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CONNECT

A rough guide to discovering God

1 WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

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The central theme of the Bible is that we were intended to live in moment by moment friendship with God. This connection with our creator is the place where all the deepest questions of life find their answers. That relationship has been disastrously broken, but the message of Jesus is that God has a rescue plan. We'll see how the Bible explains that rescue plan and how we can connect with God.

- How do you think of God?

Jesus often told stories or parables to communicate deep truths about God. One of His best known stories is about a father and his two sons. Jesus was addressing the ultra-religious people of His day who were criticising Him for spending time with people who they looked down on as unworthy or downright bad. In this story, Jesus shows how greed and immorality isn't the only way to be far from God.

First read through the story in its entirety (in the left column and over the next couple of pages). Then re-read it one paragraph at a time, answering the questions as you go.

Luke 15:11 To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: 'A man had two sons. ¹² The younger son told his father, "I want my share of your estate now before you die." So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

¹³ 'A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living.

11-13

- What did the son ask for?
- Why was this so outrageous?
- Why do you think the younger son wanted to leave home?
- What was the younger son's attitude to his father?
- What was the father's attitude to his son?

14 About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. ¹⁵ He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ 'When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, "At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, ¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'"

20 'So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. ²¹ His son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son."

²² 'But his father said to the servants, "Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. ²³ And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found." So the party began.

14-19

For the people who first heard the story, pigs were considered spiritually 'unclean'. Feeding pigs was a job for the lowest of the low.

- What did the younger son discover?
- How did this change his attitude?
- What did the son decide to do?

20-24

The son would have been regarded as spiritually 'unclean', because of his contact with the pigs, and thought to have brought disgrace on his family. The community might even have stoned him for the shame he caused his father. However, the robe, ring and sandals represent forgiveness and full restoration to the family.

- How did the father respond when his son returned?
- At what point did the father accept him back?
- What does this tell us about the father?
- How does he describe the change in his son? What does he mean?

25 'Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, ²⁶ and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ²⁷ "Your brother is back," he was told, "and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return."

²⁸ 'The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him,

29 but he replied, "All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. ³⁰ Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!"

³¹ 'His father said to him, "Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. ³² We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!"

25-28

The father's house is the place of the father's love and authority. The younger son walked out, but later, the elder son refused to go in.

- Why was the elder son so angry?
- How does the father respond?
- What does this tell us about the father?

29-32

- What reason does the son give for his resentment?
- What word does the older brother use to describe his relationship with his father?
- What do we see of the older son's view of, and attitude towards, his father?
- How does this attitude compare with his brother's?
- How does the father answer his son?
- How does the older son's description of his brother compare with the father's description of him?

Jesus doesn't tell us how the story ends. But, in the older son, He has painted His self-righteous listeners into the plot. Their response to Jesus' parable would act out the ending of the story!

In this story, Jesus shows us how we can be equally lost in the pursuit of pleasure or the pursuit of self-righteousness. The sons were only interested in what they could get from their father; by contrast, at every point in the story, the father is willing to give all he has to both of his sons regardless of their attitude towards him.

- What has most stood out for you from looking at this parable?
- What do we learn about God's character from the father in the story?
- Which son do you identify with most? Why?

In the parable, the attitude expressed by the sons towards their father represents the heart of the problem between us and God. In the next study, we'll explore further why God matters and why ignoring Him is a bad plan.



2 WHY DOES GOD MATTER?

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Mankind has been reflecting on the big questions of life, truth, meaning and God for thousands of years. The word God means many different things to different people.

- Do you think God matters?
- If God exists, what do you see as the implications for us?

The heart of Christianity is learning to understand what God is like and how we relate to Him. Christians believe that we can know what God is like because He's revealed Himself to mankind in history as recorded in the Bible. The Bible teaches us what God is like so that we can learn to interact with Him as He intended us to. In this study, we'll look at three foundational aspects of God: God as creator, God as judge and God as rescuer.

GOD AS CREATOR

Genesis 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Psalm 24:1 The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him. ²For he laid the earth's foundation on the seas and built it on the ocean depths.

Psalm 95:4 He holds in his hands the depths of the earth and the mightiest mountains. ⁵The sea belongs to him, for he made it. His hands formed the dry land, too.

⁶Come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the LORD our maker, ⁷for he is our God. ...

- What are the implications of these verses for how we relate to God?
- Psalm 24 clearly states that the earth, and all that's in it, is owned by God. What does it mean to own something?

The last two sentences from the verses in **Psalm 95** give us several key insights about how we relate to God as our creator. Firstly, relating to God is not automatic; we have to come to Him. Secondly, because He made us and everything else, He deserves to be treated with honour; we're to submit ourselves to Him. The Creator has the right to rule over everything He's created however He sees fit.

Psalm 139:2 You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I'm far away. ³You see me when I travel and when I rest at home. You know everything I do. ⁴You know what I am going to say even before I say it, LORD. ...

¹³You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvellous – how well I know it. ¹⁵You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. ¹⁶You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed.

- What are the implications of these verses for how we relate to God?

GOD AS JUDGE

Romans 14:10 ... we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. ¹¹For the Scriptures say,

“As surely as I live,” says the LORD, “every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will declare allegiance to God.”

¹²Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God.

1 Samuel 16:7 ‘... The LORD doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.’

2 Peter 3:7 ... the present heavens and earth have been stored up for fire. They are being kept for the day of judgement, when ungodly people will be destroyed.

⁸But you must not forget this one thing, dear friends: A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. ⁹The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.

¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. ...

- What do these verses tell us about us and God?

The verses from **2 Peter 3** talk about 'ungodly' people. Ungodly doesn't simply mean immoral. It means living 'godlessly', without reference to God or His wishes. The Bible sees all other human ills as flowing from this source. In contrast, living a godly life doesn't simply mean being moral. It means living every moment in a reconciled loving relationship with our Creator.

- What is the rôle of a judge? Do you see it as a good thing that God will judge our lives? Why?

