

42

GETTING TO GRIPS WITH FOLLOWING JESUS

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INTRODUCTION – THE BEST NEWS IN THE WORLD

It was the Science Fiction writer and historian H. G. Wells who once said..

“I am an historian, I am not a believer, but I must confess as a historian that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very centre of history. Jesus Christ is easily the most dominant figure in all history.”

For two thousand years people have recognised that there is something very special about Jesus Christ.

In the New Testament, Mark chapter one verse one, the author writes

“This is the Gospel about Jesus the Christ, the Son of God.”

This word ‘Gospel’ means ‘good news’. Life-changing news!S

And what’s this life changing news? It’s Jesus. The good news is Jesus.

It’s no surprise then that thousands of people flocked to see Him every day.

They knew that he was good news because he made everybody feel valuable and important. Whoever you were, wherever you’d been, whatever you’d done – Jesus always had time for you.

They also knew that He was good news because of the words He spoke. When Jesus looked you in the eye and said that God had forgiven your sins you knew that your sin had been forgiven and forgotten. It was as if God Himself was speaking words of hope to you.

But He wasn’t just good news because of what He said, it was obvious that He was good news because of things that He did. He did things that no-one else could do. In fact, He did things that only God could do.

He took water and turned it into wine.

He fed over 5,000 people with just a few loaves and two fish....

Raging storms became calm at the sound of his voice.

When He spoke deaf people could hear, the blind would see, those who could not walk would leap for joy.

He even commanded dead people to come back to life and they would.

People recognised that there was something wonderful, amazing – something good news – about Jesus.

And even though He spent all of his time with people who messed up and got things wrong – He never sinned. He was never jealous, never proud, never greedy, never selfish. He never gossiped, never stole, never swore, never got drunk – and yet He knew how to party, He lived life to the full.

He lived the kind of life that surely God would live if God walked the streets of our world. He was – and is - the good news.

Of course, some people didn't like Him. And so they took Jesus, arrested him, tortured him - and then they nailed Him to a cross as if He was a common criminal – even though He had done nothing wrong.

But even on the cross it was still obvious that Jesus was good news. As He slowly died in agony, He spoke words of forgiveness over those who looked up at laughed at Him. He knew that this was one of the main reasons why He came. To die - not for his own sins - but for the sin - the screw ups - the suffering - of all the world.

And in this incredible cosmic moment on the cross - in a way that might be hard for us to get our head around - every wrong thing, every hurtful thing, every broken thing, every destructive thing that has ever happened or will ever happen – was laid on Him.

The prophet Isaiah writes that Jesus was crushed under the weight off the brokenness of the world. On the cross, Jesus bore the full consequence of our rejection of God, so that we could be forgiven and have a new life with God - so that the whole of creation could be healed and restored.

And within just a few hours, death took Him, the sky turned black and the earth shook. A Roman soldier stared up into the face of Jesus and uttered the greatest truth ever to be discovered '*Truly, this man was the Son of God*'.

They took His dead body and laid it in a tomb, closing the tomb with a heavy stone.

But those who believed that Jesus was good news clung to the hope that this was not the end – and they were not to be disappointed.

Three days later, the stone had been rolled away, the tomb empty and Jesus was - is alive - proving to all that He is truly good news.

Truly the Son of God.

Sent to the world

- to show the world what God is like,
- to show us how to live the life we were created to live
- to die so that we could be forgiven and experience new life – life in relationship with the God who created us, knows us, loves us and has a unique destiny for each of us,
- to rise again as the proof that He is God, that death is not the end – that death is defeated
- to rise again as the promise that one day God will fix everything and make this broken world new again.

For 40 days Jesus spent time with His friends. Eating with them, laughing with them, walking and talking with them. Proving that He was more alive than anyone had ever been.

And then it was time for him to leave. But before He left he challenged his friends to tell everyone in the world the good news. To carry on His mission. To see God's Kingdom come and will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. To bring healing and wholeness, justice and generosity, love and life – to the whole of creation.

Jesus returned to Heaven. Back to the Father, where He is today praying for each and every one of us.

His friends did exactly as He'd asked. With the help of God's Holy Spirit, they went to the ends of the earth to proclaim that He is the good news.

And today, billions of people have discovered the good news about Jesus. That He is unlike anyone in the history of the universe. He is the Son of the living God and He is alive today, offering forgiveness for our past, life for our present, and hope for our future. That He invites everyone to join with Him in bringing and being that good news to the ends of the earth. To live lives of love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, gentleness, kindness, faithfulness, self-control – living like Jesus in the world.

All in the knowledge that one day, Jesus is coming back. Maybe in our life-time. Maybe not! But when He finally returns, He will put an end to sin, sickness, suffering, and death once and for all. And all those who followed Him in this life will be raised with resurrection life just like Jesus and will live God forever in the renewed creation. Now that's why Jesus is – and always will be – the good news!

So what does this mean for you today? It means that Jesus is inviting you to follow Him. To become one of His disciples and join Him in this incredible future changing mission.

So where do you start?

'42' is here to help you answer that question. Someone once said that it takes around 40 days to build a habit and so if you can find around 15 minutes a day to work through each of these sessions we guarantee (that's a bold claim!) three things:

1. You will grow in your relationship with Jesus
2. You will learn how to pray and spend time with Him regularly
3. You will start making an impact in this world for Him.

Each '42' session is structured as follows:

[Teaser] – a kick off verse and question.

[Thought] – some thoughts on the theme for the day.

[Challenge] – a challenge to put what you've learnt into action.

[Prayer] – a guided prayer and reflection.

[Discuss] – a question to discuss with a friend.

[additional Bible verses] – for further study.

Two final tips to get you started. Firstly, it's better to go through this with someone else so you can hold each other accountable for doing it daily and share your reflections and questions together at least once per week. Secondly, once you've gone through it over 42 days why not do it again but over 42 weeks – taking more time the second time through and working through all the additional scriptures.

So here's the 42 things we're going to be looked at – they cover...

- BEING (what you need to 'be' as a follower of Jesus) – Jesus wants you to be like Him
- DOING (what you need to 'do' as a follower of Jesus) – our doing flows out of our being
- KNOWING (what you need to 'know' as a follower of Jesus) – some of the big questions people often ask

- 1) Disciple-making
- 2) Self image
- 3) Comparison
- 4) God as Father
- 5) Forgiven
- 6) Freedom
- 7) Peace
- 8) Self control
- 9) Faithfulness
- 10) Love
- 11) Vision - God's direction for our lives
- 12) Humility
- 13) Integrity
- 14) Generosity
- 15) Prayer
- 16) Reading the Bible
- 17) Church
- 18) Worship
- 19) Serving
- 20) Giving
- 21) Witnessing
- 22) Spiritual Gifts
- 23) Fasting
- 24) Work
- 25) Forgiving
- 26) Friendship
- 27) Romantic relationships
- 28) Sexuality
- 29) How do we know what the truth is?
- 30) How do we know God exists?
- 31) How can we know the Bible is true and reliable?
- 32) Did Jesus really exist?
- 33) Did Jesus really rise from the dead?
- 34) Why is there so much suffering?
- 35) Do miracles still happen today?
- 36) Why am I here?
- 37) How can God be 3 in 1
- 38) What's the truth about the end of the world?
- 39) What's the truth about Heaven?
- 40) What's the truth about Hell?
- 41) Baptism
- 42) Keep growing

Ready to go....?

1) DISCIPLE-MAKING

Aim – to explain what discipleship is and to encourage people to practice it.

[Teaser]

Jesus said “Go and make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19)

But what on earth is a disciple?

[Thought]

Jesus had lots of disciples when he was here on earth. He chose twelve to be closest to him (Luke 6:13) but also had others who travelled with him and learned from him. A disciple is someone who follows another, in order to become like them – to think, feel and do the same things they do. An **apprentice**.

Disciples don't just belong in the New Testament though. You are invited to be a disciple of Jesus too. So what does that mean?

Discipleship doesn't just happen. If you want to think like Jesus, feel like Jesus and do what Jesus did, then you need to be intentional about it. That's why we've created this resource, to help you in your first steps of discipleship. Discipleship never ends; you can keep learning more about Jesus and becoming more like him throughout your life.

The first disciples went everywhere with Jesus – they walked with him, ate with him, listened to him teach, watched how he related to people, and saw him praying and relating to God. So one of the ways in which you will grow as a disciple is to spend time with Christians who are a little ahead of you on the journey, further on the road of following Jesus.

Paul did that with a young man called Timothy in the Bible. He saw that Timothy had potential to be a leader and so he spent time with him, taking him on some of his missionary journeys (Acts 16:1-3). Later he wrote letters to Timothy when he was a church leader, encouraging him to set an example for the people he was leading even though he was young (1 Timothy 4:12).

So how do you find someone like that? Looking at the way that Jesus disciplined his followers will give you some ideas for what to look for in the person you ask to disciple you.

First, in Luke 6:12 we read that Jesus chose his 12 disciples after he spent a night praying to God. So pray and ask God to show you who you should ask to disciple you. Look for someone who is the same sex as you, who you know you will get on with.

Second, the disciples watched Jesus praying and knew they wanted to do the same thing so THEY asked him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1). Look for someone who has a strong faith in God, who you want to be like, who you feel has something to teach you.

Third, Jesus spent time explaining what his kingdom was like in Matthew chapters 5 to 7. So try to find a discipler who is easy to talk to, and who is good at explaining things, someone who will let you ask lots of questions and won't mind going over things again with you.

Fourth, Jesus also sent his disciples out in twos to do what he had done. Matthew 10:1 says that Jesus gave them authority to heal people and drive out evil spirits just like he had done. He wasn't afraid to let them make mistakes; he knew that they would learn best by doing. Look for a discipler who will give you opportunities to try new things and to learn by doing.

Finally, when Jesus returned to be with his father, he gave his disciples the great commission which we can read about in Matthew 28:16-20. He left them to get on with it, You need a discipler who will be able to let go when they have taught you all they know and who can let you move on.

Remember that you're not looking for someone perfect, but someone who is willing to share some of their life with you and who can learn alongside you. Pray and ask God to show you who you can ask. Perhaps the easiest way to explain what you're looking for is to show them this and explain that you chose them! Then sit down and talk through how it might work for both of you. If they don't feel they are the right person, then ask them if they can recommend someone else. Don't give up – the right person is out there somewhere!

Don't just find someone to disciple you, commit also to disciple someone yourself – just like Jesus' commanded in Matthew 28.

[Challenge]

Your challenge is to find someone to be your discipler. Start by praying that God would connect you with the right person. Look for someone you respect and feel you can learn from. Then talk to them about it and show them this resource.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Think about the areas in which you want to grow as a follower of Jesus. Are there specific things you want to learn?

Thank God that he wants you to be a disciple of Jesus and that he wants you to grow in your faith.

Ask God to show you who could be a good discipler to you. Ask God to help you explain well what you are looking for.

'Lord, thank you for the example that Jesus set in sharing his life with people so they could learn from him. Help us to find people in our own lives who can enable us to grow in our faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.'

[Discuss]

What are you looking for in a disciple?

[additional Bible verses]

- John 18:15-18 and John 21:15-17 – Jesus' disciples weren't perfect. Peter made mistakes but Jesus forgave him and gave him a fresh start.
- 1 Corinthians 4:16 and 1 Corinthians 11:1 – Paul told people to imitate him as he followed Jesus.
- Philippians 2:5-8 – be humble as you learn from your discipler, just like Jesus was.
- 1 Thessalonians 2:8 – understand that disciple-making is all about 'doing life' with people.
- 2 Timothy 2:2 – we need to reproduce other disciples ourselves. We're disciples, making disciples, making disciples – and so on.

2) SELF IMAGE

Aim - To explore what self-image is and where it comes from.

[Teaser]

I praise you God because I am wonderfully made (Psalm 139: 14) [NIV]

Can you honestly say that about yourself?

Website – [Thought]

There was a mime artiste who used to do a brilliant mime where he pretended to be happy at an imaginary party. He'd put on a 'happy' mask and everyone would laugh and think he was the life and soul of the party. But he wasn't really happy on the inside though. Every day, he'd put on the 'happy mask' and give his 'performance' to others. Until one day he discovered he couldn't take off the 'happy mask'.

Have you ever felt like that? Trapped behind a mask! Pretending to be what you're not? Not liking who you are?

We're talking about our self-image or self-esteem. If you have a low self-esteem then you don't think you're worth very much. You might wish you were someone else. If you have good self-esteem, then you know that you are a valuable person. You have a sense of what you do well without being arrogant. You can take your place alongside other people.

Our self-esteem is affected by lots of different things, from our upbringing to our achievements. When our self-esteem is low, it's tempting to try to boost it with external things such as possessions, clothes or the friends we have. We might try to make ourselves feel more valuable through having the latest gadgets, or wearing designer clothes or hanging out with cool people. The trouble is that those are very shaky things to base your self-esteem on because they can so quickly disappear or go out of fashion. We need to base our self-esteem on something more solid.

You can't get more rock solid than God. So what does He think about you?

Psalm 139 says that God put you together in your mother's womb and that **you are fearfully and wonderfully made**. God made you and He doesn't make mistakes. Recognise then, that there's a lot of good stuff in you. God has gifted each of us with passions and strengths, hopes and dreams so that we can make our mark in the world. Rather than looking at what you can't do, be thankful for what you can do.

Luke 12:7 says that God knows you so well that he even knows how many hairs there are on your head. **You are God's precious child** and he is proud of you. The creator of the Universe – the one true God - loves you. He loves you because he loves you because he loves you. He is love. Your life is so precious to God that he died so that you could live, and he's alive today rooting for you.

In Matthew 22:36 Jesus was asked what was the most important commandment. In other words, how can people best please God? Jesus said that we need to **love** God with everything that we have and then we need to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. Think about who Jesus says we are to love – **God, others and ourselves**. If we don't love ourselves – if we don't accept and value ourselves for who we are – then it is difficult to love God and to love others.

If we don't value ourselves, we are effectively saying that God hasn't done a very good job in creating us.

How then can we build a more healthy sense of ourselves? How can we value ourselves as God values us? We need to stop putting ourselves down and being hard on ourselves. We need to accept the truth of what God says about us and ask him to change the way we see ourselves.

It can take time to change the way you see yourself, especially if you have been putting yourself down for a long time. The first step is to decide that you want to see yourself as God sees you. So find a mirror, look yourself in the eye and say 'Thank you God that I am fearfully and wonderfully made!'

[Challenge]

On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is very low and 10 is very high, how would you rate your self-esteem: the way that you value yourself? What do you think about that number? Talk to someone you trust about it and tell them why you have scored yourself at that level. If your self-esteem is low, what could you do to increase it by one or two points?

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Take a moment to thank God for his love for you, that he values you, that he wants you as part of his family.

Tell God how you feel when you hear someone say that you are fearfully and wonderfully made.

Talk to God about the gap there might be between the way he values you and the way you value yourself. Ask God to close the gap and to help you stop trying to fill it with other things.

'Father God, we thank you for your deep love for us. Help us to listen to what you have to say to us and about us. Transform the way that we see ourselves until we see ourselves with your eyes; able to love ourselves, to love others and to love you with all that we have. Amen.'

[Discuss]

What has helped to give you a good sense of your value?

[additional Bible verses]

- Psalm 139 – read the whole Psalm where David speaks about how much he is known and loved by God.
- Psalm 103:1-13 – a Psalm that lists all the things God has done for us.
- Luke 7:36-50 – Simon, a religious leader, sneers at a woman who pours perfume on Jesus' feet, but Jesus can see her true value.
- Ephesians 1:3-8 – find out what God thinks about you by reading these verses – wow!
- 1 Peter 3:3-4 – Peter reminds us what true beauty is.

3) COMPARISON

Aim – to understand how damaging it can be to keep comparing ourselves to others and to learn to be ourselves in God.

[Teaser]

Do your own work well and then you will have something to be proud of. But don't compare yourself with others. (Galatians 6:4) [CEV]

So what's wrong with comparing ourselves to others?

[Thought]

Have you ever struggled with comparing yourself to other people? In lots of areas of life we get measured and compared with others. It happens in exams where you get a grade for how well you've done. It happens in athletics where you get given a time for a run or a distance for a throw. It happens with our bodies where we're aware of who is taller, skinnier, prettier or stronger than we are.

The problem with comparing ourselves with others is that often we end up making a judgement as a result. We can either think that we're better and then be tempted to feel superior, or we can decide that we're worse and then put ourselves down. Comparing ourselves to others can be really toxic and in Galatians 6:4 the Bible tells us not to do it. Don't compare yourself with others!

The point is that you are you. God didn't create you to be anyone else. **God made you unique.** You're one-of-a-kind! There will never be another 'you' in the history of the universe so God wants you to step up and take your unique place in history.

We need to remember that we're not worth more or less than anyone else – you are simply precious to God. God made us as individuals. God treats us as individuals. He took the care to give you a totally unique personality, brain pattern, DNA structure, eye retina imprint and fingerprint. Why then would he bother to compare you, favourably or negatively, with others? God doesn't compare you to others and neither should you.

How then do you address comparison in your life? The secret is to **learn to be content.** Content with who you are and what you've got. You'd be amazed by the difference it would make if you could get to a place where you give 100% of your life to God and stop being nosy about what other people are doing (that's their responsibility). It would be so liberating.

At the end of the day comparison is a 'no-brainer'! It always creates one of two problems.

Either **comparison breeds arrogance**, when we think we're better than other people, and remember God says he's against the proud. Or **comparison breeds envy**, where we think we're worse (or worse off) than other people and then become jealous of what they have. Again, the Bible warns us of the dangers of jealousy.

There is always more that we can learn about ourselves, about God and about the world he has created, but the key to killing comparison is to accept and love ourselves exactly as God has made us.

In Romans 12:3-8, Paul encourages us not to think too highly of ourselves but to have a good awareness of our strengths and weaknesses. He goes on to say that we are all different and complimentary - and that enriches the world we live in. Imagine if everyone was exactly the same. How boring the world would be! Accepting the fact that we are all unique, that we're all different, that we all have something to contribute to God's world makes comparison unnecessary and unhelpful.

So let's not spend any more energy on comparing ourselves with anyone. Let's make it our life goal to follow Jesus and to become more like Jesus – where his mission becomes our passion. Let's **be thankful and content** with who he is making us to be.

[Challenge]

Do you tend to compare yourself with others? Just between you and God, write two lists – one of people that you feel are better than you, and one of people that you think are worse than you. Think about the people on those lists. What exactly makes you feel superior or inferior to these people? Do you think that God agrees with you? Well, he doesn't! Tear up the list or completely destroy it in some way and as you do so, ask God to help you to stop comparing yourself with others.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

God created you and loves you exactly as you are. When he looks at you he is really proud of his handiwork. Spend some time thanking God for the way he has made you and the gifts he has given you, even if you don't feel very thankful!

Be honest with God about whether you tend to compare yourself to others. Talk to him about the ways in which you feel superior or inferior to others.

Ask God to help you accept yourself exactly as you are and to give up the damaging habit of comparison.

'Creator God, you have designed and created us just as we are, and when you look at us you are pleased with what you see. We confess that comparing ourselves to others is damaging and pointless. Help us to accept ourselves just as we are and to realise how valuable we are to you. Help us to stop comparing ourselves and to walk in the freedom that you offer us. In Jesus' name, Amen.'

