like to can do more than one exercise.
- You could choose one exercise together now and decide that everyone will attempt the same one. Some might like to arrange to do the exercise together. Those who are keen could do the others as well.
- You could take more time for the course and decide to use the next meeting to do the exercises as a group. This would double the length of the course, but perhaps people would not mind that.