GOD AS RESCUER

Ezekiel 18:23 'Do you think that I like to see wicked people die? says the Sovereign LORD. Of course not! I want them to turn from their wicked ways and live. ...'

Luke 15:1 Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. ²This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people – even eating with them!

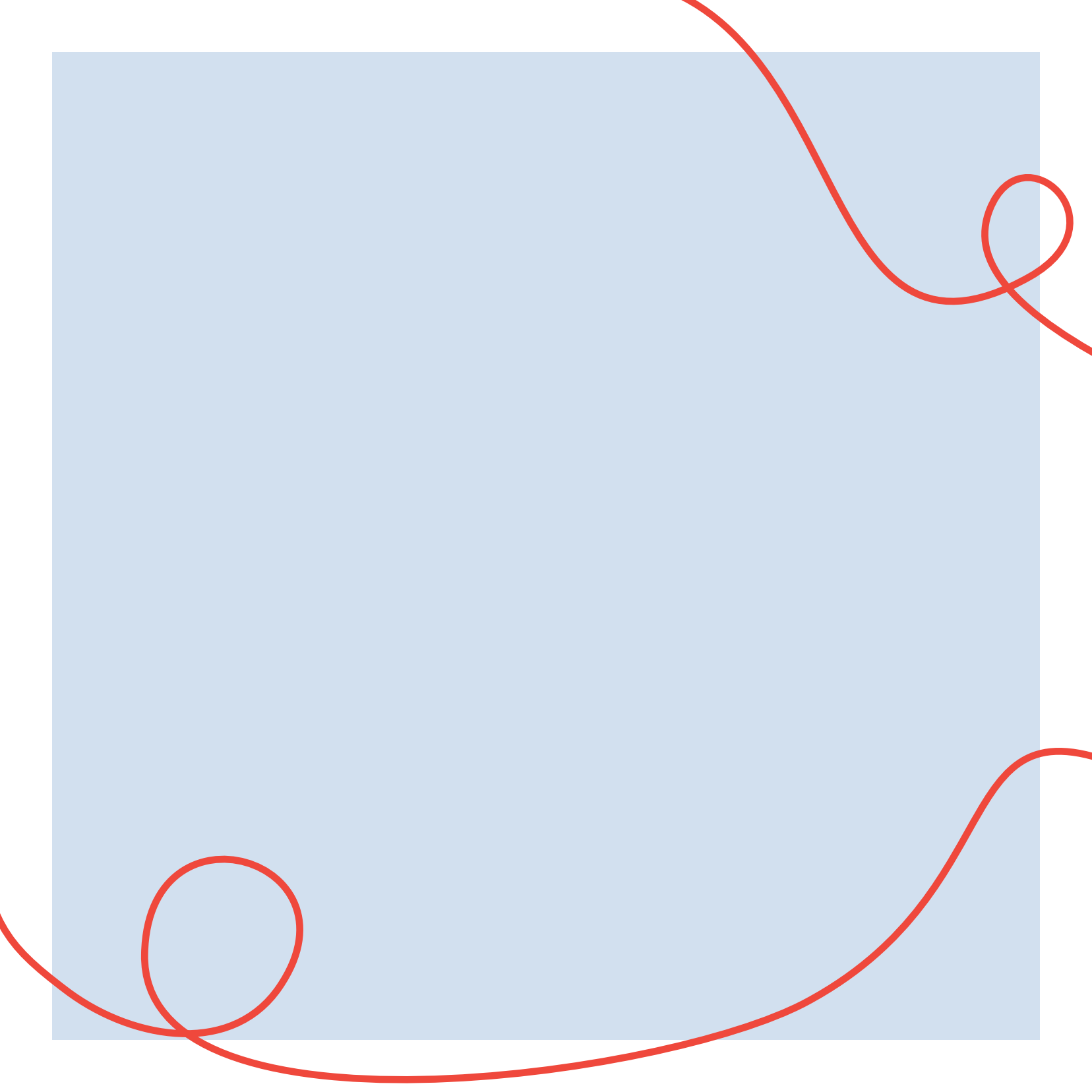
³ So Jesus told them this story: ⁴ 'If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. ⁶ When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep." ⁷ In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away! ...'

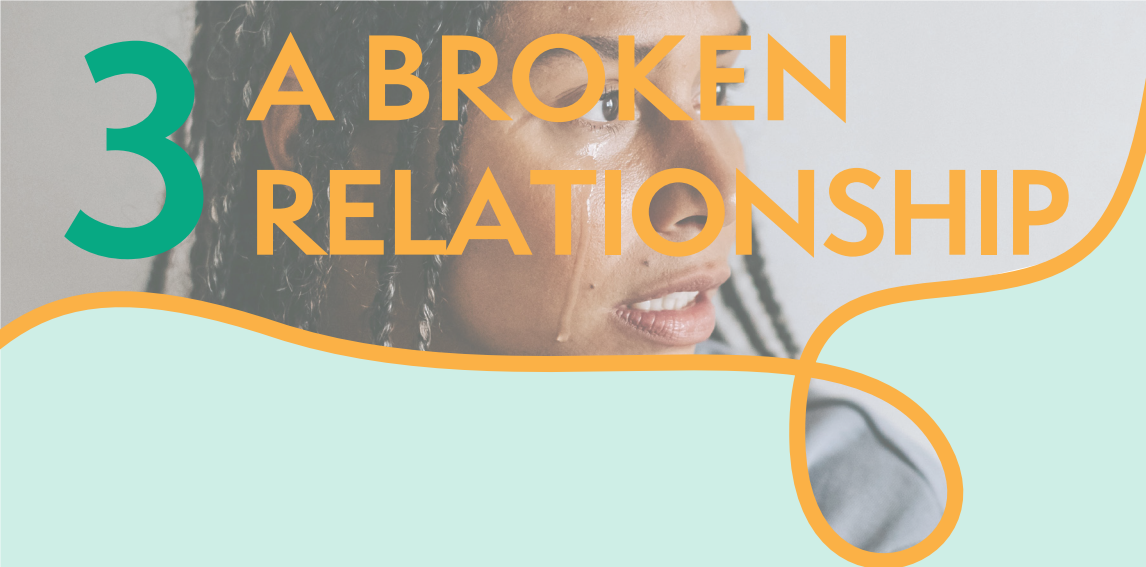
- What do we learn about God's heart from these verses?