[Discuss]

What do you think about this topic? Do you agree that comparing yourself with others is damaging?

[additional Bible verses]

- 1 Samuel 18:6-9 – see how comparison can lead to anger and jealousy.
- John 21:15-23 – Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, tried to compare himself to John, another of Jesus' disciples and asked 'what about him?' Jesus said it was none of his business!
- Romans 15:1-7 – Paul reminds us to accept each other and be considerate.
- Philippians 4:12-13 – Paul could say that he was content whatever circumstances he found himself in – that's crucial to stopping unhelpful comparisons!
- Hebrews 13:7 – remember that there is still a lot you can learn from other people.

4) GOD AS FATHER

Aim – to discover that God is our father and to grow in relationship to him

[Teaser]

God's Spirit doesn't make us slaves who are afraid of him. Instead we become his children and call him our Father. (Romans 8:15) [CEV]

Do you know God as your father?

[Thought]

Someone once said that 'the single most important thing about us is what first comes into our heads when we hear the word 'God'. Our understanding of God shapes everything else about who we think we are and what life is about. So what comes into your mind when you hear the word 'God'?

In Mark 14:36 *Jesus surprised everyone by calling God 'Abba' which was a new way of calling God 'Father'. The Jews were used to calling God Father, but in a distant, respectful way. Jesus had a close loving relationship with his Father God, just like a little child with his or her dad. That's the kind of relationship we can have too. I think the first word that God wants us to think of when we hear his name is 'Daddy'!* He wants us to have a close relationship with him where we feel safe and secure, knowing that he loves us; that he'll **provide** for us and **protect** us; that he's on our side.

In Luke 15 Jesus told a story that tells us what kind of father God is. A man had two sons. The youngest son came to him and asked for his share of his inheritance now, even though his father was still alive. Effectively the younger son was saying to his dad, 'I wish you were dead so that I could get half your money now'. So his dad gave him half of everything that he owned.

The younger son travelled and had a great time spending all the money. But then his money ran out and so did his new friends. The only work he could find was looking after pigs for a local farmer. He was so hungry, he wished he could eat the pigs' food! He suddenly came to his senses and thought, 'the servants who work for my dad have more than I do. I'm going to go back, apologise to my dad and ask for a job as one of his servants.'

So he set off to return, but while he was still quite a way from home his dad, who had been looking out for him, saw him in the distance. His dad ran to meet him, and threw his arms around him. The younger son started his speech to say sorry and to ask for a job, but his dad interrupted. He called his servants and said: 'Quick, bring some new clothes for my son, and let's have a party to celebrate him being back!'

Jesus was saying that God is like the dad in that story – **generous** in giving to us, **quick to forgive us** when we get things wrong, **looking out for us** if we're far away - delighted when he sees us. God is a hugging, kissing, partying God who loves his children. Wouldn't it be great if when we heard the word God, we had an image of a laughing, delighted father giving us a big hug?

Perhaps your experience of an earthly dad feels very different to this. Our human fathers aren't perfect. Some dads are **aloof** – they're not good at expressing how they feel. But God is a hugging God as the story you've just heard shows.

Some dads are **absent** – perhaps because the marriage has ended or they need to work long hours to make ends meet. But God is a present God who is with us all the time.

Some dads are **authoritarian** – they are strict and seem to always notice when we do something wrong. But God is a generous God who is slow to anger and abounding in love.

Finally, some dads are sadly **abusive** – they damage the people they are supposed to love with harsh putdowns or even violence. But God is love and his perfect love for us drives out all fear.

God longs for us to have a really healthy understanding of what a father's love is so that we can be secure in our relationship with him. Romans 12:2 says that we need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We need to fill our minds with these positive images of God's love for us and ask God to set us free from any negative things that have happened to us.

The next time you hear the word 'God', whatever first comes to your mind, choose to imagine God running to give you a big hug with a beaming smile, delighted to see you!

[Challenge]

Find a quiet space and draw a picture of you and God that represents how you view him. Compare your picture with the image at the end of the story of the father running to hug and kiss his son. Pray about your picture and if it's very different, ask God to help you to understand and experience exactly how much God loves you. It might be helpful to talk to someone you trust about your picture and ask them to pray for you.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Spend some time thanking God that he is your father and that he loves you.

Talk to God about any difficulty you have in receiving his love. Ask him to renew your mind so that nothing can stop you receiving his love.

Tell God what's on your mind – your heavenly father loves to hear from his children.

'Father God, I thank you for your deep love for me, and your delight in me. Help my understanding of your love to grow, so that I can be secure in my relationship with you, close to you as my heavenly dad and confident that you want the best for me. Amen.'

[Discuss]

What comes to your mind when you hear the word 'God'?

[additional Bible verses]

- Zephaniah 3:17 – reminds us that God delights in us.
- Matthew 6:7-13 – Jesus teaches us to pray to God our father.
- Luke 11:9-13 – God is more loving than even the best of dads here on earth.
- Romans 8:15-17 – God's Spirit helps us to call God 'father' and let's us know that we are God's children.
- 1 Corinthians 8:6 – Paul reminds us that God is the father of all creation.

5) FORGIVEN

Aim - to understand why and how God forgives us, and the importance of forgiving ourselves and others.

[Teaser]

Christ sacrificed his life's blood to set us free, which means that our sins are now forgiven. (Ephesians 1:6-8)

Do you know what it's like to be forgiven? Would you like to find out?

[Thought]

In chapter two of his gospel, Mark talks about a time when Jesus was teaching in someone's home. There were so many people squashed inside that it was impossible for anyone else to get in. Some men arrived, carrying a paralysed friend on a mat. They couldn't get inside the house, so they climbed up on the roof, made an opening and literally lowered their friend down through the hole so that he could get to Jesus to be healed.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to see a mat coming down from where the ceiling used to be? Yet Jesus had no problem with it at all.

He said to the man, '**Your sins are forgiven!**' That caused a huge stir! Everyone knew that only God could forgive sins, so if Jesus was saying he could forgive, then he was clearly claiming to be God.

Jesus went on to heal the man, and the man walked out of there, praising God and carrying his mat. To Jesus though, the most important thing was to let the man know that his sins were forgiven. But why was that so important?

Put simply, sin is anything we say, do or think that comes between us and God – **falling short of God's best**. We can sin by doing the *wrong* thing - like lying, being jealous or violent. We can also sin by not doing the *right* thing - like being kind, standing up for justice or being generous.

The word sin has an 'I' in the centre, which reminds us that sin is putting ourselves first instead of God. **Sin comes out of our selfishness**, and it can really damage our relationships with other people. It can really damage *us*. Ultimately though, all sin damages our relationship with God; every time we sin, we sin against God.

We know when we've sinned, don't we? Usually we feel a sense of guilt; a heaviness inside. We know that we've hurt God. How fantastic then, to know that God can forgive us and loves to do so. 1 John 1:9 says, "*If we confess our sin, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" **Confessing is owning up** to what we've done wrong – acknowledging before God that we have sinned.

But how does God forgive us? **All sin has consequences**, and God can't just pretend that sin hasn't happened or that it doesn't matter. Because Jesus was sinless – he never committed a single wrong in his entire life - he took all our sin on himself when he died on the cross. 1 Peter 2:24 says "*He [Jesus] himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you have been healed.'*"

The Bible contains some great imagery to help us understand what that forgiveness is like. Psalm 103:12 says that **God removes** our sin from us as far as the East is from the West – and you can't get further away than that! Isaiah 1:18 says that our sin is like a deep red stain, that **God transforms** into bright, dazzling whiteness. When **God forgives** us, we're made clean.

We need to learn to receive God's forgiveness. Don't hold onto feelings of guilt, or keep reminding yourself of what you did wrong. Accept that God has forgiven you and enjoy the freedom that forgiveness brings. Often we need to forgive ourselves as well as receiving God's forgiveness.

Then God asks us to go one step further, and to **forgive other people**. Jesus reminds us about that in the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:12: "*forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*" The 'as' is very important. It's not an option; it's part of the deal. God forgives us just as we forgive others.

So don't hold back. Be quick to ask for forgiveness. Be quick to forgive yourself and to forgive others. And enjoy the freedom that comes from being forgiven!

[Challenge]

Find a place where you can be quiet and sit down with a pen and some paper. Pray, asking God to bring to your mind all the things you need to be forgiven for. Write them down, one by one. Then when you're finished, confess them to God – owning up to where you have sinned. Then destroy your piece of paper: shred it, rip it up; throw it in the bin. Receive God's forgiveness – because you're forgiven!

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Some churches use this prayer of confession in their services. You might like to repeat the words after me, as you think of how they apply to you.

'Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
we have sinned against you and against each other,
in thought and word and deed,
through negligence, through weakness,
through our own deliberate fault.
We are truly sorry, and repent of all our sins.

For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, who died for us,
forgive us all that is past;
and grant that we may serve you in newness of life
to the glory of your name.

Father God, we thank you for your promise – that if we confess our sins, you are faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us. We choose to receive your forgiveness and to forgive ourselves. Amen.'

[Discuss]

Do you have trouble believing that you're forgiven?

[additional Bible verses]

- Psalm 51:1-19 – this is a beautiful cry for forgiveness from David who committed adultery and murder.
- Psalm 103:1-13 – read about how amazing God is, and how he loves to forgive us.
- Luke 7:36-50 – Jesus says that those who have been forgiven the most will love the most.
- John 4:13-14 – speaking to the woman at the well, Jesus explains the amazing consequence of receiving his forgiveness.
- Colossians 1:13-14 – a powerful reminder of forgiveness, and what it means for our eternal future.

6) FREEDOM

Aim – to explain what we are set free from as Christians, and how we increasingly inherit our freedom

[Teaser]

Jesus has set us free to live a free life (Galatians 5:1 [The Message])

Do you feel like you're completely free?

[Thought]

Paul says in Galatians 5:1 that Christ has set us free to live a free life! So what stops us fully experiencing that amazing freedom?

We live in a broken world, and the Bible says we have an enemy - Satan - who wants to keep us captive and stop us being free. That happens in four key ways.

The first is **sin**. Before you were a Christian, you couldn't help sinning. Romans 7:14 says that we *were* slaves to sin. Yet now you know Jesus, whenever you sin, you can ask for God's forgiveness, receive it, then ask God to transform you by his Spirit so you can choose not to sin in future.

The second thing that stops us being free is **sickness**. Being ill was not part of God's original plan for us, and all sickness reminds us that we live in a broken world. Jesus showed what happens to sickness when it meets God's love and power. Matthew 9:35 says that Jesus healed every disease and illness. Jesus can still heal today. So if sickness is stopping you being free, ask Jesus to heal you, and if necessary, keep on asking.

The third thing that stops us being free is **suffering**: emotional distress such as fear, grief, anxiety, sleeplessness and confusion. The Bible tells us in 1 Peter 5:7 to cast all our anxiety on Jesus - because he cares for us. We can bring all our suffering to Jesus, ask him to take it, and receive his peace in return.

The fourth and final thing that stops us being free is **Satan**. If you get involved in any activity linked to the evil one, then that can keep you captive. That might mean watching really unhelpful horror films, or reading horoscopes; it could even mean getting involved with things like tarot cards or ouija boards. They're all very bad news and should be avoided.

Sin, sickness, suffering and Satan; four things that can stop us experiencing the freedom that Jesus wants to give us. However, they're all things that can be overcome if we pray and ask God to set us free. If you're concerned about any of those things, then talk to someone you trust and ask them to pray for you.

In 2 Corinthians 1:10, Paul says *"God has delivered us from a deadly peril and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us."* There are three tenses in that sentence. God has delivered us in the past; he will deliver us in the future, and he'll continue to deliver us in the present.

So here's a helpful way of taking hold of the freedom that Jesus gives us. Firstly, **recognise your free**. Romans 6:11 says *"count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ."* Keep reminding yourself that Jesus has already set you free.

Then **resist** the devil. James 4:7 says *"submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you."* Notice that you don't resist the devil by fighting him; you resist him by putting God first in every area of your life. Then Satan *has* to flee from you! For example: don't co-operate with sin and give in to temptation, but co-operate with the Spirit and resist.

Finally, **replace** every lie that holds you captive with God's truth, which sets you free. 2 Corinthians 10:5 says *"take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."* So when a thought comes into your head that you're a failure because you've sinned again, remind yourself that God loves to forgive and to give you a fresh start.

Always remember: there are people who would love to pray for you, and to help you to find even greater freedom.

[Challenge]

Write out the verses that we gave you about taking hold of the freedom Jesus gives you. That's Romans 6:11, James 4:7 and 2 Corinthians 10:5. Write each of them on a different post-it note or piece of card and stick them somewhere prominent: on the frame of your mirror or next to your bed. Read them each morning and night and learn them off by heart to help you take hold of the full freedom Jesus offers.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

How free do you feel from guilt, suffering and sickness? Talk to God about it.

If you are feeling guilty about anything, then confess it to God. Tell him what you have done and ask for his forgiveness. Then let yourself receive his forgiveness.

If you are worried about anything, then talk to God about it. Ask him to fill you with his peace and to help you trust him.

If you are sick, then ask Jesus to heal you and make you well, to set you free from all sickness.

If you have got involved in any activity linked to the evil one, such as horoscopes or tarot cards, then confess that to God and ask him to set you free. It may help to get someone else to pray for you as well.

'Thank you Lord that you have set us free, so that we can live a free life. Please liberate us from everything that holds us back, whether that is sin, suffering or sickness. Help us to live in the reality of the freedom you give us. Amen.'

[Discuss]

What does it feel like to be truly free?

[additional Bible verses]

- Exodus 6:2-7 – God has always been about setting his people free – and he always hears the cries of his people
- Luke 4:18 – when Jesus started his ministry, he said that he had come to set the oppressed free.
- John 8:31 – Jesus says that knowing the truth will set us free – that's the truth about who Jesus is and the truth about who we are.
- 2 Corinthians 5:17 – Jesus has made us completely new! So let's live like it!
- Galatians 5:1 – we don't need to be slaves to anything – Jesus has made us completely, eternally free!

7) GOD'S PEACE

Aim - To grow in the understanding and experience of the peace of God in our lives, because of or despite circumstances around us.

[Teaser]

Because you belong to Christ Jesus, God will bless you with peace that no one can completely understand. And this peace will control the way you think and feel.
(Philippians 4:7) [CEV]

How can you get more peace in your life?

[Thought]

Life can get really busy and stressful can't it? There's the pressures of work, stress from family or friends, plus worry about the future and what it might hold. Finding peace can seem impossible.

Jesus was pretty clear that in life we will experience good and bad stuff - see Matthew 5:45 - and yet he promises that in him, we can have peace.

Perhaps we need to think about what we mean by peace. One of the names for God in the Bible is *Jehovah Shalom* which means **The Lord is Peace**. This word 'shalom' doesn't mean the absence of suffering. It means wholeness and wellbeing; it means that whatever is going on around you, good or bad, you can be ok inside.

Paul says a similar thing in 1 Corinthians 14:33 where he says that "*God is not a God of disorder but a God of peace.*" Jesus himself is described as the **Prince of Peace** in Isaiah 9:6. When Jesus is born as a baby, we're told in Luke 2:14 that he has come to bring peace.

When the whole world seems to be going crazy, God is still able to bring us peace. Philippians 4:6-7 says "*Don't worry about anything, but pray about everything. With thankful hearts offer up your prayers and requests to God. Then, because you belong to Christ Jesus, God will bless you with peace that no one can completely understand. And this peace will control the way you think and feel.*"

God's peace is hard to understand because we can find it even when everything seems chaotic around us. Knowing that we belong to Jesus, and that we're loved by him, gives us security and wellbeing deep within.

We need to make space though, to receive God's peace. We need to remind ourselves that we belong to Jesus, and that he loves us.

Next time you're feeling stressed then, try this. Find a place where you can be on your own and won't be disturbed. Sit down and make yourself comfortable. Close your eyes and become still inside.

Then become aware of your breathing. Breathe a little more slowly and a little more deeply. Ask God to come and fill you with his peace.

As you breathe in, think about God's love and peace filling you up.
As you breathe out, let go of whatever is causing you stress.

Breathe in God's love;
Breathe out worry

Breathe in God's love;
Breathe out stress

Breathe in God's love;
Breathe out anxiety.

Tell God about the issues on your mind. Imagine placing them in God's hands one by one.

Thank God for his love and for his presence in your life. Thank him that his peace can be found in the middle of busyness.

[Challenge]

That's your challenge for today – find a moment to breathe deeply in this way and ask God to fill you with his peace. You might find it helpful to listen to this podcast again next time you feel stressed.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Take a moment to pray about God's peace.

Tell God about all the things you are worried about. As different issues come to mind, imagine handing them over to God for him to take care of.

If there's a specific situation where you need God's peace, tell him about that.

Ask God to fill you with his peace.

'Father, I thank you for your gift of peace that allows me to be whole and still inside no matter what is happening around me. Help me make space to receive your peace. Amen.'

[invitation to respond]

Do you think it's possible to find peace in a busy world?

[additional Bible verses]

To discover more about finding God's peace in a busy world, look at these verses:

- Psalm 23 – the most famous Psalm which reminds us why we can know God's peace.
- Isaiah 9:6-7 - Jesus is described as the Prince of Peace.
- Proverbs 14:30 - a peaceful heart is healthy.
- John 14:27-28 - Jesus promises to give us peace.
- Romans 15:13 – Paul prays that we will experience God's peace.

8) SELF CONTROL

Aim - To grow in our understanding of the importance of self-control, of the enemy's view of self-control and to learn how to experience greater self-control.

[Teaser]

A person without self-control is like a house with its doors and windows knocked out. (Proverbs 25:28) [The Message]

How good is your self-control?

[Thought]

Did you know that your **reactions reveal your reality**? How you react to stuff reveals a lot about what you're REALLY like?

Why is that? Because your reactions are involuntary and unplanned, but they're the things that show what's really going on inside your heart – reactions reveal reality.

So for example, you might say that the next time your friend lets you down, you're going to forgive them. But when it happens, the reality may be instead that you have a sulk, you plot revenge or spread rumours about them. Your reactions reveal that you're not quite as forgiving as you thought you were!

So self-control is a really important characteristic because it's all about reigning in our reactions and our instincts and choosing to behave in the right way, even if that's difficult. Self-control nurtures **obedience** to God where we don't give in to what we desire but give ourselves to what God wants. We put pleasing God above pleasing ourselves.

Self-control is part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Galatians 5:23 tells us that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. We need to choose to exercise self-control, but as we open ourselves up to God's Spirit, we can expect self-control to grow stronger in our lives. Developing self-control isn't about gritting your teeth and trying harder. It's about making room for the Holy Spirit to help us. Think of it like getting dressed every morning; **embracing the work of the Spirit** and putting on self-control.

If we don't learn to control ourselves - our bodies, desires and reactions – then we can end up making some bad decisions that can have some major consequences for ourselves, our relationships with people – and God.

And remember, this is not about living by rules. Galatians 5:1 says that as Christians we're completely free. But it's recognizing that not everything is good for us, not every appetite should be satisfied, whether it's food or sex or happiness or possessions or whatever can end up becoming unhelpful to us.

