

WWII School Resource



The Role of Faith and the Bible in World War II

Assembly or Lesson Plan (KS1, KS2 and KS3)

This resource is designed for use in both primary and secondary school settings as part of an assembly or lesson, marking the 80th anniversary of the end of World War Two in 2025. It introduces pupils to the important role faith and the Bible played in the lives of many people during the war.

The resource encourages pupils to reflect on the significance of what people carry with them, using real-life stories to illustrate how the Bible provided comfort, hope, and guidance during challenging times.

Aim

To introduce and explain the commemorative World War Two Gospel of John to pupils by reflecting on what people carry in their pockets, alongside real-life stories of two individuals from that time.

Objectives

Pupils will:

- Reflect on and share what they usually keep in their pockets and how useful it is.
- Consider what might be the most precious thing they own.
- Hear the real-life stories of John Borland and Beryl Yorke from World War Two and understand the significance of the Bible in their lives.
- Understand that for Christians, the Bible continues to serve as an important guide to life today.

Welcome and Introduction

Start by introducing yourself to build rapport with the pupils. Share your name, a bit about your family, job, hobbies, or something fun and topical (e.g. where you're going on holiday, what you had for breakfast).

What's Inside Your Pockets?

Ask the pupils:

What do you keep in your pocket?

Is anyone wearing something with a pocket who would like to share what's inside? (*Invite a few children and adults to participate. Start by sharing what's in your pocket to model the activity and build trust. For example, "In my pocket, I've got a phone, key, tissue..."*)

Bring a few children and adults to the front to explore what's in their pockets. Ensure you ask them to confirm they're happy to share before doing so. Make the experience affirming, not embarrassing.

Could anything in our pockets save our life if we were in trouble? Probably not. Let's think of what could save our life. *Use a light-hearted, exaggerated style to explore ideas.*

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A shield or body armour... but that wouldn't fit in a pocket. A teleportation device hasn't been invented. Maybe pepper spray or an alarm so we could run away... but probably too big and not a wise thing to carry! *Steer clear of taking ideas, we don't want suggestions like guns!*

What Might We Have Found Inside a World War Two Pocket?

Now, I'm going to tell you about someone who carried something in his pocket that he said did save his life during World War Two. 2025 marks 80 years since the war ended, so we're encouraged to remember those who served. What do you think he carried in his pocket? Here are a few clues:

- It wasn't big.
- It wasn't a weapon.
- It couldn't hurt anyone.
- It wasn't expensive.

Take ideas... pick up on the clever and funny ones but emphasise that it doesn't hurt anyone! Tell the story of Private John Borland and use the accompanying slides. Ask the pupils to look out for what John Borland kept in his pocket and the famous person he influenced.

In June 1940, John Borland and his comrades were stationed in Normandy, as part of the last line of British and French defence. Most forces had already evacuated, but John and his unit stayed behind to hold the line. The plan was to reach the harbour for evacuation, but with German tanks firing from the cliffs, this became impossible. John and an army corporal sought shelter in a nearby lighthouse, where the corporal was shot and killed. John, wounded and without food, water, or ammunition, was captured by the Germans the next day.

As he was being marched off with a gun held to his back, a piece of paper fluttered across his path. He picked it up and **put it in his pocket**. That night, before falling asleep, he looked at the paper and discovered it was a page of printed Bible verses with the words, 'Don't give up' written in pencil on it. John was kept as a prisoner for five years. This is what John has to say about the page of Bible verses he kept in his pocket.

"The printed Bible tract became my Bible for the next five years. With it, I held short services for some of the boys in the prison camps. I still have it today, and I would never part with it. I promised that if I got home safely, I would serve the Lord. I did, and I always felt there was a guardian angel watching over me that day on the beach."

In January 1945 towards the end of the war, John and the prisoners were forced on a long march through Poland. Many died along the way, but in April, John managed to escape by rolling into a ditch. He was later picked up by an American tank.

After the war, John kept his promise to serve the Lord. He mentored boys in the Christian faith through The Boys' Brigade, Sunday School, and football coaching in Govan and Rutherglen in Scotland. One of the most famous boys he mentored was Sir Alex Ferguson, who often spoke highly of him.

John died aged of 92 still living out his promise to serve God and still reading his Bible.

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Discussion: Did You Spot What John Kept in His Pocket?

Can anyone guess what John kept in his pocket?

Why do you think we might say that the page of Bible verses saved John's life?

Discuss comfort, hope, faith, the message of "Don't give up," and how it helped John feel God was with him during tough times.

It's amazing that the piece of paper with Bible verses floated past John at the moment he needed it most! It helped him survive five years in prison, giving him hope.

Did you spot which famous person John Borland influenced?

Sir Alex Ferguson! *If pupils aren't familiar with him, explain that Sir Alex Ferguson is a famous football manager who led Manchester United to a treble victory in 1999. This is what Sir Alex Ferguson has said of John Borland:*

"John Borland was one of the biggest influences on my earlier life and I always held him in deep affection. He instilled a sense of discipline and Christian values into my life and many other boys – through The Boys' Brigade, Sunday school and football training. He always took such a passionate interest in our formation and well-being. He was my mentor, a lifelong friend, and a hero."

A Life with Impact

It is remarkable how one person's life can influence others. John Borland made a significant impact on Sir Alex Ferguson and many others. For Christians, this idea is central to the Bible—illustrating how one life can affect many. Christians view the Bible, which narrates the story of Jesus, as a guide for living. Over the past two thousand years, Jesus' life has touched millions, and He invites His followers to "follow me" and live in a way that positively impacts others, just as John Borland did for Sir Alex Ferguson.

The Most Precious Thing (Optional if Time Allows):

What's the most precious thing you own? It doesn't have to be valuable, just something special to you. *Encourage a few pupils to share, focusing on what makes an item precious rather than valuable.*

This next story is about a woman named Beryl, who said that the Bible was the most precious thing she owned. See if you can work out why.

Beryl grew up in London with a large family and didn't have many possessions. But there was one thing she cherished: a Bible she was given in primary school. During World War Two, she lost her Bible in a bombing raid. Beryl prayed for its return. Two years later, Beryl's Bible was returned to her by a workman who had found it in the wreckage.

Beryl said, "I was so thrilled to think that God was able to care for me in this way. I learnt at this young age that God always hears our prayers and thoughts. That answer to prayer has always remained with me. In my 91 years, I have continued to reflect on how God has always spoken to me - especially through reading His living words in the Bible and through talking with Him in prayer."

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Invitation to Take a Commemorative Gospel of John

Beryl was given her Bible at school, and it became the most precious thing she owned.

Today we'd like to give you a book from the Bible. The Gospel of John. John was one of Jesus' friends and his book is about the life of Jesus. The book we'd like to give you is a copy of the book that people in the army like John were given in World War Two.

This Gospel is small enough to fit in your pocket, just like the one John Borland kept with him. If you'd like to take one, feel free to do so. You don't have to take it, but we'd love for you to have a copy of this special commemorative book.

I wonder if it will fit in your pocket?