The Bible teaches that, although we're in big trouble with God and heading for judgement, God loves us and wants to rescue us.

- In view of what we've looked at so far, why might we need rescuing?

Jesus is God become man, stepping into our world to provide a way that we can be rescued from God's judgement and brought back into relationship with Him. We'll look at how He's done this in more detail in the next studies.





3 A BROKEN RELATIONSHIP

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In the first study, we looked at a story about a father and his two sons which Jesus used to illustrate the way that we relate to God. We saw that both the sons treated the father with contempt and were only interested in what they could get out of him. By contrast, the father loved both his sons deeply and at every point in the story was willing to give them all he had. In this study, we'll explore further the fundamental problem in our relationship with God.

- How do you think our culture would define sin?

Read through the entire passage from **Romans 1:18-25**, on the left, which continues overleaf. Then come back and answer the questions on the right, which also continue overleaf:

Romans 1:18 But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. ¹⁹ They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. ²⁰ For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.

²¹ Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. ²² Claiming to be wise, they

- What are God's actions in these verses? What are man's actions?
- According to the passage, how would you sum up man's attitude towards God?

instead became utter fools. ²³ And instead of worshipping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshipped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴ So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies. ²⁵ They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshipped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! ...

- How have you seen these things reflected in our society?
- Can you see any of these things in your own life?

This attitude towards God, not honouring Him, pushing Him away and replacing Him with other things, is what is meant by the word 'sin'. The heart of sin is rejecting God and ordering our lives around ourselves. The Bible teaches that all forms of evil flow from this source. The passage we looked at in Romans goes on to list some of those expressions of evil: greed, hate, envy, murder, fighting, deception, malicious behaviour, gossip, backstabbing, God-hating, insolence, pride, boastfulness, refusing to understand, breaking promises, and being heartless and unforgiving (see **Romans 1:28-31**).

Psalms 14:1 Only fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, and their actions are evil; not one of them does good!

² The LORD looks down from heaven on the entire human race; he looks to see if anyone is truly wise, if anyone seeks God. ³ But no, all have turned away; all have become corrupt. No one does good, not a single one!

Psalms 5:4 O God, you take no pleasure in wickedness; you cannot tolerate the sins of the wicked. ⁵ Therefore, the proud may not stand in your presence, for you hate all who do evil. ⁶ You will destroy those who tell lies. The LORD detests murderers and deceivers.

Psalms 36:1 Sin whispers to the wicked, deep within their hearts. They have no fear of God at all. ² In their blind conceit, they cannot see how wicked they really are.

- What do these verses teach us about man's attitude towards God?
- According to Psalm 36, why are people often unaware of the seriousness of their sin before God?
- How do you feel about the verses we've just looked at?

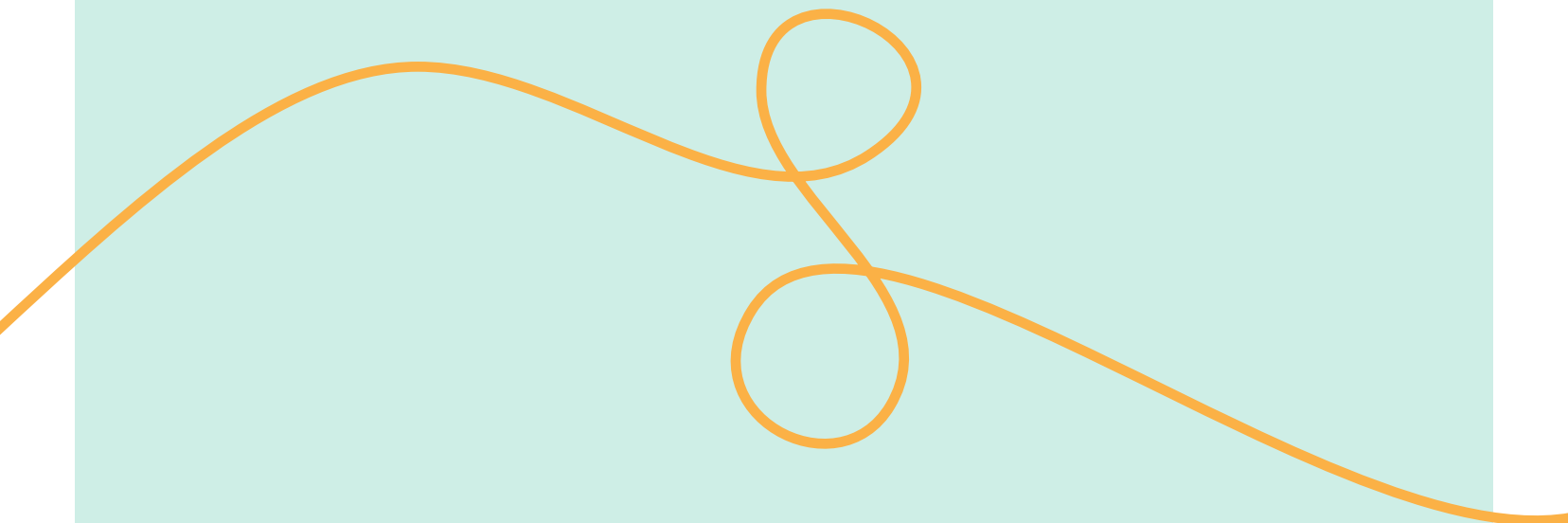
Isaiah 59:1 Listen! The LORD's arm is not too weak to save you, nor is his ear too deaf to hear you call. ² It's your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore.