So how can you develop more self-control? It's something that needs **discipline**, because often it doesn't come naturally to us. Think of it like a muscle that needs exercising to make it stronger. So start with something obvious and small where you currently lack self-control. Perhaps you know that you spend too much time on social media sites each night. Perhaps you're in the habit of eating too much chocolate and you know that's not healthy. Perhaps you're watching stuff on TV that's filling your mind with unhelpful thoughts and images.

Start to make some better choices to exercise your self-control. Instead of spending huge amounts of time on social media sites, choose to limit your time. Make a decision to buy and therefore eat less chocolate. If there are certain channels on your TV which are unhelpful then try and block them – or just stop flicking over to them. As you make small choices on a regular basis, bigger choices will become easier.

The key to self-control is **embracing the grace of God**. When we realise how awesome God's love and kindness is towards us it should inspire us to want to please Him and not easily give in to the things that tempt us. Titus 2:12 says that the grace of God teaches us to say no to ungodliness and to live self-controlled lives.

If you find self-control really difficult, then talk to someone you trust and ask them to pray for you. And remember, that self-control is impossible without the person and the power of the Holy Spirit. So pray for a daily filling of the Spirit's power, love, and self-control.

[Challenge]

Choose one area where you know you need to exercise more self-control – spending time on your computer, eating unhealthily, staying up too late. Decide how you want to behave instead, but don't make it too hard for you to achieve. Pray and ask God to strengthen your self-control by his Spirit. And then do what you've decided!

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Think about the grace of God – God's rich love for you and his desire for you to be whole. God is so quick to forgive you and to give you a chance to start again. Drink in God's love and grace. Open yourself up to the Spirit of God.

Then ask God's Spirit to show you where you need to exercise more self-control. Think about what actions you need to take.

Then ask God to help you exercise self-control in this area.

Lord God, we thank you for the gift of your Spirit who transforms us. May we be open to the work of your Spirit so that our lives bear the fruit of self-control. Make us more like Jesus, Amen.

[Discuss]

What are your top tips for developing more self-control?

[additional Bible verses]

- Proverbs 5:22-23 – the consequences of lack of self-control.
- Luke 22:42 – Jesus showed how strong his self-control was when he prayed for God's will to be done, not his.
- 1 Corinthians 10:23 – reminding us that just because you can do something doesn't mean you should.
- 2 Timothy 3:1-5 – Paul warns us what a lack of self-control will look like.
- 1 Peter 5:8-9 – Peter tells us to be self-controlled and to resist the devil, our enemy.

9) FAITHFULNESS

Aim - To increase a sense of security in God's dealing with us, and to encourage us to care enough for others to be faithful to them

[Teaser]

God is a faithful God who does no wrong; upright and just is he. (Deuteronomy 32:4)
[NIV]

What does it mean to be faithful?

[Thought]

Faithfulness means that God is **consistent**; he doesn't change; we can depend on him. The Bible is full of promises about God's faithfulness - verses like Psalm 33:4: *"For the word of the Lord is right and true; he is faithful in all he does."*

God desires good things for us. Jeremiah 29:11 tells us that he has plans to make us flourish, not come to harm, but because his love for people allows everyone to make choices, those choices have consequences, God's good plans for us don't always come to fruition. But that doesn't mean God has changed. Romans 8:31 says that God is for us. So who can be against us? We can hold on to God's faithfulness even if things aren't turning out how we wanted.

In response, we are invited to **be faithful to God**. When you were a toddler and you didn't get your own way, you probably threw a tantrum – we all did. Now we're older, we can choose better behaviour. We can choose to stay faithful in our thoughts, our action and our feelings to the God who is faithful to us first.

We need to put our faith in God's faithfulness - to trust that **he will fulfil his promises** to us even if that takes longer than we would like, or doesn't happen as we expect.

Jesus is very clear about the need for us to have faith. Faith is like a muscle that grows as we use it, but the size of our faith is not important. No, what matters is where we invest our faith; what we put our faith in. In Luke 17:6, Jesus says that even faith the size of a tiny mustard seed will bear fruit if it's invested in God who is faithful.

Sometimes we need to wait for answers to our prayers, or learn to adjust as we get a different answer to the one we expected. God knows what we can cope with and what our limits are. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says *"God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted – or stretched – beyond what you can bear."*

If you're struggling with being faithful to God, talk to older Christians and ask them to tell you stories of God's faithfulness in their lives. Find out from them how God has provided what they needed at the right time, and be encouraged that God will do that for you too.

In thinking about faithfulness, there's one other area to consider: our **faithfulness to other people**. Do you care enough about anyone to be truly faithful to them? That means loving, caring, giving, serving, laughing and even crying with them – sticking by them through good times and bad.

James 2:14 challenges us to do that in really practical ways; not just to say that we care about someone but to show it in our actions. So a faithful friend will come and see you when you're down and listen as you pour out your troubles, rather than just sending a text to say that they're praying for you!

More than that, it means going a step further and caring about them so much that you will confront them when they're doing something wrong, or acting in an ungodly way. In

Matthew 18:15 Jesus says that if a fellow Christians sins, then you should go and quietly point out what they've done wrong, to give them a chance to put it right.

That's challenging isn't it? We never like to be told that we're in the wrong and your friend might be angry or upset. So we need to act in love and with compassion, but not be afraid to speak the truth.

Being faithful is about showing that kind of tough love at times, because that's what God does for us. So be inspired by God's faithfulness to you, and show faithfulness back to God and others in your life.

[Challenge]

Who do you need to be faithful to? Perhaps one of your friends is having a hard time. Perhaps one of your parents are stressed or anxious. Think about how you can show them practical, faithful love that sticks with them through the difficult times. That could involve listening to them talk about what's happening, doing their cleaning, or just surprising them with a chocolate bar. You probably know what will be most appreciated by the person you're thinking of. Then go and do it!

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Spend some time thanking God for his faithfulness. You could use some of the verses we've looked at to remind yourself how faithful God is.

Have you ever felt let down by God; felt that he hasn't been faithful to you? Talk to God about it. Ask him to help you understand what was going on.

Will you choose to put your faith in God, to trust in his faithfulness? Tell him how that feels.

'Lord God, we thank you for your faithfulness to us, that you love us and provide for us even when we ignore you, or turn away from you, or reject you. Help us to trust your faithfulness and to show that same faithfulness to others. In Jesus' name, Amen.'

[Discuss]

What stories do you have to tell about God's faithfulness?

[additional Bible verses]

- Psalm 86:15 – God's fuse is very long; his patience even longer.
- Psalm 117 – The shortest psalm in the Bible talks about God's faithfulness.
- Romans 3:3-4 – God is faithful even if we're not. His faithfulness doesn't rely on us.
- Galatians 5:22 – one of the fruit of the Spirit is faithfulness, so we can expect to grown in faithfulness as we become more like Jesus.
- Hebrews 10:23 – we need to hold onto God's faithfulness

10) LOVE

Aim – to explore how and why God loves us, and consequently how we should love ourselves, others, and God’s creation.

[Teaser]

God, you are tender and kind, not easily angered, immense in love. (Psalm 86:15) [The Message]

How much does God love you?

[Thought]

If you had to sum up God in one word, what would it be? It might seem impossible to reduce the creator of this amazing universe into one simple word, but the Bible has done it. And that word is Love. 1 John 4:8 tells us ‘**God is love**’.

Love is the very essence of God’s being; everything that God does is motivated by love.

Love is a word that gets used a lot, isn’t it? I might say that I love pizza; I love going to the cinema; I love my pet dog; I love my wife. Clearly I don’t mean exactly the same thing in each of those cases! I love my wife differently to the way I love pizza!

The New Testament is written in Ancient Greek, and this language has lots of different words for love. There’s ‘**phileo**’ love, which is the kind of love I might feel towards my friends; there’s ‘**eros**’ love, which is the kind of love I feel towards my wife. Then there’s ‘**agape**’ love, which is a sacrificial, servant-hearted, undeserved, totally committed, unswerving love. This is the kind of love that God has for us and for his creation.

So when we say that God is love, we’re not talking about a warm fuzzy feeling. God is deeply, passionately committed to the people and the world that he has made. John 3:16 says that God loved the world so much that he gave it his only son. God gave up the most precious thing he had - his son Jesus - and watched him go through a horrible, agonizing death in order to save us from the same thing.

God’s love for us is so strong that there is nothing we can do to weaken it. In Romans 8:31-39, Paul comes up with a long list of things that we think might separate us from God’s love: trouble, hardship, famine, danger, death, demons and the future. He concludes by saying that absolutely **nothing can separate us from the love of God** that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Sometimes it can be hard to receive God’s love. Sometimes we don’t feel very loveable, and we’re aware of everything we’ve done wrong. No matter; God’s love is consistently strong however we feel or whatever we do. We need to get into the habit of receiving God’s love, soaking in it so that it transforms us and enables us to love in return.

As we receive God’s love, God invites us to **share his love with others**. 1 John 4 goes on to say that “*Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.*” Jesus said in John 13:35 that the world would know that we are his followers by the way that we love each other. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he said in Luke 10:27 that it was to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbour as you love yourself. Again, that’s not about warm fuzzy feelings, but showing the same commitment, care and love to God and to others that God shows to us.

Remember too that God’s love extends to the whole of his creation. As you heard, John 3:16 says that ‘God so loved the world that he gave his son,’ and the Greek word for

'world' is 'Kosmos' meaning the whole created order. That's absolutely everything in the universe, from the tiniest bacteria to the most distant star and everything in between.

We are called to share in God's love for his creation. In Genesis 1:28, God says that the first people are to fill the earth and subdue it. In other words they are to tend it, care for it and steward it so that it thrives. Another way that we can show our love for God is to look after this world that he created. Recycling, walking instead of using the car, not running the tap when we clean our teeth – these things aren't just good for the environment, they can be part of our worship and a way that we show our love for God.

So learn to receive and embrace God's love. His wonderful, beautiful, unconditional love for you.

As you learn to receive more of this love, share it with everyone you meet – friends, family, strangers and - Jesus dared to say - even with your enemies.

[Challenge]

As a way of thanking God for his love, who could you show love to today? Think of a generous act of kindness you could show someone without expecting a reward or recognition. Then go and do it!

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Remind yourself of how much God loves you. Think about some of the Bible verses we've looked at today. There is nothing that can separate you from God's love.

Spend some time thanking God for his love. Imagine that love filling you from head to foot, soaking into the very depths of who you are.

Tell God about your love for him, even if it may feel small in comparison.

Ask God to help you love others in the same way that he loves you. Talk to God about those you find difficult to love.

Ask God to help you love this planet as much as he does and to show that in the way you live.

'Dear Lord, we thank you for your immense love which surrounds and fills us. We thank you for the strength of your love which cannot be diminished, no matter what we do. Help us to receive your love and to then show that same love to others and to this world you have created, Amen.'

[Discuss]

What helps you to receive God's love? How do you demonstrate God's love to others?

[additional Bible verses]

- Isaiah 54:10 – God's love for us will never fail.
- Matthew 5:43-48 – Jesus challenges us to love those we consider our enemies.
- Ephesians 3:14-19 – Paul prays that people would know the full extent of God's love.
- Hebrews 12:6 – God's love means that he does challenge us.
- 1 John 4:7-21 – read the whole of John's amazing words about God's love.

11) VISION

Aim – To understand why we need vision; what it is, how we get it and what we do about it, both personally and corporately

[Teaser]

Paul says, 'I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.' Philippians 3:14

What's your vision for your life? What's your goal?

[Thought]

Where are you going in your life? That can be a scary question to think about, can't it? To grab hold of your future in God, there's one key thing you'll need to get you heading in the right direction, and that's vision. If someone can see perfectly, they are said to have 20/20 vision. Wouldn't it be great to have a 20/20 vision of where we are to go in life and what we are to do for God?

Sometimes that does happen. God speaks clearly in our hearts; through our conscience. He speaks through the Bible, through circumstance and through friends. Often though, we need a bit of assistance to see clearly what God has in store for us. Think of it like looking at a view through blurry binoculars; a few small adjustments to the lenses can bring your vision sharply into focus.

The first adjustment is to remember that **God made you** and knows exactly what you're like. Psalm 139:4 says "*before a word is on my tongue you know it completely.*" So he's likely to catch your attention in a way you can understand.

The second adjustment to help you have vision for your life is to realise that we don't always see or understand immediately. Often we need to **develop perseverance**. We need to spend time waiting on God, blocking out all distractions. So if you don't feel like you're hearing from God, persevere. Keep asking.

Sometimes though, our vision for our future is unclear because it's just too far away! For example, if you have a heart to serve God in Albania, you might have to wait until you're a little older, so there's no point buying a plane ticket now! However, you can still take some small steps towards your goal. You could buy a map of Albania and pray over it on your bedroom wall. Taking small steps toward a bigger vision helps you to check whether the big vision is the right one.

God gives each of us a **personal vision** for our lives, but we are called to live that out within a church community. We each need to find our own role in the kingdom of God, and to do that with the people of God.

Without personal vision, you'll be easily led by others. Without having a **corporate vision** – a vision that's shared by other people - you'll become unaccountable and lonely! The word for Church in the New Testament Greek is ekklesia, which translates to mean a team of 'called out' people with a common purpose or vision. How much do you know about the vision of your church? What part can you play?

Talking about vision may feel serious, but you don't need to worry about getting it wrong. If you pray, asking God to give you vision, then you need to trust that he will. It's easier for God to direct a moving object than a stationary one. Isaiah 30:21 says "*Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'*" God will show you the way you need to go, so trust him, sharpen your focus and follow your vision!

Finally, remember this: the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit brings vision. In Acts 2:17-18 we read that God will pour out his Spirit on all people, and that includes you. What happens when the Spirit is poured out? The people of God will dream dreams, and see visions. So pray for more of God's Holy Spirit in your life so you can get a glimpse of God's vision for his world and for you.

[Challenge]

Take a moment to think about your vision for your life, and write it down. If you don't have a clue where to start, then that will give you something to pray about! Pray about your vision, or your desire to have a clear vision for your life, offering it up to God and asking him to make it clear.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Picture yourself standing in a wide-open space with your past behind you and your future in front of you. Imagine Jesus standing just ahead of you, leading you into the future.

Thank God that he has your past, present and future in his hands; that he loves you and wants only what is best for you.

Ask God to give you a clear vision for your future. How does he want you to serve him? What gifts does he want you to use?

'Lord God, we thank you that you know us inside out. Thank you that you have exciting things ahead of us. Please give us a clearer vision of how you want us to serve you in the future. Amen.'

[Discuss]

What's your vision for your life? What steps have you taken to get closer to it?

[additional Bible verses]

- Mark 8:34-38 – Jesus explains that laying our lives down – like he did – needs to be part of our vision for the future
- Proverbs 29:18 – reminds us of the importance of vision
- Joel 2:28 – God promises to speak to us through dreams and visions
- Acts 26:12-20 – Paul speaks about being faithful to the vision God gave him
- Revelation 21:1-4 – God's ultimate vision for us is a future with him.

12) HUMILITY

Aim - To help us understand the source of humility and practice it more readily.

[Teaser]

Be completely humble and gentle (Ephesians 4:2) [NIV]

But what does it mean to be humble and why is it important?

[Thought]

People used different titles for Jesus in the gospels. He was called 'Rabbi', which means teacher. He was called 'Messiah' or 'Christ' which means he was God's anointed one. He was called 'Lord' which means 'leader' or 'boss'.

But the title which Jesus gave *himself* most often is '**Son of Man**'. In Mark's gospel that phrase is used more than 40 times. Why do you think Jesus used this title for himself more than any other? *Whilst in Daniel 7 the phrase is used to represent the divine, glorified, Messiah, it's also repeatedly used in the book of Ezekiel to represent a lowly human being. This is what we see in Jesus. He was fully God, because also He thoroughly identified himself with very ordinary people - people like you and me. Son of Man was a common phrase of the day. It was a way of saying: 'I'm one of you. I'm for you.'*

When you think of who Jesus *actually* is, it's a phrase full of humility. Jesus *is* the Son of God and yet he left his throne in heaven to come to earth to live among us. John 1:14 says 'The Word (that's Jesus) became flesh and blood and moved in to the neighbourhood.' Philippians 2:6-7 said that Jesus was equal with God but didn't want to use that to his own advantage, so came to live on earth, fully human and fully divine. Jesus is our great example of humility and if he was willing to humble himself then we must be willing to do the same.

So what does that look like? True humility is to have a right view of yourself before God, recognising that you're not better or worse than other people. We don't keep pointing to all that we've done right to show how great we are, and we don't keep rehearsing all that we've done wrong to show how useless we are.

To be humble is to have a right understanding of who we are before God, without any illusions; knowing that we are created by God, that we're loved by God, and that we're all sinners in need of God.

Without this, we can sometimes use the wrong things to make ourselves feel good. We can base our sense of self-worth on our achievements, or on the way we look, or the people we know. Sometimes we can end up putting other people down in order to feel better about ourselves. If we have a right view of ourselves before God however, none of this is necessary.

True humility is having a strong sense of who we are in God, with an honest recognition of our strengths and weaknesses. Romans 12:3 says "*Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.*"

So what does humility look like in practice? How can we be humble people?

Firstly, we need to be **secure in God's love**, knowing that we're valuable to him no matter what we do. Ephesians 2:7 says that we're saved by grace - which is a gift from God - not because of anything we've done. Ephesians 3:17-18 talks about the immense love that God has for us. We need to soak in that love until it's part of who we are.

Secondly we need to **think about other people's needs before our own**. Philippians 2:4 says, *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”* That doesn't mean we have to put ourselves down; remember what we said earlier about self-esteem and the need to love ourselves. We just need to make sure that we value other people more than we do ourselves.

Thirdly, we need to remember that real humility recognises that **none of us have got everything it takes**. We are part of a team, or as Paul puts it, members of a body. Humility recognises and rejoices in differences and the fact that others do some things better than us. When we're humble, we'll want other people to excel and do things well because that's better for our team effort. Be someone who encourages others and celebrates when they do things well, rather than wanting all the praise and glory for yourself. That's the road to a humble life.

[Challenge]

If we're honest, most of us like to be praised and celebrated. We like to be told that we've done something well. Humility is about wanting other people to experience that too. So think about who you could encourage and build up today. Has one of your friends done something really well that no one else has noticed? Think about how you could celebrate their achievement today and let them know that you think they're great!

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Spend a few moments thinking about the journey Jesus came on so that we could know him, from sitting on a throne at God's right hand to being born among farm animals as a human baby. Thank him for his willingness to come to our world in humility.

Then spend some time reminding yourself of how much God loves you. You belong to him, and you're precious to him. Ask God to give you a secure identity in him so that you don't need to depend on anything else to make yourself feel important.

Ask God to help you to be humble. Talk to him about specific situations where you might find this difficult.

'Lord Jesus, we thank you that you were willing to come to earth in humility to live among us. We thank you that you did that out of your love for us. Help us to be secure in that love, knowing who we are in you. Help us to be humble people, putting others first and finding our identity in you. In your name we pray, Amen.'

[Discuss]

How do you feel about this invitation to be humble? What do you think humility looks like in practice?

[additional Bible verses]

- Proverbs 29:23 – humility leads to honour.
- Micah 6:8 – God requires us to walk humbly.
- Matthew 23:1-12 – Jesus had harsh words to say about the religious leaders who tried to make themselves look important. If you don't humble yourself then God will!
- James 4:10 – if we humble ourselves before God then he will lift us up – we won't need to do it for ourselves!
- 1 Peter 5:5-7 – Peter tells us to put on humility; we can choose to wear it.

13) INTEGRITY

Aim - To explore the what, why and how of Godly integrity as an essential part of wholeness in Christ and relationship with God and others.

[Teaser]

Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but whoever is dishonest will be found out. (Proverbs 10:9) [NIV paraphrased]

What does it mean to have integrity and why is it important when you want to follow Jesus?

[Thought]

Integrity is a bit of an unusual word. It can be used when you're talking about people, and when you're talking about the properties of physical objects.

So if there's an earthquake, you might hear that a building is unsafe because its 'structural integrity' has been damaged. Or a politician who fiddled their expenses might be described as 'lacking in integrity'. So what is integrity and why is it important to God?

To have integrity is to be upright, honest, consistent, and trustworthy. It's all about '**wholeness of character**' whereas the opposite of integrity is a 'character with holes'. Integrity is about living a life where our **words and actions match up**, and where those words and actions are driven by a commitment to do the right thing. It's about being the **same person in every circumstance** and not faking it or wearing masks. It's a great quality to aim for – to be known for keeping your promises; for standing firm no matter what's happening around you.

In Matthew 23 Jesus launches an all-out assault on the respected leaders of the day – the Pharisees. Jesus makes it clear that there is a gaping hole in their character. They're **legalistic, proud, complacent, compromising, and hypocritical** – the very opposite of integrity.

Elsewhere in Matthew 7, Jesus said that anyone who hears his words and puts them into practice is like a man who built a house on solid rock. So integrity starts with listening to the words of Jesus and doing what he says.

If you have integrity then you're **consistent** – you're the same whatever situation you find yourself in. We say that people lack integrity when they behave differently in different situations. So if someone listens to Adele's music all the time at home, but then in front of his mates who can't stand her, pretends to hate the very music he loves – that's lacking in integrity. It's not being consistent.

Alongside that, having integrity is also about being **honest** – telling the truth. There should be no room for lies – not even what we sometimes call the 'white lies' that get us out of trouble!

Integrity then is about being upright, consistent and truthful. It's about living your daily life well; having nothing to hide.

Have you ever noticed that when you know you've wronged someone, it's hard to look them straight in the eye? That's because instinctively we know that what's inside us is not good – it's dark and we try and hide it. If we have integrity then we'll be able to look people in the eye without being afraid and without having anything to hide.

Why is integrity such an important quality for Christians to develop? Because **God has integrity**. All the words we've talked about are used of God in the Bible. Psalm 92:15 says that God is upright. James 1:17 says that God does not change like shifting

shadows – he’s consistent. Hebrews 6:18 says that it’s impossible for God to lie – he’s completely truthful.

It’s a high standard to live up to, isn’t it? But we have God’s spirit in us to help us change – it’s not something we have to do on our own.

[Challenge]

Your challenge today is to be on Integrity Alert! Ask yourself throughout the day whether you’re being upright, consistent and truthful. Ask God to help you to act with integrity, and to show you where you’re missing the mark.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Why not come to God in prayer and ask him to show you where you’re lacking in integrity?

Think back over the last 24 hours – can you say that you were upright, consistent and truthful? Ask God to show you where you missed the mark. You’ll find that God brings to mind the times when you’ve twisted the truth, or lacked consistency, or not stood firm.

Talk to God about those times, and say sorry. Ask God to help you to change.

Lord, we thank you that Jesus was a man of total integrity and set us such a great example. Help us listen to the words of Jesus and put them into practice so that we are standing on solid ground, consistent and truthful. Help us to be people of integrity who show those around us what you’re like. Amen.

[Discuss]

Can you think of people you know who have integrity? Where have you seen it in their lives?

[additional Bible verses]

- Genesis 39:6-12 – Joseph rejects the sexual advances of his master’s wife because he has total integrity.
- 1 Kings 9:1-5 – God challenged King Solomon to be a person of integrity like his father David, and said that God would bless him if he was.
- Job 2:3 – Job was the most upstanding follower of God – and even when he was put to the harshest test, he kept his integrity
- Daniel 6:5-12 – Daniel continues to pray to God even when it becomes illegal to do so; even though it means he may die as a result.
- Matthew 22:16 – Jesus was known as someone who had integrity, who wasn’t swayed by what others thought.

14) GENEROSITY

Aim – to learn more about the generous nature of God and how we can be generous in return.

[Teaser]

A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. (Proverbs 11:25)

But surely if you give things away you won't have anything left? How can generous people prosper?

[Thought]

Generosity is the habit of giving freely without expecting anything in return. The Bible says in Proverbs 11:25 that **a generous person will prosper**. That means that they'll be successful and do really well. So how does that work? If you give stuff away freely, surely you'll be left with nothing - or very little?

We can be generous or stingy with anything that we have. With our money; with our friendship; with our time; with our energy; with our kindness; with our love; with our forgiveness; with our possessions... the list goes on!

Whenever we are being generous we are being a little bit like God. God made us so that he could be generous to us, to bless us with good things. You can see in the very first chapter of the Bible how **God generously made all things**. This generosity of God goes right the way through the Old Testament to its end – just look at Malachi 3:10 for evidence of that.

It doesn't end there though. It starts again in the New Testament, in Matthew 5:1-12 with the ten-part blessing Jesus gives on a mountaintop. In effect he's re-writing the ten commandments! This generosity and blessing continues right the way through the New Testament.

God is so generous to us - even giving us his own Son - so that we can be generous to others. We are **blessed**, in order **to be a blessing**.

As you might expect, Jesus is our role model in this. Paul quotes Jesus' in Acts 20:35 as saying "*it is better to give than to receive*". Do you believe that? Have you experienced it? It doesn't matter if you can't give a lot because you haven't got a lot – it's your **heart attitude**, and the sacrifice that you make, that counts.

Jesus makes this really clear in Luke 21 verses 1-4 when he's at the temple observing the rich people putting in their offering. He compares their giving with the giving of a poor widow. Jesus says that it was the widow who gave the most, because she gave out of what she didn't have, while the rich people gave out of great wealth, still keeping lots for themselves. She was the most generous. Her sacrifice was the greatest.

In Philippians 2:5, Paul reminds us that we are to have the same attitude as Jesus himself, and this word 'attitude' literally means 'to think or feel or do'. So when it comes to being generous, giving anything away or blessing others, we are to think, feel and do the same as Jesus.

Generosity was one of the hallmarks of the early church. Just like a hallmark in a gold ring gives evidence of the origin and purity of the gold, so too generosity is one of the hallmarks of the Kingdom of God and of his church. In Acts 2:42-47 you'll read a fantastic, and very challenging, description of the early church putting generosity into practice.

The truth is, as Psalm 24:1 says, *“the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world and all who live it”*. God owns the lot. It’s not yours; it’s all his. We need to give all we have back to God and then see what bits of time, energy, money, gifts and so on he lends back to us. All of this is so that we can be generous to others.

Remember, you’ll never be able to out-give God. Jesus himself said in Luke 6:38: *“Give and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full—pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. The amount you give will determine the amount you get back.”* Now there’s a challenge.

[Challenge]

Who can you be generous to today? Think about how you could be generous with your time, by spending it doing something for someone without expecting anything in return. Perhaps you could sit and listen to a friend who is having a hard time. Perhaps you could do some cleaning for someone else. Think of one thing and make plans to do it.

Then think about how you can be generous with your money or possessions. Maybe you could take some of your clothes or DVDs to a charity shop. Or you could sponsor someone that you know is doing an event to raise money. Again, decide what you’re going to do and then do it.

As much as you can, do those things in secret. Don’t expect huge thanks in return, but know that God has seen your generosity, and that you’re starting an excellent habit!

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Spend some time thanking God for being so generous and giving us a beautiful world to live in - for giving us his son Jesus to save us, and for filling our lives with love, forgiveness and grace.

Then continue to thank God some more – be generous with your praise!

Talk to God about your desire to be generous and the ways in which you are planning to act generously. Ask God to give you a generous spirit and to help you develop a habit of being generous.

‘Generous God, we thank you for all you have given us – a beautiful world that we can call home, your son Jesus who gave up his life for us, and the love, forgiveness and grace that you pour into our lives day after day after day. Help us to learn from your generosity and to be more like you. Help us to live generous lives, giving freely to others without expecting anything in return. In the name of your son, Jesus, Amen.’

[Discuss]

When have you been on the receiving end of generosity? When have you given generously?

[additional Bible verses]

- Genesis 12:1-3 - the original responsibility of God’s people was to recognise that they were blessed to be a blessing.
- Psalm 112:5 – be generous and good things will come to you.
- Romans 8:32 – reminds us about the God who gave up his son and will supply our needs.
- 2 Corinthians 9 – if you give generously, then you’ll receive generosity from God!
- James 1:5 - if anyone lacks wisdom, they should pray to God who gives generously.

15) PRAYER

Aim - To discover how to deepen a relationship with God through prayer, and to explore different ways of praying

[Teaser]

Pray continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17) [NIV]

But what exactly is prayer and how do we do it?

[Thought]

Most people at some point in their lives will pray to God, even if they don't have a faith or rarely go to church. It might be a prayer of desperation: 'please help me with my exam!' Or of anger: 'why me God?'. It might be a prayer of gratitude: 'thank God for that', but pretty much everyone prays.

Prayer is direct communication with God, and one of the key ways that we get to know him. Imagine trying to get to know someone without talking to them or hearing what they have to say. Think of prayer as a conversation with God where you speak to him about the things on your heart and learn to listen for what he has to say.

Even though prayer is common, there is always more we can learn about it. Jesus' disciples would have grown up in the Jewish faith where prayer was a regular part of their lives, but when they saw Jesus praying, they realised that the way he prayed was different. In Luke 11:1 they asked Jesus, 'Lord, teach us to pray'.

Jesus taught them perhaps the greatest and most famous prayer of all time; it's come to be known as The Lord's Prayer. It's a prayer we can use word for word, but it's also a really good pattern to follow in our prayers, because it explains the kinds of things we can and should bring to God in prayer. You can find the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13. Let's go through it phrase by phrase and explore what it teaches us about prayer.

Our father in heaven – this reminds us that God is our father and he loves us. Prayer starts with a relationship. We're not approaching a distant scary god, we're coming to talk to our heavenly dad who knows us inside out.

Hallowed by your name – God is so worthy of our praise and worship. Telling him how great he is in prayer reminds us of who we are praying to, and gives us more faith.

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven – this encourages us to pray that more of heaven will break out on the earth – right here, right now.

Give us today our daily bread – it's okay to ask our Heavenly Dad for what we need, rather than just what we want, for each day. He has promised to provide for us. Note though that we don't start with what we want. Prayer is not a shopping list!

Forgive us our sins - we're all broken. We all selfishly put ourselves first sometimes. We all hurt others and damage ourselves. This hurts God. So we need to own up, apologise, and choose again to be different. We don't need to live with guilt because God always forgives us when we are genuinely sorry.

As we also have forgive those who have sinned against us – it's no good asking God to forgive you if you bear a grudge against someone else! Choose to forgive them and pray for them.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil – we can ask God to keep us safe from harm and keep us close to him. We can tell him about specific things that are troubling us.

It can be helpful to use this as a pattern for prayer because it stops us focusing on ourselves and reminds us who God is. You can spend as long as you like on each section of the prayer, telling God all your concerns.

However, prayer is not all one-way traffic. We need to learn to listen to God as well. Being quiet in God's presence and simply just 'being' is really important too. Gradually we will learn to hear God's voice. You might choose to use the Lord's Prayer as a pattern for your time in prayer and then spend five or ten minutes in quiet, just being with God.

Prayer is a journey that draws us closer to God. You'll continue to learn about prayer throughout your life so don't hesitate – get stuck in!

[Challenge]

Use the Lord's Prayer as a structure for your prayers over the coming week. Choose a regular time of day that suits you; some people prefer first thing in the morning; others pray before they go to sleep. Find the prayer in Matthew 6:9-13, and go through it one phrase at a time. Say the phrase and then add your own words, expanding on that theme. Make a note of things that you pray for and anything that you sense God is saying to you.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Spend some time thanking God that he is your father, that his heart is full of love for you.

Thank God for the gift of prayer. Ask him to teach you how to pray.

What is on your mind at the moment? Bring it to God in prayer. Tell God how you feel and what you long for.

'Loving Father, thank you that we can come to you just as we are. We don't need to pretend; you welcome us with open arms. Teach us to pray, Lord, so that we can have a strong relationship with you, secure in your love and aware of what you want us to do. In the name of Jesus, Amen.'

[Discuss]

How do you pray? What's your favourite time and place to pray.

[additional Bible verses]

- 2 Chronicles 7:14-15 – God inspires us to humble ourselves and pray for healing of our land.
- Matthew 7:7-11 – Jesus commands us to ask and keep asking, knock and keep knocking, seek and keep seeking.
- Matthew 18:19-20 – getting together with other people to pray is really powerful.
- Romans 8:26-27 – sometimes we can't find the right words to pray but God's Spirit prays for us and God understands exactly what we want to say.
- Philippians 4:6-7 – God doesn't want us to be anxious about anything but to bring our concerns to him.

16) READING THE BIBLE

Aim - to engage meaningfully and in a variety of ways with scripture.

[Teaser]

The word of God is alive and active (Hebrews 4:12) [NIV]

What do you make of the Bible?

[Thought]

Christians believe that the Bible isn't just any old book; it's actually God's word to us. It has been carefully passed down from generation to generation and lovingly translated so that as many people as possible can benefit from its life-bringing wisdom.

The Bible tells us about God's involvement with humanity right from the beginning of time. It's not just some instruction manual for life. It's **God's great story**, showing us how we fit into the big picture and how God wants to continue to work in our lives. It's full of principles that we can follow to make life work better. It's full of stories of people who have followed God which we can learn from. In its pages we can discover what God is like and how he wants to be in relationship with us. And we get pointers to the future, telling us what lies ahead for us. All that in one book!

2 Timothy 3:16 says that *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."* The Bible is a practical book, designed to make a difference to our lives.

In fact the Bible isn't just one book; it's a library of 66 books. Some of them are **historical accounts**; some are **letters** that people wrote to the early church; some are **poetry and songs**; some are full of **wise sayings**; some tell us about the **life of Jesus**. It's important to understand the nature of each bit that we're reading.

Because there's so much in the Bible, it can be hard to know where to start. So how can you get the most out of the Bible? Here are some tips.

First, there's no single *right* way to read the Bible; you need to find out what suits you. First thing in the morning or last thing at night? As much as you can or a few verses at a time? On your own or with friends? You need to experiment to find out what works for you.

Second, don't start at the beginning and expect to read it all the way through to the end. As it's a library of books, you can choose which order to read them in. Mark's gospel is a great place to start where you can find out more about the life of Jesus.

Third, quality is better than quantity. Don't feel you have to read huge chunks in one sitting. Getting stuck into a few verses and thinking through how they apply to you is more valuable. Psalm 119:103 says that God's word is sweeter than honey. Make sure you really taste it! Ask the Holy Spirit to really help you get into it.

Find a version of the Bible that's easy to understand. For example, the New Living Translation is a version that puts God's truth into today's language.

Don't be afraid to mark your Bible. Highlight verses that stand out for you. Write questions and explanations in the margins.

Try to memorise some of the verses you read – perhaps memorise one verse a week. That way you'll be able to feed on God's truth even if you haven't got a Bible to hand.

If you find something you don't understand, make a note of it and ask another Christian about it. Don't be afraid to ask questions about the Bible.

You may find it helpful to use Bible reading notes. These will suggest a passage to read each day and will have some explanation to go with it. Talk to someone at your church and ask them to help you find some.

Reading the Bible in a group is really helpful. You can ask questions and find out what other people think. Ask at your church to see if there's a group designed for you, and if not see if someone will start one!

And persevere – there will be some days when you won't get much out of what you're reading and you'll find it hard to understand. Spending time in God's word is always beneficial however. Proverbs 3:1-7 describes it as good medicine that will make us healthy!

Finally, remember the acronym SOAP:

S is for '**Scripture**' – read it

O is for '**Observation**' – what did you observe when you read the Bible?

A is for '**Application**' – how can you apply what you've observed to your life?

P is for '**Prayer**' – pray that God, by His Spirit, His word will change your life.

What are you waiting for? Build some passionate Bible reading habits - starting today - and discover God's great story and his invitation to you to play your part.

[Challenge]

Your challenge is to read the Bible every day for the next week. Start with the gospel of Mark, and read one chapter each day. Write down one thing you've learned, one question you have, and one thing God might be asking you to do. At the end of the week, decide how you'll continue!

[Prayer]

(pauses to pray between phrases)

Spend some time thanking God for the Bible.

Talk to God about your feelings about the Bible – are you excited at the thought of reading it? Or bored? Confused? You can be honest.

Ask God to open up his word to you, to help you understand what it says and what he wants you to do with what you read.

'Lord God, we thank you for your word, the Bible, and all the wisdom it contains. Please open up your word to us, and show us your truth. Speak to us through the Bible and help us to put into practice what we read. In the name of Jesus, Amen.'

[Discuss]

What's your top tip for getting stuck into the Bible?

[additional Bible verses]

- Psalm 1:1-3 – meditating on God's word brings lots of blessings!
- Psalm 119:9-11 – God's word keeps us from sinning.
- Psalm 119:105 – God's word will show us the right way to go through life.
- Luke 4:16-21 – Jesus had a lot of respect for the scriptures which make up our Old Testament.
- Hebrews 4:12– The writer speaks about how the Bible has power to cut to the real issues in our lives.

17) CHURCH

Aim – to help people to understand the importance of church and why they need to be part of it.

[Teaser]

Don't give up the habit of meeting together (Hebrews 10:25) [NIV]

Are you in the habit of meeting with other Christians at church?

[Thought]

What does the word 'church' mean? If you look it up in a dictionary the first definition it will give you will be a building or place of worship. 'Church' for most people has become a place, somewhere you 'go to'. People might ask you 'where is your church?' or even 'how many churches are there in your town?'

Yet in the New Testament 'Church' is a much more active word, describing something that you do, something that you are. So as a Christian, you don't 'go' to church – **you are the church** when you meet up with other believers in Jesus' name. Church is the people, not the place. The church is **the people of God on the mission of God**. Jesus said that where two or three people gathered in his name, he would be there with them (Matthew 18:20). So Jesus comes to be the church with us.

That means that being a Christian is not a solo sport like rock climbing. It's a team activity like football. There's no fun and little point playing football on your own – you need a team. In the same way, all Christians need to be part of a church. Hebrews 10:25 says: *"Let's not give up the habit of meeting together; let's encourage one another."*

Jesus said in Matthew 16:18 that he would build his church. There is only one church of Jesus on the earth, but there are lots of different expressions of it. Churches are often grouped into denominations, for example there are Methodist Churches, Baptist and Anglican churches, New Churches, and more. Each one will have a slightly different emphasis and often they will have different styles of worship, leadership structure and so on.

With so many different types of churches, how do you make a good choice?

There's a really helpful passage in Acts 2:42-47 that describes what the very first church was like. It gives us ten things to look for in a growing church.

(1) It says that the first Christians devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, so good **Bible-based teaching** is really important. (2) They were also committed to forming close, **supportive friendships** based on being generous to each other. (3) They regularly **celebrated communion** together, remembering Jesus' death and resurrection. (4) **Prayer** was an important part of the church's life.