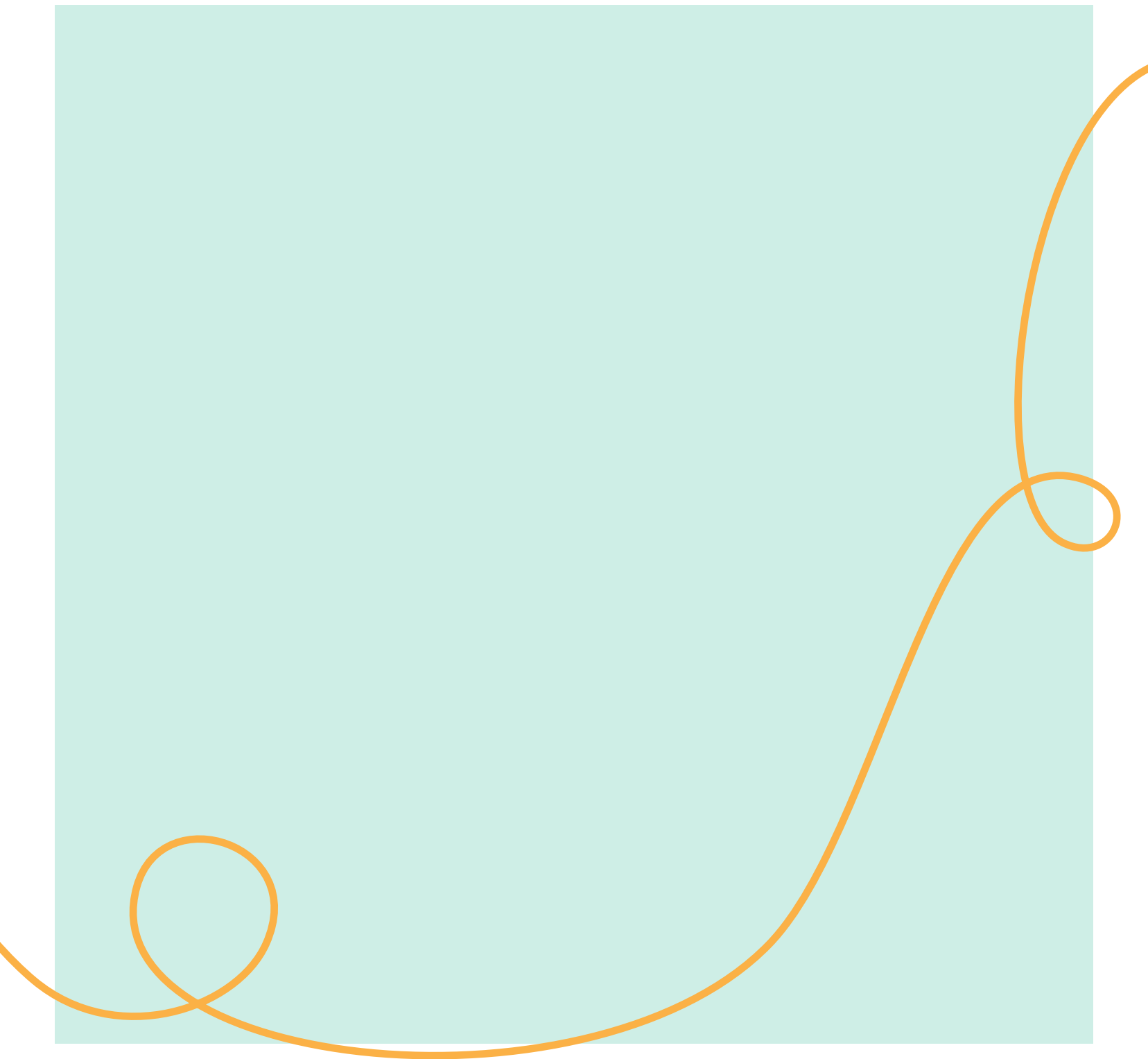
- How do these verses describe the consequences of sin?
- Where does the problem lie?
- Can you see these attitudes in the world around you?

The Bible teaches that the ultimate consequence of sin is death (**Romans 6:23**). Death is essentially separation. On a physical level we're separated from our bodies; on a relational level we're separated from other people; on a spiritual level we're separated from God for all eternity. The agony of eternal separation from God, the source of all goodness and life, is what the Bible calls hell. As we saw earlier, death and hell is not what God wants for people. However, death cannot be overcome unless the problem of sin is dealt with.

- How would you define sin in light of this study?

In the next study, we'll look at God's solution to this problem of sin and its consequences.





4 GOD'S RESCUE PLAN

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In the last study, we considered the fundamental problem between us and God: sin.

- How did we describe the essence of sin?

The Bible shows that sin is the root of all other human ills. The ultimate consequence of sin is death. In the Bible, death doesn't simply mean that our heart stops beating. The essence of death is separation: separation from our bodies, from each other and from God (the source of everything good) for all eternity. This is what the Bible calls hell. Unless something changes, this is our destiny. However, we've also seen that God loves us and wants to rescue us from our sin and His judgement. Like the father of two sons that we looked at in the first study, God wants us to share our lives and our hearts with Him. But for this to happen, our sin must be dealt with.

This study looks at how God has made this possible. One of the authors of the Old Testament was a Jewish prophet called Isaiah. He lived 80 years before Jesus, and he looked forwards to the One who would come to rescue people from God's judgement by dying in our place. The following verses specifically predict the nature, significance and meaning of Jesus' death.

Read through the entire passage from **Isaiah 53:3-6, 8**, on the left, which continues overleaf. Then come back and answer the questions on the right, which also continue over the other side:

Isaiah 53:3 He was despised and rejected – a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care.

⁴Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God,

- How did the writer predict that Jesus would suffer?
- What would be the significance and meaning of Jesus' death?

a punishment for his own sins! ⁵ But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. ⁶ All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on him the sins of us all. ...

⁸ ... he was struck down for the rebellion of my people.

- If Jesus is God in human flesh (just as the Bible describes Him), what do we learn about the character of God?

Although these words were written long before crucifixion was even invented, the similarities between Isaiah's prediction of Jesus' death and the actual event are striking! The New Testament of the Bible further explains the significance of Jesus' death.