(5) They expected to **see God work supernaturally** among them, to answer prayers and heal people. (6) They **shared** their life and possessions with each other and gave to people in need. (7) They **met together** as the whole church in large groups, and also in smaller groups where people could get to know each other better. (8) They actively praised and **worshipped God**. (9) They **served the community** around them and were well regarded. (10) They saw lots of **people becoming Christians** and joining their church. Those are ten signs of an active, healthy and growing church!

No church is perfect of course, and sometimes it can seem hard work to get on with everyone and to find ways of worshipping and learning that suit so many different people. It's worth persevering though, because that's how Jesus wants us to be.

Always remember how important you are to the church. Just as a body finds it hard to function with only one arm, or without an eye, so the church will be much worse off without you.

[Challenge]

It can be easy to find all the things that are wrong with your church! If that's true for you, then decide that for the next month you will have a positive attitude. Each time you go along, look for something to be thankful for. Make a point of saying something positive about the service or activity to your church leader. Say hello to someone you haven't talked to before. Find out if there's anything you can do to help such as serving coffee or putting out the chairs on a Sunday morning.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

If you belong to a church, start by thanking God for the people who are part of it with you.

Ask God to help you to be an active part of the church, working with others to get to know God better and to serve him.

If you're not part of a church, talk to God about what keeps you away. Ask God to help you find a church where you can feel at home and contribute.

'Jesus, thank you that when we meet together in your name, you are there with us. Help us to play an active part in the churches you've called us to belong to, welcoming others in your name. Amen.'

[Discuss]

What's the best thing about your church? How could it be better? If you don't go to church, what kind of church are you looking for? .

[additional Bible verses]

- Romans 12:3-5 – as a church, we're all part of something greater than ourselves.
- 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 – Paul describes the church as a body – every part is important!
- Ephesians 5:25-27 - Jesus loves the church – that's you and me!
- Colossians 1:17-20 – Christ himself is the head of the church.
- 1 Peter 2:4-12 – Peter describes the church as a like a house – we're all stones built on the foundation that is Jesus.

18) WORSHIP

Aim - To explain and explore the nature of worship for the Christian; to encourage and provoke its development personally and corporately

[Teaser]

Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.

(Romans 12:1) [The Message]

What is worship all about and why is it important?

[Thought]

You've probably heard the word 'worship' lots of times. But have you ever stopped to think about what it is and why we do it?

The dictionary definition of worship is giving honour and devotion to someone or something. The Bible talks a lot about the worship of God, so let's explore why and how we can do that.

First of all, we worship God **because he's worth it!** Psalm 145:3 says "*Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom.*" The more we understand about God; about who he is and what he has done for us, the more we'll want to worship him. That worship will overflow from the thankfulness in our hearts.

A man came up to Jesus once and asked him: what is the most important thing to do in life? Jesus replied, in Mark 12:30-31, by saying "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second command is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'*"

We **love God with the whole of our being** – that's worship. Then as we get closer to God, we start loving the things he loves. We love people. We love God's world.

Clearly there are times when we gather with other Christians to worship, whether that's in church, another group or in someone's home. Worship however should be a way of life rather than a one-off event.

If we love the things God loves then we will **love justice, generosity, kindness and goodness** - which means that we will want to see more of these things happening in our world.

Equally, we will **hate** the things God hates. Things like **poverty, homelessness, famine, oppression, brokenness, sickness, suffering**. Our worship of God will drive us into action to see these things change.

God reminds us very powerfully in Amos 5:23-24 that worship is not just about singing. It's all about **seeing God's justice and righteousness break out** all over the world.

Romans 12:1-2 invites us to offer our whole selves as a living sacrifice to God, which, it says, is our true worship. So we can offer each part of our day to God in worship: our time at work or in education, our friendships and relationships, our mealtimes, what we wear, how we relate to people and so on.

We won't always feel like worshipping God, but it's important for us to have the willpower to do it anyway. As we start to worship, our feelings will fall into line. In Psalm 103 David says "*Praise the Lord, my soul.*" He seems to be talking to himself, stirring himself up to worship, reminding himself of all the amazing things God has done for him.

We're not on our own when it comes to worship. When Jesus talked about worship in John 4:24, he said that God is Spirit and that his worshippers must **worship in Spirit and in truth**. So the Holy Spirit helps us in our worship. He's the Spirit of creativity, who was hovering over the world at the creation, and who inspires and fills our worship of God.

People can worship many different things and we need to watch for that temptation in our own lives. When Jesus was being tempted in the wilderness, the devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said *"If you worship me I will give you all their authority and splendour"* (Luke 4:6). Jesus was quick to say that he was going to worship only God, but this temptation from the devil shows that whatever we choose to worship - whether good or bad - will have some authority over us.

Worship your partner and they'll become your number one, whereas God should be your number. Worship your image or style and you'll be captive to vanity and comparison, rather than focussing on bringing glory to God.

So learn to give yourself to God in worship, to stir up your heart and offer all that you have to him. True worship is loving God, loving what he loves and hating what he hates.

May your worship inspire you to embrace God's mission to bring hope, help and healing to a broken world.

[Challenge]

Write a psalm of worship to God, telling him how great he is. Lots of the psalms are acrostic poems – each line starts with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. See if you can think of a word to describe God beginning with each letter of our alphabet, and let that lead you into worship.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

These verses are from the beginning of Psalm 100. Use them to worship God.

*"Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come before him with joyful songs.
Know that the Lord is God.
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture."*

'Lord, there aren't enough words in the world to express our love for you. You are worthy of all our worship and praise. Help us to worship you with all of our lives. Amen.'

[Discuss]

What's your favourite way of worshipping God.

[additional Bible verses]

- 2 Samuel 6:14 - King David was so caught up in worshipping God that he danced before the Lord with all his might and he didn't care that his wife was sneering at him.
- Isaiah 58:6-14 - God reminds us that our worship should drive us to embrace His agenda of justice in the world.
- Matthew 6:5-8 - Don't become something in public to impress others that you are not in private.
- James 4:8 – When we worship God, he comes closer to us.
- Revelation 4:11 – We worship because God is worth our worship – because of who he is and what he has done.

19) SERVING

Aim - to develop an understanding of why and who we serve, and to grow in the desire to do so.

[Teaser]

Jesus said to his disciples, 'Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant.' (Matthew 20:26) [NIV]

What does it mean to serve, and why does Jesus want us to do it?

[Thought]

If we're honest we live in a very selfish world where everyone wants to meet their own needs above everyone else's. Life can easily be all about getting, rather than giving. So talking about serving might not seem to be very exciting or attractive! Let's be clear right from the beginning then: if you are a follower of Jesus, then you're called to be a servant. What's more, this is a fine, honourable, acceptable and enjoyable thing to be and to do. Let's look at three reasons why this is so.

First, **we serve because Jesus is the Boss.** We know that he has rescued us from sin and selfishness; from death and destruction. This is why the Bible calls him our Saviour, because he saved us! Even his name, Jesus, means Rescuer of God's people. However, for every time that the Bible calls Jesus our Saviour there are nine more times that it calls him our Lord, which literally means "Boss". If Jesus is our Boss then we have to choose whether to obey him and serve him. In John 12:26 Jesus said, *"If any of you wants to serve me, then follow me. Then you'll be where I am, ready to serve at a moment's notice. The Father will honour and reward anyone who serves me."*

Second, **we serve because that's the example that Jesus set for us.** In Philippians 2:5-8, Paul tells us to have the same attitude that Jesus did. He says that Jesus *"being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death on a cross."* Before Jesus came to earth, he was ruling the universe at God's side with everything under his command. He chose to put all of that to one side and to come to earth as a servant.

Then, when he was here on earth, he also chose to serve his disciples. Just before he died, he shared a special meal with his friends in a room they had borrowed for the occasion. You can read about it in John 13. In those days, people wore sandals, and their feet would get very dirty and smelly during the day. Normally when you went to someone's house, a servant would wash your feet as a sign of welcome. Jesus and his disciples didn't have any servants to do that job. You can imagine them looking at one another, thinking 'I wish there was someone here to wash my feet!' None of them seemed willing to do it for each other. Then Jesus surprised them all by getting up, pouring water into a basin and washing their feet one by one. Here was the creator of the universe doing the job of the lowliest servant!

Jesus could do that because he was secure in who he was. In John 13:3 it says that Jesus knew who he was, where he had come from and where he was going. He knew that his identity didn't come from what he did, but from who he was. So he was happy to serve his friends and to set us an amazing example.

The third reason why we serve is because **Jesus has told us to.** In Matthew 20:20-28, the mother of two of Jesus' disciples – James and John – came and asked if her boys could be rulers in Jesus' coming kingdom. Jesus said in response: *"whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, just as the Son of Man didn't come to be served but to serve."*

So serving is an honourable thing to do; something we do because we love Jesus and want to be more like him. We serve him, secure in our identity as God's children, not as slaves but as Jesus' friends. Who can you serve today?

[Challenge]

Are you up for some Secret Service? Think about who you can serve today. What could you do for someone that would make them really happy? Think about the kinds of tasks that have to be done but people generally don't enjoy, like washing up, hoovering, doing the ironing or cleaning the toilets! Don't go for the easy option – choose something that will benefit someone else not you! Decide what you're going to do and then go and do it in secret, not expecting any reward or praise but choosing to serve because that's what Jesus wants you to do.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Start by thanking Jesus for his example of service in coming to earth as a human being.

Thank God for your identity in him, that you are his child and loved by him.

Ask God to help you to serve others willingly, with a glad heart.

Talk to God about the opportunities you will have to serve others over the next few days. Ask him to help you to be a blessing to others.

'Jesus, we thank you for the example of service that you gave us. Thank you that you were willing to leave the majesty and power you had in heaven and to come to earth as a human. Help us to serve others with a willing heart in obedience to you. In your name, Amen.'

[Discuss]

What does it feel like when someone serves you? What acts of service have you performed recently?

[additional Bible verses]

- Joshua 24:14-15 – presents a challenge about whether we will serve God or something else.
- 1 Samuel 12:24 - we serve God as we remember all that he has done for us.
- Luke 22:24-27 – Jesus came to earth as someone who serves.
- Galatians 5:13-14 – God has set us free from sin and guilt; we need to use that freedom to serve others.
- 1 Peter 4:10 – we need to use our gifts to serve others.

20) GIVING

Aim - To grow in understanding and practice of the spiritual discipline of giving

[Teaser]

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. (Luke 6:38) [NIV]

How generous are you?

[Thought]

Today's topic is something that we love other people to do for us; but which is more challenging when we do it for other people. Sound mysterious? I'm talking about *giving*. We love it when people give to us, but how good are we at giving to other people... and to God?

The first thing to realise when we think about giving is that **God wants the whole of your life**. He wants your time, your energy, your relationships, your future, your past and your finances. Because God gave it all to you in the first place. Psalm 24:1 says 'The Earth is the Lord's and everything in it.' When we give, we're just giving back to God what he has already given to us.

But the Bible also specifically talks about giving away our time and money to God. Right from the start of the Bible in Genesis 2:1, we're asked to keep the Sabbath – to give one day a week over to God. From very early on in the Bible, in Leviticus 27:30-34, the Israelites were asked to give one tenth of everything they produced to Him.

Have you ever thought about why God needs our time and money? Is it that he's understaffed and can't get things done if we don't help? Or that he's suffering in the recession and is a bit short of cash at the moment?

Of course not! The point of giving our time and money to God is to increase our dependency on him. It stops us trusting in our wealth, or our ability to provide for ourselves, and helps us to put our trust in God.

So how much should we give? A good place to start is by looking at the guidelines given in the Old Testament – which asked the people to give God one seventh of their time, and one tenth of their money. The point is – start somewhere – and then every year try and grow your generosity.

You might feel you don't have much money and you can't afford to give, but the real question is this: can you afford **not** to give, if that's what God asks us to do? Let's be generous when we give, because **God has been extraordinarily generous to us**.

Giving is a real test of what is most important to us. Jesus said in Matthew 6:21 that "*where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*" If material things like having the latest phone are what is most important to us, then that's what will own our hearts. But the opposite is also true; if we make Jesus our heart's desire then that's where we'll invest our time and money.

So what should we give our money to? Again, the Old Testament gives us some good principles that are still relevant. The Israelites gave offerings that provided for the priests who served God in the temple (see Leviticus 6 and 7). So we should give to our local church to support our church leaders and the work that the church does in our community.

They were also encouraged to be generous to the poor, the weak and the powerless, which in those days meant the widows and orphans (Exodus 22:22). We also need to give to the poorest in our world, whether that's in our own country, or overseas.

Remember, **you can NEVER out-give God**. Jesus said in Luke 6:38: *“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”*

There are so many reasons why we should give...

- Because we're thankful to God
- Because it shows we're trusting God for our lives
- Because there are many needs in the world
- Because – ultimately - Jesus commands us to do it

So commit to a life of giving and discover, as Paul quotes Jesus in Acts 20:35, that it is **more blessed to give than to receive**.

[Challenge]

Your challenge today is to give something away. It could be money, it could be your time when you do something for someone; it could be that chocolate bar in your pocket.

Decide what you're going to give and then give it cheerfully

– God wants us to give with joy! Then, over the next few weeks, think about how you can get into the habit of giving.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

You can talk to God about how you feel about giving.

Start by thanking God for all he has given you – this beautiful world we live in, your friends and family, the gift of his son Jesus. There's so much to thank God for.

Then acknowledge that everything you have is God's anyway. Think about your most treasured possessions – they all belong to God.

Ask God to help you use what he's given you wisely. Ask him to help you to be generous in your giving. Choose to trust that God will provide for you.

'Father God, you have given me so much. Thank you for your generosity: that you provide all I need. Help me to become more generous; to give my time and money freely and cheerfully. Amen

[Discuss]

How do you feel about the thought of giving away your money and time? Worried? Happy? Cross?

[additional Bible verses]

- Proverbs 11:24 – This proverb underlines God's economic policy; that we receive in line with what we give.
- Malachi 3:10 – God actually invites us to test his generosity out – to discover the principle that you can't outgive God!
- Matthew 6:25-34 – Jesus tells us to trust God to provide for us – he knows what we need.
- Luke 21:1-4 – Don't worry if you haven't got much to give; Jesus praises a woman who gave just two small coins.
- 2 Corinthians 9:6-8 – God loves us to give generously and cheerfully!

21) WITNESSING

Aim – to equip people to share their faith more effectively.

[Teaser]

How can people have faith in Jesus and ask him to save them if they have never heard about him? (Romans 10:14) [CEV]

So whose job is it to tell people about Jesus?

[Thought]

How did you find out about Jesus? Think about the journey that led you to commit your life to him. Who were the people involved?

Now think about the people around you who don't know Jesus. How are they going find out about who Jesus is and what he has done for them?

The answer is through ordinary Christians like you. Telling people about Jesus is your responsibility and your privilege.

Jesus made that clear in the last words he said to his disciples. In Matthew 28:19-20 he said: *"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."*

The good news about Jesus is to be like ripples on a pond that spread out until the whole world is reached. Jesus' original disciples were to make more disciples, who made more disciples and so on until the good news reached us. Now it's our turn to pass it on.

Why do we need to do that? Firstly, because that's the **mission** that Jesus has given us in Matthew 28:19-20. Secondly, because Jesus **loves** everyone in this world and wants everyone to come to know him. 2 Peter 3:9 says that God is patient and wants everyone to turn from sin, so that no-one is lost. Thirdly, Jesus wants everyone to **hear** the good news about him before he returns, so the quicker we tell people, the sooner he'll come back and all pain, sin, sickness and suffering will end.

Those are three pretty compelling reasons, aren't they? If we're honest though, telling people about Jesus can be difficult. We can be scared that we'll be rejected, that we'll get it wrong, that people will laugh at us, or that we won't be able to answer their questions.

We need to remember that we're not alone in this. Jesus has given us his Spirit who will help us communicate. Jesus told his disciples in Luke 12:12 that the Holy Spirit would give them the words they needed to say whenever they found themselves in difficult situations.

In Acts 1:8 Jesus told his disciples that they would be his witnesses all over the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. A witness simply shares their experience: their story. You might not have all the answers but you can't deny the difference that God is making in your life.

So how can we share the good news about Jesus with our friends? First we need to **accept** that it is our job. Are you up for the challenge? Then we need to **pray** that Jesus will give us his love and compassion for our friends and family who don't know him, and that he will draw people to himself.

We need to be good friends to them, showing the difference that Jesus has made in our lives through our actions. We need to have courage to tell our story, what we've experienced of Jesus. "This is how I was... This is what Jesus did and how... This is now how I am." We need too to be bold to invite friends to our church. Remember, actions speak louder than words, but be prepared to explain your actions.

You have a great opportunity and privilege to tell people about the commitment you have made. Ask Jesus to give you the words to say, the opportunity to say them, and the courage to go for it!

[Challenge]

Choose one person who you would love to come to know Jesus. Pray for them and for yourself – that God would be at work in them by his Spirit, and that he would give you opportunities to share your faith. Commit to praying this every day for the next week, and wait to see what God will do!

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Remember that you are not on your own when it comes to sharing your faith. God has given you the gift of his Spirit to empower you.

Start by thanking God that he has saved you and given you new life. Thank him for the people who were involved in bringing you to Jesus.

Bring to God your friends and family who don't know Jesus. Ask him to be at work in their hearts and to help you share your faith with them.

Pray for one or two people specifically – that God would give you opportunities in the next week to talk to them about Jesus.

'Lord God, we thank you for the new life you have given us. Help us to share the amazing story of what Jesus has done with our friends and family. Please work in them by your Spirit so they are ready to respond. Help us to have courage, to be gentle and wise, and to talk about our experience of you. In Jesus name, Amen.'

[Discuss]

How did you become a Christian? Ask people to pray for you as you share your faith with your friends.

[additional Bible verses]

- Matthew 5:16 – Jesus tells us that the way we live our lives can point people to God.
- Acts 1:6-8 – Jesus reminds us we are to be his witnesses all over the world in the power of the Spirit.
- 2 Corinthians 5:11-21 – Paul explains that we are Christ's representatives.
- 1 Timothy 4:12 – the different ways in which we set an example in our faith.
- 1 Peter 3:15-16 - always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you about the hope you have.

22) SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Aim – to explore the nature and purpose of God's gifts to us.

[Teaser]

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 14:1) [NIV]

But what are the gifts of the Spirit and why should we want them?

[Thought]

Most of us love receiving gifts, but all over the UK there are various postal depots filled with undeliverable parcels and packages. Huge piles of valuable stuff - of badly wrapped or mis-addressed birthday, Christmas and wedding presents. Gifts galore!

Wouldn't it be great to be let loose in one of those warehouses? Also though, isn't it really sad to see all those good things that never got to their destination? They were never received by the people they were meant for.

In Matthew 7:10-11 Jesus compares our earthly dads with God, our loving heavenly father. He says: *"If one of your children asks you for bread, how many of you would give her a stone? Even though you're broken people, you know how to look after your children well. How much more will your heavenly father give good gifts to those who ask him!"*

God loves to give us gifts. It would be tragic, and such a waste, if God ended up with a huge heavenly pile of gifts that he had always longed for you to have, but which you never chose to believe or receive. So let's think some more about the gifts God gives us.

Firstly, **God has gifted you because of the way he has made you.** In other words, you are naturally gifted by design in ways that other people are not. That's why comparison to others is a dead end and should be a 'no go' area. God doesn't want you to be like anyone else; he wants you to discover and use the natural gifts he has given you – things like being good at a sport, or an academic subject, or making friends, or being artistic. These are gifts that we can carry on discovering and developing throughout our lives.

God has also given us gifts through his Holy Spirit. These are gifts that go beyond our natural gifting and are like tools to get God's jobs done; they're called super-natural gifts. The gifts that the Holy Spirit gives probably need a bit more unwrapping. Have a good look at the list of gifts found in 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 and Romans 12:3-8. These don't provide a complete list but are a good place to start to understand some of the Holy Spirit tools that God wants to give us so we can better help and serve others.

One such gift is a **word of wisdom** - this is a word or phrase from God, beyond the experience, natural ability or wisdom of the speaker, which unlocks a difficult, tense or challenging situation. Jesus used this gift when a crowd of angry men brought to him a woman who had been caught in adultery in John 8. The law said that she should be stoned to death and so the men wanted to know what Jesus would do. Jesus thought for a while and then said 'anyone without sin should throw the first stone.' The men disappeared one by one without hurting the woman; they knew that they couldn't claim to be without sin. Jesus' word of wisdom defused the situation.

Another gift is the **gift of healing**, the ability to pray with faith and to see people healed physically, emotionally, relationally or spiritually. Jesus healed lots of people. A woman who had been bleeding for 12 years and who would have been an outcast in her society crept up behind him to touch his cloak because she knew that would heal her. Jesus turned around and spoke to her to make sure that she knew she was not just healed, but loved and accepted by God.

Then there's the **gift of prophecy**, a gift given to encourage and build up people by speaking God's word into their situation. This kind of prophecy is not necessarily about what's going to happen in the future; it also reveals what God is thinking about a situation right now and encourages people to choose to serve God wholeheartedly.

As you study the Bible you'll discover that there are many of these special gifts that God wants to give us to build up the people of God and to do God's work in this world.

So how do we get these gifts? Paul tells us to '**eagerly desire' the gifts of God's Spirit**. So which of the gifts stand out to you? Which would you like to have to help you serve God and others? Because you can go for broke! You could have the lot!! Don't be a minimum Christian and settle for a little. Ask for a lot!

Having asked, step out this week and go with your 'spiritual hunches' because that's probably God nudging you. Pray for the sick. Perform acts of kindness and service. Speak God's word over someone as you pray a blessing on them. Give it a try! It's time to live supernaturally in a way that only a disciple of Jesus can.

[Challenge]

Read through the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 and Romans 12:3-8. If you don't understand what they are and how they are used, then talk to another Christian. Ask God to give you the gifts of his Spirit and tell him which one you would like. Then try using it this week!

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Thank God for his generosity and his desire to give his children good things. Tell him some of the things you are feeling grateful for today.

Talk to God about the things you are naturally gifted at. Ask him to show you how you can use them for him.

Talk to God about the gifts of the Spirit, and tell him which gift you desire the most. Ask God to equip you with the gifts of his Spirit so that you can use them in his kingdom.

'Generous God, you have given us so much – thank you for your love, for your forgiveness, and for the salvation that you give us in Jesus. Help us to use the gifts that you've given us in your service, and teach us more about the gifts of your Spirit and how to use them. In Jesus name, Amen.'

[Discuss]

Which of the gifts of the Spirit would you like?

[additional Bible verses]

- Exodus 35:31 – look at the gifts of creativity that God gave this Old Testament character.
- Ephesians 4:11-13 – some more gifts God gives to build up his church.
- 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 – Paul reminds the church that it is God's power working through him that ultimately makes the difference.
- 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 – having gifts but using them without love is useless.
- 1 Corinthians 14:12 – we're not to use gifts for our own benefit but to build up the church.

23) FASTING

Aim - to gain a greater understanding of what fasting is; why we fast and how to do it.

[Teaser]

When you fast, don't put on a sad face. Act normally and your Father will see what you're doing in secret and reward you
(Matthew 6:16-18) [paraphrase]

So what's fasting, and why should you do it?

[Thought]

'42' is all about growing in your relationship with Jesus, getting to know him better and becoming more like him. That takes time and is a process rather than something that happens instantly. There are some tools however that can help to build your faith more quickly, and one of those is fasting.

Fasting is mentioned many times in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. It means going without something that's important to us so that we can spend more time praying and drawing close to God. Jesus did this himself right at the start of his ministry. He went without food in the wilderness, helped by the Holy Spirit, and came out of it able to resist temptation from Satan and being sure about what God wanted him to do.

Jesus clearly expects his disciples – that's you and me – to fast. In Matthew 6:16-18 he says '*When you fast...*' not '*If you fast...*' He says: "*When you fast, don't put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They make their faces look sad to show people they are fasting... So when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then people will not know that you are fasting, but your Father, whom you cannot see, will see you. Your Father sees what is done in secret, and he will reward you.*"

So what's the point of fasting? It's not about trying to impress God with how spiritual we are, and trying to twist his arm to get what we want.

Fasting helps us in several ways.

Firstly, fasting is a great way of remembering how much **God has blessed us**. You sometimes only really appreciate something when you have to do without it!

Secondly, fasting **reminds us to pray**. When your stomach rumbles because you're hungry, it's a bit like an alarm clock telling you it's time to pray. You can then drive that hunger into a prayer, for example: 'God I'm more hungry that you answer this prayer than I am for food.'

Fasting also creates time and space to pray more. If you give up TV or the Internet for one day, just think about how much time you'd have to pray! Fasting shows God that we are serious about getting to know him and about spending time in prayer.

You can give up different things in a fast, and the idea is to give up something that you would miss; something that means a lot to you. Giving up food for a meal or more is one option, but you could fast from the TV, or give up chocolate for a while, or leave your phone at home one day. You'll probably know which of those would be most difficult and therefore which God might want you to try.

It should go without saying that we mustn't fast something that will harm us. If you're ill, for instance, then you need to eat. Fasting is also not a great idea if you've ever had a form of eating disorder. Be sensible. Always talk through your fasting plans with someone else who will consider your welfare.

So enjoy the self-discipline that fasting releases and see if you can hear or feel God more clearly. He wants to speak to you. He wants to transform you. Begin the journey of embracing fasting as a way to deepen your relationship with him.

[Challenge]

Your challenge for today is to fast for an hour from something that you like doing and use some of that time to pray instead. Pray that you would get to know God better, ask God what he wants to show you, and spend time receiving God's love.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Take a moment to pray about fasting.

Tell God how you feel about the idea of fasting. You can be honest with him.

Do you think God might be asking you to fast? What do you need to fast from? Talk to God about it.

'Lord we thank you that you long for us to get to know you better. Help us to discover fasting in order to spend more time with you, and please meet us when we do. In Jesus name, Amen.'

[invitation to respond]

Have you heard of fasting before? What do you think about the idea?

[additional Bible verses]

- Nehemiah 1 – Nehemiah fasts and prays to receive God's wisdom on how to restore Jerusalem.
- Isaiah 58:1-5 - fasting on its own doesn't impress God; it needs to be done with right motives.
- Joel 2:12-13 – God encourages us to return to him with fasting.
- Acts 13:1-3 - the first Christians fasted and prayed when they had important decisions to make.
- 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 - our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.

24) WORK

Aim - Building a biblical framework and healthy approach to work and working.

[Teaser]

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human bosses (Colossians 3:23) [NIV]

What's a good attitude towards work?

[Thought]

What does God think about work? It might surprise you to know that work was God's idea in the first place. Genesis 1:28 tells us that God created Adam and Eve and said to them: *"Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature."* God gave people a job to do – to look after the earth, explore and develop it, and to fill it with more people. **Work is a good, God-given thing!**

Why does God think work is a good idea? God has given each of us gifts and abilities that he wants us to use in this world. Exodus 31 talks about a man called Bezalel who was an artist with some incredible God-given gifts which he used to make the temple beautiful.

So why is work so important?

Firstly, we get a great sense of **achievement** and **purpose** when we use the gifts God has given us. It's like we're doing what God made us to do.

Secondly, work is one of the ways that we can **honour God**. Ultimately, God is our boss and he's the best boss in all the world. We should want to give our very best for our heavenly boss as part of our worship.

Thirdly, work also helps us to **provide for our families** and for those who are unable to work because they are old or unwell.

It's easy to see how work has been spoilt and become something other than what God intended. Some people work to get as much money as they can, even if that means other people suffer. Some people think that their worth as a person depends on the job they do. They have made the mistake of switching their secondary identity (what they do or have) for their primary identity (who they are). Some people can be very driven by work, always rushing, never finished; always striving for the next thing.

Remember, work isn't just about getting paid. Part of the biblical definition of work means to 'nurture' or 'look after', and we all have to do some of that. Whether you have a full or part-time job, or do your share of the housework – that's all work!

As you look ahead to the future, pray that God will show you the work that he wants you to do. Pray that he'll reveal to you the gifts that he wants you to use for him, which could well be linked to the things that you most enjoy and are good at now.

If you're anxious about the future then do talk to someone you trust about it and ask them to pray for you.

Finally, remember that work needs to be balanced with **rest**. Genesis 1 says that God made people on the sixth day of Creation and then rested on the seventh day. Adam and Eve's first day was a day of rest, not a day of work - A day to prioritise relationships with people and God, not being driven to perform. Remember *this* as you juggle your work,

the jobs you do at home and all the activities you're involved in. Make sure you get some good rest so that you have lots of energy for all the things you want to do.

[Challenge]

Think about the work that you need to do at the moment. Make a list of all the 'jobs' you have to do on a weekly basis? Now, mark yourself against each – do you do these gladly or begrudgingly? Do you do them well or as quickly as possible? Do you do them as if you were working for God? How might you do them differently next time?

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Bring your thoughts about work to God in prayer.

How does the topic of work make you feel? Excited? Scared? Anxious? Tell God about it.

Do you have any ideas about what work you'd like to do in the future? Ask God to open up opportunities for you, and to make it clear what steps you need to take.

Jesus said we should ask God for our daily bread. Ask God to provide for you as you study and plan ahead for the future.

'Thank you Lord that you have given each of us gifts and abilities. Please provide us with opportunities to use these in our work, to bring you glory and to feel your pleasure. Help us to trust you to provide all that we need. In Jesus' name, Amen.'

[Discuss]

What work can you imagine yourself doing in the future?

[additional Bible verses]

- Proverbs 10:4 – there are benefits to working hard and costs to being lazy.
- 1 Corinthians 15:58 – none of our work for Christ is a waste of time.
- Colossians 3:23-24 – Paul gives the reason why it's so important that you give your best in work.
- 1 Timothy 4:12 – Paul inspires us to set an example in all that we do, including our work.
- 1 Timothy 6:6-10 – check your motives for wanting to do a particular job and don't get seduced by earning lots of money.

25) FORGIVING

Aim - To unpack the nature of forgiving, its importance, and how to forgive others.

[Teaser]

How many times should I forgive my brother or sister if they sin against me? (Matthew 18:21)

How would you answer that question? Find out how Jesus did!

[Thought]

In Matthew 18:21-35 Peter, one of the disciples, came to Jesus and asked him a question: 'How many times should I forgive my brother or sister if they sin against me?' He suggested to Jesus that he could forgive someone seven times, but that if they kept doing wrong, seven would be it – no more!

Jesus said don't forgive someone seven times; forgive them seventy-seven times! By that Jesus didn't mean that we should keep count, but rather that we should keep on forgiving people no matter how many times they need it.

The need to forgive others is in the Lord's Prayer too – the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. "*Forgive us for doing wrong, as we forgive others.*" You've probably heard those words, but did you know that Jesus went on to say: "*If you forgive others for the wrongs they do to you, your Father in heaven will forgive you. But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.*" (Matthew 6:12-15) That's quite serious isn't it? If we don't forgive others, then God won't forgive us.

Imagine it like this. God is always trying to throw His arms of love around you, to hold and to embrace you. However, if at the same time you are pushing away, hitting out at and generally fighting with someone else because you're upset and haven't forgiven them, how much more difficult is it for God to get His arms around you?

So how can we get into the habit of forgiving other people?

The first thing is to remember what God has done for us in forgiving our sins. We don't deserve his forgiveness, but he forgives us anyway. People that hurt you don't deserve to be forgiven, but you can **choose to forgive** anyway.

Second, we need to be clear about what forgiveness is. When you forgive someone who has hurt you or bullied you, you're not saying 'What you did to me doesn't matter.' Because it does matter. It matters to God. It matters to you. And it matters to others who care for you. Forgiving someone doesn't mean ignoring or forgetting what they did wrong - pretending it didn't hurt or never happened. It *does* mean though that you **give up** any thought of revenge; that you stop holding on to bitterness. You choose to **release** them from that debt and to **start again** with them. Just like God has done with you.

So how do we forgive? Usually **forgiveness is a process**. Sometimes it can be really hard to forgive someone. *Really* hard. Forgiveness starts with a choice, not with a warm fuzzy feeling. Often, we need to forgive someone several times before we're really able to let go of the way they've hurt us. You need to first decide to forgive, and then keep making that same decision until the feeling follows.

You know you've really forgiven someone when you don't tense up on the inside when their name is mentioned, or when they come into the room. When you no longer feel angry about what they did, or want to get revenge. Having made the choice to keep on forgiving you'll find that your feelings follow that choice. Eventually you'll feel different about that person. If you don't, then keep choosing to forgive and **keep asking God to help you**.

One final point. Jesus said that we need to keep on forgiving, and we do. However, that doesn't mean that if someone deliberately keeps on hurting us, we should just do nothing about it. If someone is physically hurting you, or mistreating you, then you need to tell someone about it. Talk to someone you trust about it; don't suffer in silence. You'll still need to forgive them, but you'll be much more able to do that once their bad treatment of you is being addressed.

Forgiving others can seem like a really hard thing to do. It's an incredible feeling though, to be free from anger, revenge and bad feelings towards others. In that sense, forgiveness is a bit of an adventure. You need to experience it to truly understand what it's all about. So don't delay – work out who you need to forgive, and get started.

[Challenge]

Who do you need to forgive? What do you need to forgive them for? Jesus says that if you don't forgive them, then God can't forgive you. Ask God to help you on the journey of forgiveness – and take the first step by telling God that you want to be able to forgive them.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Remember that forgiveness is a process – sometimes the first step is to ask God to help you to want to forgive.

Think about who you need to forgive. Imagine them standing in front of you. How do you feel about forgiving them? You can be really honest with yourself and God.

Talk to God about how you feel. If you can, forgive this person, letting go of your need for revenge. If you're not ready to do that yet, start from where you are and ask God to help you move towards forgiveness.

'Father God, we thank you that you lavish forgiveness on us with such generosity. Thank you that you have set us free from sin. Help us Lord to forgive others when they sin against us. Amen.'

[Discuss]

Any questions about forgiveness – how it works, how to do it, why it's important?

[additional Bible verses]

- Matthew 5:22-24 – Jesus is very clear: we have to learn to forgive one another.
- Luke 23:32-34 – Jesus set us a brilliant example by forgiving the people who crucified him.
- John 8:7 – Jesus urges us to forgive, rather than judge other people's sin.
- John 20:22-23 – Just before Jesus left his disciples for the final time he told them to forgive other people.
- Colossians 3:12-14 – another call to forgive just as we have been forgiven.

26) FRIENDSHIP

Aim – to understand how to do friendships well.

[Teaser]

Some friends don't help, but a true friend is closer than your own family. (Proverbs 18:24)
[CEV]

So how can you find true friends like that, and be a true friend to others?

[Thought]

Why do we need to talk about friendship? Surely everyone just makes friends as they go through life? That's true to a certain extent but it's worth thinking about what true friendship is and how you can form really good friendships that will enrich your life and the lives of your friends.

Think about the friends you have had in your life already – the good friendships and the ones that haven't been so good. From your experience, what makes a really good friend? What do you hope for from your friendships? Some of the obvious qualities are **liking each other** and **enjoying each other's company**; having some **interests in common**; being able to **have fun with each other**; **caring for each other** and **sticking up for each other**. But is there more to being a great friend?

Jesus calls us his friends in John 15:15. He is our example when it comes to friendship. He shows us what strong, faithful, committed love looks like.

The book of Proverbs in the Old Testament is full of wisdom about what makes a good friendship. Proverbs 17:17 says that a friend is there to help in any situation; Proverbs 25:19 says that a friend you can't trust in times of trouble is like having a toothache or a sore foot. **Commitment** and **faithfulness** are two qualities of true friendship. You want to know that friends will be there for you in good times and bad times.

You also want to know that you can trust your friends. Proverbs 11:3 says that a gossip tells everything but a true friend will keep a secret. You can say whatever you want to a real friend and they'll keep it to themselves rather than using it against you, or even sharing it with others for fun.

Perhaps one of the biggest tests of whether someone is a true friend or not, is what happens when you disagree with one another and fall out. It's a mistake to think that friends should always agree with each other; a good friendship is one that can weather the storms of life, not necessarily one that's always calm.

Proverbs 27:6 says that you can trust a friend who corrects you, but kisses from an enemy are nothing but lies. A true friend will have the courage to tell you when they think you're wrong and will challenge you when they think you're behaving badly.

Proverbs 27:17 says that just as iron sharpens iron, friends sharpen one another's minds. So having good discussions together will benefit both of you, where each person can share what they think; where you're free to disagree; where you challenge each other to explain your point of view.

Falling out with your friends is probably inevitable; it's bound to happen at some point, but you can decide that rather than bearing a grudge and wanting to get revenge, you can sort things out and **forgive each other**. You can also decide that *you're* going to make the first move, rather than waiting for your friend to come to you!

We've thought a lot about what makes a good friendship, but how on earth do you find friends this good? The key is to decide that you are going to be this kind of friend to other people. Lead the way by showing people what true friendship is all about!

Taking the initiative is another important element of friendship. Lots of people end up waiting for the other person to make the first move. They do this because they probably feel a bit insecure and unsure. Will the other person want to be with me? Am I interesting enough? Do I dare risk asking them if they'd like to do something first? Suppose they say no. Then I'm going to feel hurt or rejected.

So make the first move. Pick up the phone. Send the text. Get on Facebook. Email the party invitation. Don't wait for everyone else to do it first. If it doesn't work out, then all you've lost is an afternoon or evening, but if it does, it could be the start of a beautiful friendship!

[Challenge]

Your challenge is to think about two people. First, think about someone you would like to get to know better. What could you do to build that friendship? Invite them round? Have lunch with them? Decide what you'll do and take the initiative.

Then think about a friendship that has gone a bit wrong. Perhaps you fell out over something, or you just haven't seen them for ages. What could you do to put the friendship right? Don't be too proud to say sorry. Decide to make the first move and do it.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Jesus calls you his friend. Spend some time thanking Jesus for his love for you and his committed friendship to you.

Think about the friendships that you would like to develop. Ask God to help you to be a really good friend to these people. Ask him to show you what you can do to deepen the friendships.

Then think about a friendship that has gone wrong. Talk to God about what happened. Regardless of whose fault it was, ask God to show you what you could do to put things right.

'Lord Jesus, thank you that you call us friends, and you show us what true friendship is like. Help us to take the initiative in our friendships, to get to know new people and to put things right when they go wrong. Fill us with your love for our friends. In your name we ask, Amen.