Romans 3:19 Obviously, the law applies to those to whom it was given, for its purpose is to keep people from having excuses, and to show that the entire world is guilty before God. ²⁰ For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are.

²¹ But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. ²² We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.

²³ For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. ²⁴ Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. ²⁵ For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood. ...

²⁷ Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on obeying the law. It is based on faith. ²⁸ So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law.

'The law' here refers to God's standard as laid out in the first five books of the Old Testament. However, the previous chapter of Romans makes it clear that the law can also refer to any awareness we have of God's standards (as, for example, through our consciences).

- What does the law do? What can't it do?
- How can we be put right with God? What's God's part in this? What's our part?
- Who's eligible for God's forgiveness? Why?
- How would you explain God's solution for sin in your own words?
- What are the implications of our acquittal being based on our faith, not our good deeds?
- What does this passage reveal about God's love?

In this passage, faith means actively trusting God and taking Him at His word. The heart of the Christian message is this: God has provided a way for sinful people to be forgiven, restored to relationship with Him and transformed to fulfil the eternal purpose for which He made them. The way of rescue that God has provided for us is to trust that God dealt with the problem of our sin and guilt through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus' resurrection is vital to Christianity for many reasons. His dying, and then overcoming death, back up His claim to be God. He chose to step into our world as a man, but as God, had power to defeat sin and death. And, because Jesus is not dead but alive, we can know Him and relate to Him as a living person, not just as an idea.

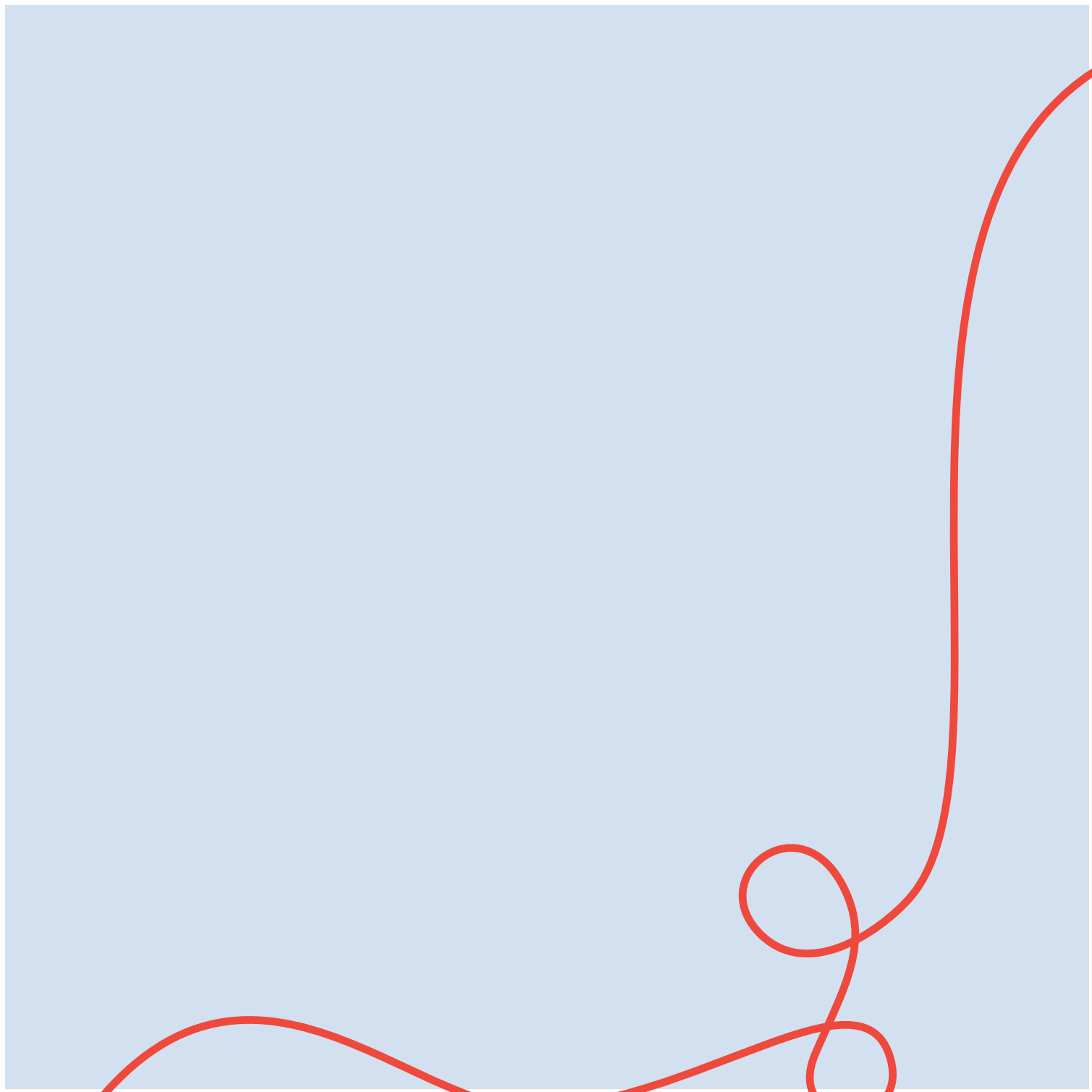
Christianity stands or falls on the resurrection. Paul, who wrote the book of Romans that we've just read from, also wrote that if Jesus wasn't resurrected, then Christians are wasting their time and are the most pitiful people alive (**1 Corinthians 15:19**)!

- **What is new to you from this study?**
- **From the first four studies, how would you summarise the message of Christianity so far?**

In light of God's offer of forgiveness and new life, every person is faced with a choice: receive or reject God's offer of forgiveness. This is the most important choice you can ever make. Whatever decision you make has huge implications, determining the direction of your life and your eternal destiny.

In the next two studies, we'll look more deeply at this choice as well as the implications of receiving God's forgiveness and entering into a relationship with Him.