[Discuss]

What's the best thing that a friend has ever done for you?

[additional Bible verses]

- Luke 11:5-8 – Jesus tells a story about a loyal friend.
- Romans 12:9-10 – honour your friends above yourself. There's no room for selfishness in true friendship.
- 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 – read these verses replacing the word love with your own name. How do you measure up to this great description of what characterises good friendship?
- 1 Corinthians 15:33 – Paul reminds us to be careful that we're not hanging out with people who are a bad influence on us.
- Galatians 6:2 – good friends share their burdens and support each other.

27) ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Aim - to give advice on how to have healthy, God-honouring relationships with the opposite sex

[Teaser]

God said: It is not good for man to be alone... Then God made woman. (Genesis 2:18, 22)

How can you have a healthy, God-honouring relationship with the opposite sex?

[Thought]

God created people. In Genesis 2:18 he says 'it's not good for a man to be alone' and so he made a woman to be man's partner. God wanted men and women to work together to explore and develop the wonderful world he had made.

Of course that doesn't mean that everyone will get married, but as that's the direction that most of us go in eventually, it's worth thinking about how to conduct our romantic relationships in a way that pleases God.

There are no rules about the age at which you should start going out with someone. You should never feel under pressure to do either of those things just because your friends are. Take things at your own pace; there's no rush.

Remember that our sexual urges and attractions are part of who we are and how God made us. Don't be afraid of them or ashamed of them. Instead, you need to learn to enjoy them and learn how to handle them well - in a way that honours God and respects yourself and others.

What are some of the issues that you need to learn to handle well? First, there's **flirting** - deliberately leading someone on by playing with their emotions to get a response. Flirting treats someone as an object, which is there to make you feel good. It's not the way to test if someone likes you or not. We need to treat people with more respect than that.

Then there's **dating** - getting into an exclusive relationship where everyone else understands that you're together. Don't drift into a dating relationship - talk about it and pray about it with each other first, and with someone you trust. It's really important - whoever you are - that you make sure you date someone who shares your values and beliefs. 2 Corinthians 6:14 says 'do not be yoked together with unbelievers' - that means don't form a bond with someone who doesn't share your faith in Jesus. This is hard - but true: the chances are they'll end up pulling you away from God, not toward Him.

The next thing to think about is **exclusivity**. Although you may really like the person you're going out with and want to spend all your time with them - don't! Keep in touch with your old friends, both male and female.

Finally you need to ask what makes for a healthy **physical** relationship. Don't let sexual attraction get out of perspective and dominate a relationship. You need to be disciplined enough to keep it in its place and allow it to develop in proportion to and alongside other aspects of the relationship, so that you're ready for sex only when you're ready to make a lifelong commitment in marriage to your partner.

In the meantime, you need to set boundaries together, and agree on how you'll share your affection for each other. The aim of setting boundaries is not about seeing how close you can get to sin without sinning; it's about pleasing God and enjoying one another and him with clean hearts and consciences. It's about respecting your partner and not wanting to hurt them by pushing them further than they want to go. If you do cross your boundaries and mess up, then talk to God about it and be quick to say sorry to

him. Then think about how you can avoid doing it again. Maybe talking to – and becoming accountable to - a friend you trust would help.

Those are some things to avoid, so more positively, how can you build a great relationship? Spend lots of time talking, finding out each others' hopes and dreams, and learning what makes each other tick. Spend time with other friends on your own and as a couple; go out in a big group and have fun; laughing together is really important. Get to know each other's families. Pray for each other and with each other; go to and serve in church together.

We've given you lots to think about, but it's worth getting this right and learning now how to develop healthy relationships with the opposite sex. It will save you lots of heartache in the future, and it'll set you up for rest of your life.

[Challenge]

On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is terrible and 10 is brilliant, how healthy are your relationships with the opposite sex? What steps could you take to increase your score?

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

A good framework for praying is to use three words: 'Thankyou', 'Sorry' and 'Please'. Use them to pray about the romantic relationships you've had or hope to have.

Say thank you to God for creating people and enabling us to love each other. Thank God for the people you are closest to.

Is there anything about your romantic relationships that you need to say sorry for? Take some time to do that, and know that God forgives you – totally and utterly.

What do you want to ask God for? Share your heart's desire with him and know that he hears you.

'Creator God, we thank you for the gifts of love, romance and sex. Help us to grow into romantic relationships slowly and wisely, not using one another or rushing ahead, but honouring you and each other. Amen.'

[Discuss]

Do you have any tips to share on having a healthy romantic relationship?

[additional Bible verses]

- Ecclesiastes 4:12 – A relationship is far stronger when God is at the heart of it.
- Song of Songs 8:4 – there's no need to rush into romantic relationships; don't awaken love too soon.
- 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 – your body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit so treat it well!
- 1 Corinthians 13 – this is what God's love is like; we should try to model this kind of love in our relationships and eventually, marriages.
- Galatians 5:22-23 – are your romantic relationships full of the Fruit of the Spirit?

28) SEXUALITY

Aim - To embrace and understand our God-given sexuality and how it develops.

[Teaser]

I praise God because I am fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14) [NIV]

And that means every part of you, including the fact that you're a sexual being. What does God think about that?

[Thought]

We seem to live in a sex mad society. It's hard to watch TV adverts, music videos or films for very long without being bombarded by references to people having sex.

God gets a very bad press when it comes to sex. The average person probably thinks that Christians don't like having sex, and that they certainly don't like talking about it. Many people probably assume that God is pretty much anti-sex, or even that sex itself is a sin. All of these things are myths and misunderstandings.

The fact is that God invented sex. He thinks it's a great idea!

Let's start at the beginning - literally. Genesis 1:27-28 says that: *"God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and said to them, **Be fruitful, and multiply...**"* So God thinks the sexes are good. He created male and female, and created them to fit together. Then he told them to multiply, and made it pleasurable. Unlike the way that fish, or amoeba or plants reproduce, God gave humans a reproductive process that was enjoyable!

So sex is a gift from God. But as with any gift it needs to be cared for. God gives us instruction in his word about how we're to conduct our sex lives.

God's key principle is that sexual intercourse – this amazing, precious gift – is intended for marriage. In 1 Corinthians 7:2, Paul writes that *"since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband."* Sex is for one woman to share with one man for life. That's the deal; the maker's instructions if you like.

Why is that so important? In 1 Corinthians 6:18, Paul explains that sexual sin – called sexual immorality in the Bible – is so serious because as well as the physical dimension involved, there's a Spiritual one. He writes: *"Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body."* The act of sex turns two people into 'one flesh' (Mark 10:8) – the ultimate act of human unity. So God doesn't want us to become 'one flesh' with lots of different people.

Is God trying to spoil our fun? **God is our creator.** He knows how we work best. He wants us to get the most out of life, not to spoil our enjoyment of it. He knows that a healthy view of sex protects against guilt, unplanned pregnancy, sexually-transmitted infections (STIs), sexual insecurity, and of course, great emotional distress. When we think about it that way, God's approach feels like good sense, rather than a bunch of rules.

So if we can't have sex outside marriage, the obvious question is "How far can you go?". This is the wrong question to ask though. The Bible tells us not to murder people but we wouldn't then say 'How far can I go? Is it ok to beat someone up a little?' Our attitude shouldn't be 'How far can I go?' but 'How close can I stick to God and what he wants?' 1 Corinthians 6:20 says: *"You were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body."*

You don't have to be sexually active. That's the world's lie, and Romans 12:2 tells us to *"not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."* So choose God's way, not the world's way – it actually makes a lot more sense.

One more thing. If we've already messed up sexually, then God wants and loves to heal and forgive us. More than that, we can ask for the power to stop having sex and start living right.

So whatever your sexual past might be, choose today to ask God to be Lord of the whole of your life – including your sexuality. Ask for forgiveness where necessary, and then move on; because God has. He wants you to experience his best for you in every area of your life. That certainly includes our sexuality – he just wants you to be careful and responsible with this wonderful gift. That responsibility includes setting some wise, God-honouring boundaries about your physical relationship if you are with someone.

[Challenge]

One way to make sure that you have a healthy attitude to your sexuality is to have someone that you can talk about sex honestly with. This could be your discipler, or a good friend who you trust. Think about who this person could be for you, and think about the questions you have. Then ask your chosen person if you could talk to them about some of the questions you have about sex. It may feel embarrassing, but it's an important thing to do. If they laugh, then find someone else!

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Thank God for creating you as a unique and beautiful person. Thank him for the body he has given you, and for all the potential it has.

Talk to God about your sexuality; your feelings, struggles, hopes and lusts. You can be completely honest with him.

Is there anything that you want to say sorry to God for? Or to ask for his help with?

'Thank you Lord, for the gift of our bodies and the gift of our sexuality. Help us to cope with the physical and emotional challenges that come with being sexual beings, and to enjoy the gift that you've given us with the right person, at the right time. Amen.'

[Discuss]

What has helped you learn about sexuality? Where do you go to get your questions answered?

[additional Bible verses]

- Song of Songs 8:4 – Don't feel you have to rush into relationships; don't awaken love too early.
- Luke 2:41-52 – Jesus went through sexual development just like you! He knows what it's like.
- 1 Corinthians 10:13 – God promises not to tempt us beyond what we can bear.
- Colossians 3:5 – Paul urges us to 'put to death' sexual immorality.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7 – we have to go on a journey of self-discipline and self-control; it's not easy, but it's what we're called to: living a holy life.

29) HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT'S TRUE?

Aim - To explore the nature of truth, how it relates to God; how we assess truth, and what we do with it

[Teaser]

Jesus said, 'you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.' (John 8:32) [NIV]

But what is truth and where do we find it?

[Thought]

Have you heard the story about the four blind men who were taken into a cage containing an elephant? They had to decide what was in the cage with them by touch alone. So one blind man touched the elephant's trunk and decided it was a snake. One touched the elephant's leg and decided it was a tree. One touched the elephant's tail and thought it was a rope. The fourth and final man touched the elephant's side and decided it was a wall! The story reminds us that if we really want the truth we need to see the bigger picture.

Deep down we know that there *are* some absolute truths in life. If I decide to jump out of the window of a 10 storey building believing that I will fly – the truth is – I'm going to be disappointed. I might sincerely believe that I will fly but there is an absolute truth connected with the law of gravity that says I will fall. That's always been true for all people, in all places, and it will be in the future.

So the big question is: how do we know what the absolute truths are?

Firstly, and most importantly, the Bible tells us that **God embodies truth**. In John 14:6 Jesus said "*I am the way, the truth and life*". Jesus was saying that he embodies truth – because God is truth. God is unable to lie. God is not relatively this or relatively that. God is constant. We're told in James 1:17 that God is unchanging. Reliable. He is absolute truth. This is great news for us because that means we can trust him and depend on him.

Secondly, **God's truth makes sense**. Remember when we talked about the Bible being God's living story. The Great Story of our lives; of the universe; of the cosmos. Many people today don't believe that there is an over-arching story. They say that we're all just making it up as we go along. Even that view though is a big story to believe in. The Bible presents God's living story as the real deal: the real truth. Revealing to us what life is all about. When you engage with the Bible, when you engage with the story, it makes sense. This world is not an accident. We were lovingly created by a God who wants to know us, and the search for meaning and purpose that lies in the heart of every man, woman and child is only ultimately fulfilled by knowing our creator.

Thirdly, **God's truth works**. Jesus would often share with people God's best way of living and he would preface what he would say with the phrase 'I tell you the truth...,' It was like Jesus was saying, what I'm telling you is true. It will change your life. It works. Jesus most famous sermon is found in the gospel of Matthew, in chapters 5 through 7. Jesus is sharing some amazing truths in this passage. Imagine the kind of world we would live in today if people lived out these truths. The world would be a better place; the kind of place that people would love to live in.

God's truth works. It makes sense and it's good for us – particularly as the Holy Spirit works within us to bring those truths to life (John 16:13). No wonder the Psalmist wrote, in Psalm 25:5, "*Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long*".

God wants us to live life according to his truths. It makes sense. It works. Like nothing else.

The God of Truth, revealed in the person of Jesus, invites every one of us to “*taste and see that the Lord is good.*” (Psalm 34:8)

Test it. Try it. See for yourself. Live a life of truth in the power of the Spirit. You’ll discover for yourself that God’s truth is the real deal, for all people, for all time.

[Challenge]

Are there any aspects of the Christian faith or the story of Jesus that you find difficult to believe? Decide that you are going to check out whether this aspect is true or not and that you’re going to take Jesus at his word, believing that the Spirit will guide you into all truth. Bring it to God in prayer, then explore it in depth: talking to other Christians, reading up on it, praying about it. God will show you whether it’s true or not.

[Prayer]

(pauses to pray between phrases)

Thank God for the Spirit of truth, and ask him to lead you deeper into the truth.

Ask God to reveal the truth to you, the truth about who he is; the truth about Jesus and what he came to do, and the truth about who you are.

Tell God where you struggle to believe that what you’ve heard about him is true. You can be completely honest.

‘Lord God, we thank you for your Spirit of truth and that you promise to lead us into all truth. Help us to understand the truth about who you are and who Jesus is. Help us to see the truth about ourselves. In Jesus’ name, Amen.’

[Discuss]

What do you think about Jesus’ claim that he is the truth?

[additional Bible verses]

- Psalm 25:5 – we can pray and ask God to guide us into all truth
- Psalm 86:11 – a prayer that we will live by God’s truth.
- Ephesians 4:11-15 – we need to be people who value truth and speak the truth to one another in love.
- 2 Peter 3:3 – Peter speaks about people ignoring God’s truth and making up their own truth.
- 1 John 3:18-20 – true faith will be expressed in our actions, not just our words.

30) HOW DO WE KNOW GOD EXISTS?

Aim - to explore internal and external evidence that points us to the reality of God.

[Teaser]

For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities have been clearly seen from what has been made. (Romans 1:20) [NIV]

Do you agree? What convinces you that God exists?

[Thought]

How do we know that God really exists? That's a question that every civilisation has wrestled with and we shouldn't be surprised by this – because the Bible says in Ecclesiastes 3:11 that God has set **eternity in our hearts**. Deep down something tells us that there's more to this life than what we see, feel or touch. Even that's an indicator that God is out there, waiting for us to discover him.

But that's not enough, is it? It might just be wishful thinking. So how else do we know God that exists? Well, look around you! You are surrounded by the most astounding, incredible, extravagant, breath-taking display of the existence of God imaginable. It's called the Universe!!

But where did the universe come from? Is it easier to believe that nothing made everything or is it easier to believe that that something or someone was behind it all? Even if the Big Bang Theory is true you've still got to ask yourself what triggered it. The Bible makes it clear that **God is the First Cause**. He is the ultimate initiator.

One of the reasons that we believe that God exists today is because he has created this amazing, **finely tuned world** for us to live in. The axis of the earth, our distance from the sun, the balance of oxygen and nitrogen – all finely tuned to create a perfect environment for us to live. If something was just a little off then we'd all be dead.

But there's another reason why we can know that God exists. Look in the mirror. You are amazing. **Human life is amazing**. The fact that we can see, feel, smell, touch, and think. The human body is the ultimate creation. Again, do we *really* believe this happened by chance or was it lovingly designed? You are not just a collection of chemicals. You are made in the image of God. God's masterpiece!

But that still might not be enough for some people. Many people say that they would believe in God if they could see him. But here's the thing. Two thousands years ago God physically broke in to human history. John 1:14 tells us that **God became human** and lived among us. Jesus Christ came to show us what God is like. Fully God. Fully man. But despite the miracles, despite the life-changing teaching, despite the unconditional love for people, despite rising from the dead – many people still didn't believe – though they had seen God – it was 'easier' to deny it.

So God has proven his existence through his creation as Paul reminds us in Romans 1:20. He's proven his existence through coming to earth as Jesus. But that's not all.

You can know that God exists because you can know God. You can follow His Son Jesus. You can be forgiven and set free to live the life God created you to live. You can be empowered by God to live that life through the work of God the Holy Spirit. You can pray and see God at work through your prayers.

God exists. Deep down we sense it. Creation declares it. Jesus demonstrates it. A genuine relationship with God reveals it.

If someone approaches the question 'how can we know God exists?' with a closed mind, then no amount of evidence will convince them; it will simply be re-interpreted according to their worldview. If however they are open to exploring the existence of God, they will discover that God *is* real and what's more: they can know him!

After all, God promises in Jeremiah 29:13 that if you seek him you will find him.

[Challenge]

Talk to three Christians over the next week to find out what convinces them that God exists. Ask them if they can give you examples of answered prayer in their lives. Find out what they think about the creation and how it came into being. Discover what makes them continue to believe in God.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Talk to God about what has led you to believe that He exists.

Tell God about any doubts you have or any questions you would like answered. You can be completely honest with him.

Ask God to reveal himself to you so that you can say without doubt that God exists and that he loves you.

'Creator God, it seems strange to talk to you and yet admit that sometimes we have doubts about you. Thank you for all the evidence that you've given us for your existence. Show us beyond doubt that you are real, that you love us and that you want to be involved in our lives. Amen.'

[Discuss]

What convinces you that God exists?

[additional Bible verses]

- Psalm 8:1-9 – contemplating the stars in the sky will lead you to give God the glory.
- Psalm 14:1-2 – where David sings about how foolish it is to believe that God does not exist.
- Mark 9:24 – we can be honest with God about how strong our faith is and ask him to help us to believe.
- Colossians 1:15-17 – Jesus reveals to us the reality of God.
- Hebrews 1:1-3 – discovering Jesus will convince you that God exists.

31) HOW CAN WE KNOW THE BIBLE IS RELIABLE?

Aim – to explore how we can know the Bible is true and reliable.

[Teaser]

The Bible is God-breathed... so that people can be equipped to do good.
(2 Timothy 3:16) [NIV paraphrase]

But how do we know we can trust the Bible?

[Thought]

Christians believe that the Bible is a very significant book, revealing to us who God is and how we should live. We need to be confident that the Bible is true and reliable - that we can trust what it says. If it's a made-up book full of myths and fairy stories, errors and contradictions, how can we possibly believe it, let alone trust the God it talks about? So what evidence is there that the Bible is true and can be trusted?

The first clue is in the name itself. The word 'Bible' comes from the Greek word "biblia" which really means **library**, or collections of books. The Bible is actually 66 books in total - 39 in the Old Testament (the section before Jesus was born) and 27 in the New Testament (the section after Jesus was born).

These books were written by around **40 different authors**. Some were shepherds. Some were administrators. Some were soldiers. Some were kings. Still others were tax collectors, doctors and fishermen. These 66 books were written over a period of 2,000 years, including a 400-year gap between the Old and New Testaments. These 66 books tell a consistent story of a loving God who wants the best for his people and who sent his son Jesus to earth. For the Bible to be 'made up' and yet be as consistent as it is across all these years and authors is impossible.

Just how reliable is it? Let's do a comparison. Historians use Julius Caesar's diaries as a fair and accurate description of Rome's conquering of France: the Gallic Wars. The standard tests for whether ancient manuscripts are reliable are **authorship** (who wrote it), **dating** (how close to the events was it written), and **source** (how many copies of these ancient manuscripts do we have and do they agree with each other).