5 WEIGHING IT UP

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Christianity is not just about forgiveness; it's about a new and changed life. To share our life with God means we align our everyday life with the design and purposes of our creator. This inevitably means big, long-term changes. Jesus warns us not to become Christians if we're not prepared to bring our lives in line with Him. In this study, we'll look at what it means to receive God's forgiveness, the gift of eternal life and the implications for the rest of our lives.

Matthew 8:19 Then one of the teachers of religious law said to him, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.'

20 But Jesus replied, 'Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head.'

21 Another of his disciples said, 'Lord, first let me return home and bury my father.'

22 But Jesus told him, 'Follow me now. Let the spiritually dead bury their own dead.'

The phrase 'first let me return home and bury my father' probably didn't mean that the disciple's father had just died and that he wanted to go to the funeral! Instead, he was asking if he could postpone following Jesus and work for his father until his father died.

- Why do you think Jesus talked so strongly to such a deeply religious man and to another who was already identifying himself with Jesus?
- Why do you think Jesus seems to be discouraging both of them from following Him?

Jesus gives two examples of the cost of following Him. Foxes and birds feel at home in the world. Those who follow the priorities of those around them experience little conflict. But, those who follow Jesus will not fit easily into the world and may experience rejection from those they love.

- What might these warnings mean for us?
- What do you think would be some of the changes involved in following Jesus wholeheartedly?
- The term 'gospel' means 'good news'. Why would choosing to follow Jesus be seen as a good thing?

John 3:1 There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. ²After dark one evening, he came to speak to Jesus. 'Rabbi,' he said, 'we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.'

³Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.'

⁴'What do you mean?' exclaimed Nicodemus. 'How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?'

⁵Jesus replied, 'I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. ⁷So don't be surprised when I say, "You must be born again." ...'

- According to Jesus, what was Nicodemus missing?
- What does it mean to be born physically?
- How is this like becoming a Christian?
- In terms of length, what's the difference between the life we have with our first birth and the life we would have with our second birth?

John 1:12 But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. ¹³They are reborn – not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.

- What promise does Jesus give in these verses?
- What does it mean to believe Jesus and to accept Him?

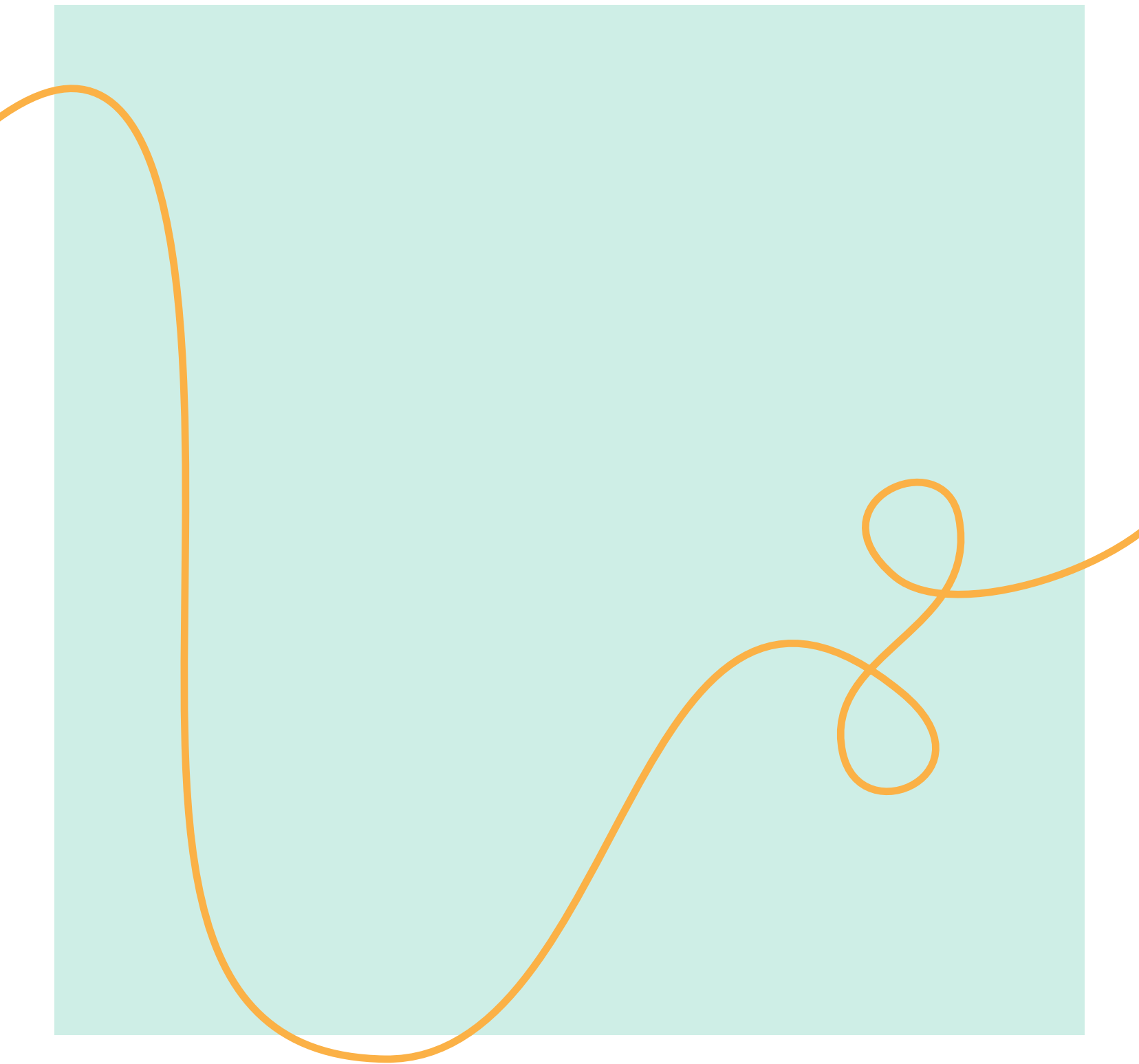
The word 'believe' in this verse is a verb which literally mean to put your trust in someone. For example, it would not be enough to say you trusted my driving. To believe, in this sense, would mean getting in the car, whilst I was behind the wheel. 'Believing', or putting your trust in Jesus, involves:

- Agreeing with God that you are sinful and cut off from Him;
- Believing God to forgive you completely, because Jesus died to pay the penalty for your sins;
- Choosing to turn away from anything that would hold you back and letting Jesus take first place in your life.
- What do you understand by this?
- Does it make sense?

Philippians 3:7 I once thought these things [*my own credentials and spiritual achievements*] were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. ⁸ Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as rubbish, so that I could gain Christ ⁹ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith.

- What has the writer gained?
- How important is it to him?
- How does this affect his view of life?
- What does Paul mean when he says, 'I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteousness through faith in Christ'?
- How could knowing Jesus be such a big deal?

In the next study, we will continue to consider how we can connect with God.



6 A CHOICE TO MAKE

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In the last session, we looked at what is involved in becoming a Christian.

- In light of what we've covered so far, how would you explain what is involved in becoming a Christian?
- What would be the implications for your life if you chose to follow Jesus wholeheartedly?

Jesus told these two short parables about becoming a Christian:

Matthew 13:44 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field.

⁴⁵ 'Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls. ⁴⁶ When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it! ...'

- In light of what we've covered so far, how would you explain what is involved in becoming a Christian?
- What would be the implications for your life if you chose to follow Jesus wholeheartedly?

One Christian author elaborates on these parables like this:

Once we had no delight in God, and Christ was just a vague historical figure. What we enjoyed was food and friendships and productivity and investments and vacations and hobbies and games and reading and shopping and sex and sport and art and TV and travel... but not God. He was an idea – even a good one – and a topic for discussion; but he was not a treasure of delight.

Then something miraculous happened. It was like the opening of the eyes of the blind during the golden dawn. First the stunned silence before the unspeakable beauty of holiness. Then a shock and a terror that we had actually loved the darkness. Then the settling stillness of joy that is at the soul's end. The quest is over. We would give anything if we might be granted to live in the presence of this glory forever and ever.

John Piper, *Desiring God*

For some, recognising the wonder of God and His kingdom is a sudden thing. For others, it's a gradual process which takes time. Whether our realisation is sudden or gradual, the end is the same: God becomes the most important thing in our lives.

- Does anything that John Piper is saying resonate with you?
- What does God desire to be in our lives?
- What do you see as some of the benefits and costs of becoming a Christian? Does it seem worth it?

Jesus give us this picture to help us understand what it means to open up to Him:

Revelation 3:20 'Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends. ...'

To a Jewish person, to share a meal is an invitation to deep friendship.

- What is the door that Jesus is talking about here? Why does He use this metaphor?
- What promise does Jesus give in these verses? How reliable do you think this promise is?

Just as in marriage, it's important to fully understand this commitment before you make it. However, if you've thought it through and want to receive God's forgiveness and new life, you can invite Jesus into your life by simply expressing these things to Him. God isn't as concerned with your words as He is with your attitude and that you mean it. You could say something like:

'God, I'm sorry for going my own way in the past. I choose to leave my old life of independence from you. [Take a moment to silently give over to Him specific things you need to leave behind.] I accept the forgiveness that you've offered me through Jesus' death on the cross. Please come into my life and help me to become the person you want me to be.'

- **What do you think would be the implications of saying and meaning this kind of prayer?**

If you understand what you would be doing and want to become a Christian, this prayer can help you connect with God. God will forgive you and give you new life. Any genuine commitment to Christ requires us to 'go public', so praying to become a Christian with another person is a great idea when possible.

Here are some possible options of where to go from here:

I don't want to explore the Christian faith any further at this time.

Thank you for taking the time to explore these issues in depth with the group.

I'm already a Christian.

Would you be interested in continuing to explore how to develop your friendship with Jesus?

I would like to become a Christian.

When would you like to pray the prayer suggested above and connect with Jesus?

I'm not yet ready to become a Christian but would like to discuss things further.

Are there further questions or issues it would be helpful to work through together? What would make it possible for you to say 'yes' to God?

If you have at some point in the past invited Jesus into your life, or think you are ready to do so, here are just a few of God's promises to you:

CARRY ON OVER THE OTHER SIDE...

2 Corinthians 5:17 ... anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

John 3:16 'For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ...'

Colossians 2:13 ... God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. ¹⁴ He cancelled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross.

Hebrews 13:5 ... God has said,
'I will never leave you. I will never abandon you.'

♣ So we can say with confidence,

'The LORD is my helper, so I will have no fear. What can mere people do to me?'

- How have you found exploring together the foundations of the Christian faith?

If you're a Christian and would like to explore further how you can grow in your relationship with Jesus, Agapé UK produces a series of studies called **ONLINE**. They explore foundational principles for building a sure, deep and productive friendship with God. Thank you for being part of **CONNECT**.

LEADERS' GUIDE



Have you noticed that people seem to know increasingly less about Jesus and the Bible, and that the word 'God' means very different things to different people? For most people, even those searching for truth, it takes more than a one-off explanation for them to truly understand and make a decision about the person of Jesus and what He accomplished on the cross.

CONNECT was designed to help people explore the biblical foundations of Christianity in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. The series is easily transferable and can be used in any number of contexts. Though the studies work best in a small group, they can also be used one-to-one. Those at any level of spiritual maturity can gain valuable insight from the rich Bible passages used in **CONNECT**, but the guiding

comments and questions assume little or no previous knowledge of the Christian faith.

As you prepare to lead a **CONNECT** group, your job is an important one. We've included some guidelines and advice in order to help you get started.

The group

It can be a benefit to have other Christians in your group. But if your group has been advertised as being for people who aren't Christians, make sure that people who aren't Christians are in the majority. Before the first meeting, ask the Christians to initially hold back from answering questions in order to give others time to think and respond.

Your **CONNECT** group is likely to include people who are not used to small groups, so they may be nervous and not know what to expect. Creating the right atmosphere will help people to open up and engage with the Bible, the group and God Himself.

You can help by:

- Being friendly and relaxed;
- Being natural and honest about your own questions and doubts;
- Listening carefully and valuing each contribution;
- Respecting people's views, even if you don't agree with them;
- Being unshockable and gracious;
- Not feeling you have to know everything;
- Not trying to argue people into believing;
- Understanding that who you are is as important as what you say;
- Including open questions which don't have wrong answers so that people aren't under pressure;
- Avoiding jargon or negativity about particular churches, denominations or individuals;
- Praying for each person between sessions.

Whose job is it?

As you lead, it will help to reflect on both God's rôle and your rôle in the group:

Group Leader's Rôle

- To create a relaxed, friendly atmosphere;
- To take the group through the questions and help them engage with the Bible;
- To ensure everyone is involved and no-one dominates discussion;
- To address disagreements and misunderstandings.

God's Rôle

- To have been preparing people to meet Him;
- To provoke questions in their hearts;

- To soften people's hearts and convict them of the truth;
- To save people.

Facilitating

One of your aims is to develop a balanced group dynamic. Your job is to help people bring out what they think, rather than just tell them what you think. It's worth asking yourself beforehand whether your tendency in a small group setting is to say too much or too little.

As facilitator, you will lead the group through the material on each card, taking no more than one hour to complete each session. Get different people to read the paragraphs. Your rôle is not to teach the content of each card. Few people appreciate being 'preached at' in this setting. Instead, direct the group to the Bible by asking the questions, helping the group explore the passages and setting the pace of the discussion.

It's important not to go too fast. Don't be afraid of silence; people need time to think and engage with





the Bible, and there are many insights to be gained from each passage and question. Don't settle for the first 'right answer' that's given, but don't let the discussion drag, either.

Open questions

Avoid questions that fish for a particular answer; if you need to make a point, make it. The best questions are those which cannot be answered 'yes' or 'no', as they will open up discussion:

- 'Great, what else do we see in these verses?'
- 'That's interesting, what do others think?'
- 'Can you explain what you mean by that?'
- 'How did you come to that conclusion?'
- 'What makes you say that?'
- 'How does the passage of the Bible we're looking at address that?'
- 'Does anyone see it differently? If so, why?'
- 'Can anyone else relate to that?'

Correcting

It's not your job to corner people with the gospel. Avoid the temptation to correct people every time you disagree with something they've said. A mark of a good leader is knowing when to keep quiet.

Sometimes, however, things will be shared that are misunderstandings of the passage and are important enough to correct. There are several ways to do this. You can ask the person how they have come to the particular conclusion about the passage. Or you can ask others what they think about the point that has been made. If neither of these do the trick, you can gently share your understanding, e.g. 'I think I would see it a bit differently...'. After you've shared your view, give the group a chance to respond to what you've said.

Tangents

During the study, people will ask questions other than those on the cards.

If the question is important to understanding the study, bounce it back to the group. It's better for them to think it through for themselves than for you to answer. If the group can't answer, you'll need to respond. If you don't know the answer, simply share that you're not sure and will do some research before the next study.

If the question will be dealt with later in **CONNECT**, ask them if you can note the question down and come back to it. If the question is a tangent to the study, or not an issue for others in the group, offer to discuss the question with the person after the study.



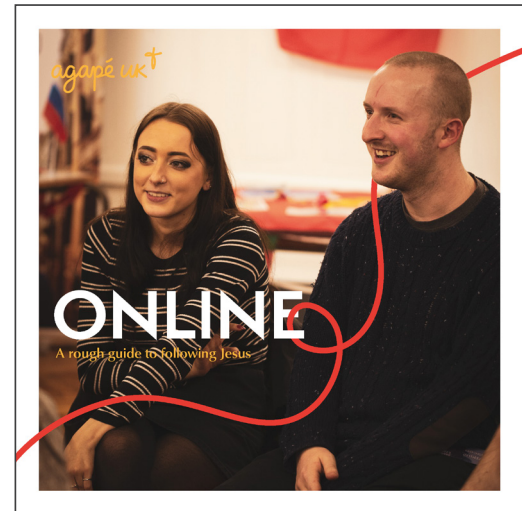
Difficult dynamics

Sometimes a group will contain an argumentative member. Often the person is just asserting that he or she will not be 'brainwashed'. Allow them to express their opinion and, if appropriate, you can ask the rest of the group what they think. As the leader, getting drawn into an argument would be very unhelpful.

If there are dominant members of your group, at some point you may want to privately ask them for help involving those who are contributing less to the discussions. You can direct questions to quieter members to draw them in, but use questions that invite them to share their thoughts, rather than put them on the spot.

This may sound daunting, especially if it's your first time leading a small group, but the best way to develop the skill of group leading is through practice. It's a fantastic way to get to know people and to talk about the most important issues in life!

If you would like some more pointers and resources to help you as you lead **CONNECT**, visit: arc.agape.org.uk/connect.



And, if you've enjoyed **CONNECT**, why not check out **ONLINE**, too? **ONLINE** is Agapé UK's follow up series to **CONNECT** that explores foundational principles for building a sure, deep and productive friendship with God.

You can find out more about **ONLINE**, and dozens of other resources from Agapé UK to help you have discussions about faith, at: arc.agape.org.uk.



CONNECT is a six session series designed to introduce the central themes of the Christian faith by letting the Bible speak for itself. Written for those who want to find out more about Christianity as well as for Christians who want to strengthen the foundations of their faith, **CONNECT** works best in a small group but can also be used one-on-one. The series also includes Leaders' Notes.

- Session 1:** What is God like? – A son comes home
- Session 2:** Why does God matter? – The creator, judge and rescuer
- Session 3:** A Broken Relationship – The lethal problem of sin
- Session 4:** God's Rescue Plan – The day that changed the world
- Session 5:** Weighing It Up – Forgiveness, sacrifice and trust
- Session 6:** A Choice to Make – Starting a new life

Also, find other useful resources to help you talk and discover more about faith at: arc.agape.org.uk.



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