Historians say that the author of the record of the Gallic Wars is Julius Caesar because there is evidence of consistent style and content, of detail and description. The manuscripts date back to within **950** years of the events, which is an acceptably ancient record. There are around **10** copies of the diaries, with only some discrepancies between them. If that sounds impressive and is enough for historians to accept the Gallic Wars as authentic, then look at the facts about the Bible.

The authors of the manuscripts included in the New Testament are historical characters, many mentioned in other early church texts and by contemporary non-Christian historians of the day. They write with genuine detail and consistent content that you'd expect from first-hand eyewitness experience. These manuscripts date back at least to within just **70** years of events they describe; that's within the lifetime of those present. There are around **24,000** copies of the manuscripts, with hardly any discrepancies between them! The Bible is far and away the most reliable ancient document of any type, anywhere, anytime in the world. But that's not all.

In the Old Testament there are around 330 prophecies concerning the coming Messiah. Jesus. The latest of these is more than 400 years before Jesus came. Many of them deal with events over which Jesus had no control, including where he was born, how he would die, and where he would be buried. Yet Jesus in only 33 years of His earthly life fulfilled all 330! That's another indication of the unique nature of the Bible.

You would expect the events that appear in the Bible to be mentioned by other people who were writing at the same time. Roman historians **Suetonius** and **Tacitus** mention some of the New Testament's events, and Jewish historian **Josephus** mentions Jesus, his birth, miracles, death and resurrection! No archaeological discovery to date contradicts the Bible's accounts, while many discoveries, for example the existence and title of Pontius Pilate, validate the Bible's descriptions.

The Bible is not a science text-book telling us how God did stuff, nor a handbook explaining what we should do in every situation we should encounter, but it is a true and reliable record of God's dealings with humanity over thousands of years. It's **God's living story**. We can turn to it to find out about who God is; to hear his wisdom on how we should lead our lives, and to find out how ordinary people related to God. Getting stuck into the Bible is a great adventure that is hugely rewarding. Have confidence that you'll meet God in its pages.

[Challenge]

What questions do you still have about the Bible? You may have heard people say that it's all made up, or that it contradicts itself. Because the Bible is such an important book for Christians, it's worth finding out whether what you've heard is actually true and whether you can trust it. Write down the questions you have and make a point of asking a Christian that you trust. Ask them what gives them confidence in the Bible. Keep pursuing the answers until you are satisfied that you can trust the Bible.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Spend some time thanking God for the Bible; that he has inspired people throughout the ages to write his word and that we are free to read and learn from it.

Talk to God about the questions you still have about the Bible, about whether it's true and reliable.

Ask God to give you confidence in his word, so that you are able to trust what he says through it.

'Father God, we thank you for the gift of the Bible and for the people that you have inspired over the ages to write down what they heard from you. Please show us that we can trust your word; speak to us through its pages. In Jesus' name, Amen.'

[Discuss]

What parts of the Bible do you find easiest to accept are true?

[additional Bible verses]

- Deuteronomy 6:4-9 – the people of Israel in the Old Testament were to make God's word central to their lives. The same is true for us with the whole of the Bible.
- Psalm 33:4 – the Psalmist speaks about the truth of God's word.
- Luke 1:1-4 – Luke, a doctor, was very careful to an accurate account of the life of Jesus that could be trusted.
- John 21:24-25 – John, the author of another of the gospels, was known to be reliable and truthful.
- 2 Peter 1:20-21 – reminds us where the inspiration of scripture comes from.

32) HOW DO WE KNOW THAT JESUS EXISTED?

Aim - To explore the evidence for the historical Jesus and who he actually is.

[Teaser]

Jesus said to his disciples, 'What about you? Who do you say I am?' (Matthew 16:15) [NIV]

How would you answer that question? Who do you think Jesus is?

[Thought]

What do you think about Jesus? Some people seem to put him in the same category as the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny and Father Christmas. Nice characters to believe in when you're a small child, but if you still believe in them as an adult then you're considered a little bit odd...

Perhaps people have not been helped by sentimental carols claiming that Jesus didn't even cry as a baby (remember 'Away in a manger?'), as if he somehow wasn't human like the rest of us; gentle Jesus meek and mild. This all helps people to dismiss Jesus as a kind of safe, fairytale figure divorced from the harsh realities of human existence in first Century Palestine. Yet this is exactly who the real Jesus of history is: **fully human. Fully real.**

We've already looked at how we can trust that the Bible is an accurate record. We have the best manuscript records in the world in the Bible. They go back earlier and nearer to the events they describe than many other historical documents. Then there's the testimony of contemporary historians writing their own documents outside of the Bible; people with no vested interest in proving Jesus existed. Indeed, some of them were the enemies of Jesus and his followers. We can read about the historical reality of Jesus in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, or Roman writers such as Tacitus and Suetonius.

Historically then, we know a lot about Jesus. We know when and where he was born. We know where he lived. We can trace his family tree. We particularly know about the last three years of his life. We know where and how he died, and where he was buried. You can go and visit these places and see them for yourself. They're as real as he is. It's a lazy thinker who believes that Jesus never existed.

There's little doubt that Jesus was a historical figure, but perhaps the more important question is whether Jesus was – or rather, is - who he claimed to be. In John 10:30, Jesus said that he and God are one and the same. He forgave people their sins, which Mark 2:7 reminds us, only God was able to do. Jesus described himself in the same way that God describes himself in the Old Testament: as a shepherd (in John 10:11-18), and by calling himself an ancient name for God, 'I am' (in John 8:58). Jesus was saying that he was the Son of God, which is the same as saying that he is God. He claimed that he was fully human and fully divine.

So really the question we need to consider is not just 'did Jesus exist as a historical figure?' because it's difficult to argue with the evidence. Jesus definitely existed. The real question is whether Jesus is who he said he was. Is Jesus the Son of God?

The famous Christian writer, C S Lewis, said that it's ridiculous to say that Jesus was a good man, or a great moral teacher but nothing more than that. He says, 'A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the devil. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for

a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come away with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.'

The historical evidence in the Bible that shows us that Jesus exists also backs up his claim to be God - through the miracles that did, and through his death and resurrection. Millions of people have based their lives on the belief that Jesus is God and have not been disappointed. Is Jesus really the Son of God? The answer is a resounding 'Yes!'

[Challenge]

Think about what C S Lewis said about Jesus – that he was either who he claimed to be; or he was completely mad; or he was evil, wanting to deceive people. Can you think of any other options? Think those through one by one. Which do you believe to be true? Can you confidently say that Jesus is the Son of God? If you honestly can't, then keep exploring the questions that you have. Decide that you'll talk to another Christian about your questions, and that you'll pray and ask God to reveal the truth to you.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Thank God for the reliable records we have that Jesus existed.

Tell God how you feel about Jesus' claim to be the Son of God. You can be honest about any questions you still have.

Ask God to reveal the truth about Jesus to you so that you know beyond doubt that Jesus is who he claimed to be.

'Father God, we thank you for the evidence that we have in the Bible and from other sources that Jesus really existed. Thank you that Jesus made it really clear that he is the Son of God, not just a good man. Help us to understand the full extent of what that means, and how that can change our lives. Reveal your truth to us by the Holy Spirit, Amen.'

[Discuss]

What convinces you that Jesus is the Son of God? Or what questions do you still have about him?

[additional Bible verses]

- Isaiah 7:14 – Jesus is God with us.
- John 20:30-31 – John wrote his gospel so that people would know that Jesus is the Son of God.
- Acts 2:36 – after the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, Peter preached that Jesus was God.
- Acts 9:19-20 – Saul was a Jew who hated Christians and used to persecute them, but then he met Jesus and his life turned around. He started to preach that Jesus is the Son of God.
- Colossians 2:9 – Paul reminds us that Jesus is fully God and fully man.

33) DID JESUS REALLY RISE FROM THE DEAD?

Aim: To explore the evidence for Christ's resurrection and its implication for us today.

[Teaser]

Christ died for our sins, he was buried, and three days later he was raised to life. And if Christ wasn't raised to life, our message is worthless, and so is your faith! (1 Corinthians 15:3, 4 and 14) [CEV]

But what proof do we have that Jesus rose from the dead?

[Thought]

One of the core beliefs of Christians is that Jesus was killed on a cross, and that he came back to life again. We call that second part 'the resurrection'. So Jesus wasn't just a historical figure; he was fully God as well as fully human, and he is still alive today.

That might be hard to get your head round when you're a new Christian, but it's not something that Christians have to force themselves to believe. There's lots of evidence for it and it makes a lot of sense.

Let's look at the historical evidence first. The Bible has **six direct witnesses** who write about Jesus' resurrection and about people seeing him living and breathing after he died and was buried.

As you heard before, the Bible is a reliable book that we can trust; it has lots of historical evidence to back it up. The Bible talks about **ten different occasions** when Jesus was seen after he rose from the dead, which took place over a period of about six weeks. Some of those involved large groups of up to **500 people**, so don't rely on a small group of witnesses. Others involved small groups of his best friends, who therefore couldn't have been fooled by an imposter.

There's more historical evidence in other writings. A Jewish historian called Josephus wrote about the birth of Jesus, the miracles he performed and – crucially - his resurrection, which shows how widely accepted those facts were at the time.

Some people try to find other explanations for aspects of the resurrection, but it's hard to find one that's convincing. Some people say that **the disciples stole the body** of Jesus and made up stories about him coming back to life. But Jesus' body was heavily guarded after the burial, so stealing it would have been very difficult. Many of the disciples were later tortured and killed for their faith. Why would they do that if they knew it was a lie?

Other people say that **the Romans must have moved the body**. Yet the Romans were really worried about the spread of Christianity after Jesus' resurrection. So if they had the body, surely they would have produced it?

Another explanation is that perhaps **Jesus didn't really die**. Perhaps he fainted on the cross and then came round later in the cool of the tomb. Jesus was severely beaten before he died. Experienced soldiers checked that he was dead. His side was slit with a spear which resulted in blood and water flowing out - which is what happens when someone is really dead. Again, this happened in front of many witnesses.

So the alternatives don't stack up. It might take some time to get your head around the resurrection, but it makes more sense than any of those other explanations.

There's one final piece of evidence: the experience of millions of people throughout the last 2,000 years who have got to know the risen Jesus for themselves and have not been disappointed. I'm one of them: I know that Jesus has risen from the dead because I know

his love and forgiveness, and have experienced his presence in my life. I pray that's true for you too.

[Challenge]

Your challenge today is to read what one of the gospels says about the resurrection of Jesus. Start by reading Luke chapter 24, and ask God to reveal his truth to you.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Take some time to pray about the resurrection.

Why not start with praise, thanking God for what he's done in raising Jesus from the dead.

Tell God what you think about the resurrection – you can be honest with him if you have questions or doubts.

Thank God for the difference the resurrection makes to your life, and to your relationship with God.

'Jesus, we thank you that you conquered death and rose again so that we can have life. Help us to live in the reality of your resurrection, and to tell other people about it. Amen.'

[invitation to respond]

What evidence convinces you that Jesus rose from the dead?

[additional Bible verses]

- Psalm 16:10 – the psalmist speaks prophetically about Jesus rising from the dead.
- John 20:24-29 – Thomas found it hard to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead but he was convinced when he met him.
- Romans 8:34 – Paul reminds us that Jesus rose from the dead and is now praying for us.
- 1 Corinthians 15 – Paul tells us why believing in the resurrection of Jesus is absolutely central to our faith.
- 1 Peter 1:3-5 – Peter says that the resurrection opens up a whole new future for us.

34) WHY IS THERE SO MUCH SUFFERING?

Aim - to explore God's heart and response to the problem of suffering. Where does it come from and why?

[Teaser]

My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" (Psalm 42:3) [NIV]

Why is there so much suffering in the world, and where is God when it happens?

[Thought]

Why is there so much suffering in the world? It's a question that people have been asking for centuries. The follow-on question is usually: if God is loving, then why doesn't he stop suffering? These are huge questions and not easy to answer, but let's explore them.

Some suffering is the natural result of cause and effect, even on a large scale. When pressure underground builds up between tectonic plates and slips along a fault line, the resulting earthquake could cause suffering to thousands. Similarly, much suffering is caused because of what you might call defects in design. Germs and bugs change and find fresh ways of attacking our immune systems, and so we have sicknesses and ill-health. Our very code of life, the genetic structure called DNA, can be flawed and then people suffer from inherited disorders, mental and physical disabilities.

Some suffering though is caused by the choices we make and the actions we take. We gossip, lie, steal, hurt people... we all know that we can make choices that inflict pain and suffering on someone else.

As if a broken natural world and broken people wasn't enough, there's a third source of suffering. In fact, this third source is really the root cause of the other two, of all the suffering ever caused and felt in the world since it began.

The Bible teaches that this third and primary source of suffering is the devil, whose very name, Satan, means 'the enemy'. Satan tempted the first people to disobey God and as a result, the whole of creation was spoilt and broken, along with our relationships with God and with each other. We live in a broken world.

So why doesn't God do something about suffering? Let's look at his options. Perhaps the easiest thing to do would be to remove all sin and selfishness, at midnight tonight. The problem is, who would be left at 12.01am? None of us. Because we're all broken, we'd all have to be destroyed. God loves us too much to do this. He's holding on, waiting for as many people as possible to discover His love and forgiveness in Jesus (see 2 Peter 3:9).

Or maybe God could just make us do good not bad? The problem is, we'd then just be like pre-programmed robots who can't love or make choices. 1 John 4:16 says that God is love, and he loves us too much to force us to do His will. Galatians 5:1 says that God gives us freedom; freedom to choose whether to do the right thing or not.

Instead, God went for a third option; not destruction, not dictatorship but devotion. John 3:16 says that God loved the world so much that he sent his son Jesus. You see, God *has* done something about suffering. In the ultimate example of his commitment to us God chose to get involved in the pain and suffering of this world when Jesus – God made flesh – lived on the earth. Jesus took the suffering, sin and sickness of the world on to the cross. God understands our suffering because He himself has suffered. The Bible promises us that one day God *will* put an end to suffering when he finally ushers in his new creation.

In the meantime, God calls us to get our hands dirty demonstrating his love, justice and compassion in the world. Christians are called to be with those who suffer, representing the heart of a loving, caring God. Some suffering can be stopped. There's enough food in the world to feed everyone but it's unfairly distributed. Some sickness can be treated. Diarrhoea is one of the world's biggest killers but can be alleviated for pennies per treatment. Some evil people can be reached and changed by the good news of Jesus' love and forgiveness.

It has been said that all it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. In the face of suffering, God gave His Son Jesus Christ. What will we do? Perhaps when God hears us ask him why he doesn't do anything about suffering, he turns the question back to us. What are we going to do?

[Challenge]

What could you do about suffering? You can't solve all the world's problems on your own but you could make a difference to one person. Think about someone you know who is suffering, and ask God to show you what you can do. Perhaps you could do a sponsored event to raise money for the homeless. Perhaps you could offer to cut the grass of your neighbour who is ill. Decide what you can do to alleviate suffering this week.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

The subject of suffering may be very close to home for you. Think about the people you know who are suffering. Talk to God about what they are going through and how you feel about it. You can be completely honest.

What questions do you want to ask God about their suffering?

Spend some time asking God to intervene in their suffering, to bring his love, healing and presence.

Ask God what you can do to help these people you love.

'Lord God, we live in a broken world and we can see the effects of that all around us. We know that you feel the pain of the people you have created - that you suffer alongside them. Thank you that you sent Jesus so that one day all suffering will be wiped out. Help us to work with you to do what we can to end suffering here on earth. In Jesus' name, Amen.'

[Discuss]

Has this session helped you to think some more about suffering?

[additional Bible verses]

- Isaiah 53 – Isaiah vividly captures the suffering that Christ went through.
- Luke 6:22 – Jesus says that we will suffer just because we follow him.
- 1 Corinthians 13:12 – Paul reminds us that one day we will understand everything.
- 1 Peter 4:12-13 – Peter speaks about the inevitability of suffering.
- Revelation 21:1-5 – we look forward to a new heaven and a new earth where there will no longer be any suffering.

35) DO MIRACLES STILL HAPPEN TODAY?

Aim – to explore what a miracle is and whether they still happen today

[Teaser]

God did extraordinary miracles through Paul (Acts 19:11) [NIV]

Do you think miracles still happen today?

[Thought]

There's a story in the gospels where thousands of people gathered to hear Jesus speak. They listened for hours and when it started to get late it became obvious that the people were really hungry. So Jesus said to his disciples, 'You give them something to eat.'

Obviously they couldn't ring for a pizza delivery even if they'd had the money to pay for it. So the disciples asked around to see if anyone had any food for sharing. They only managed to gather five loaves and two fish – and that surely wasn't going to feed more than 5,000 people.

Jesus told everyone to sit down in groups. He prayed over the food and then asked the disciples to hand it out. Miraculously, everyone had enough to eat and the disciples picked up twelve baskets full of leftovers. You can read about this in Mark 6:30-44.

How did that happen? How could one person's packed lunch feed over 5,000 people? It was a miracle – something that can't be explained by the laws of nature. A miracle is not luck or coincidence – it's God intervening in the lives of human beings.

There are lots of miracles in the Bible. In the Old Testament, Moses held out his hand over the Red Sea and the waters parted, allowing the Israelites to escape from their enemies. (Exodus 14:21-31). In the New Testament, Peter was rescued from prison by an angel (Acts 12:1-18).

So why did God perform miracles? Sometimes it was to **demonstrate his ultimate power**. In Joshua 10:13 we read about the sun standing still in the sky for a whole day in the middle of a battle so that the Israelites won. In those days, many people worshipped the sun, so by stopping it, God was showing that he had created the sun and was in control of it.

At other times, God performed miracles **to validate the person** who was speaking on his behalf. In Acts 3:1-10, Peter and John healed a lame beggar, so people knew that what they were saying about Jesus was true. God also did miracles **to show his love for people**.

Interestingly Jesus did miracles for those three reasons too. He calmed a storm by speaking to it in Mark 4:35-41, showing that he had power over the weather. He healed a paralysed man in Mark 2:1-12 to show that God had sent him and that he could forgive sins. Then in Mark 5:35 he brought a young girl back to life out of compassion for her and her family.

The Bible also tells us that other people did miracles in God's power and in his name. We've already mentioned Peter and John who healed a lame man. Peter also prayed for a woman called Dorcas, who then came back to life after she had died in Acts 9:36-42.

Do miracles still happen today? Throughout history, there is evidence that Christians have still seen miracles happen when they've prayed in Jesus' name. For example the book '*The Heavenly Man*' tells the story of a Chinese Christian called Brother Yun who was persecuted for his faith, and who had a miraculous escape from a maximum security jail.

Jesus said in John 14:12 that whoever believes in him will be able to do the works he did, and in fact will do **even greater things than he did**. In 1 Corinthians 12:27-29, Paul says that there is a spiritual gift of miracles that is given to some people. As we get to know God better and find out more about his nature, let's bring our needs and requests to him and expect him to intervene miraculously in our world!

[Challenge]

Talk to three Christians over the next week to find out what they think about miracles. Ask them if they have ever experienced God intervening in their lives in a way that can't be explained by the laws of nature. Talk to them about any questions you have.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Spend some time thanking God for how great he is and for the miracles he has performed.

Tell God what you think about miracles, both those in the Bible and those that happen today.

Ask God to increase your knowledge of him and your faith in him so that you can pray in confidence.

Talk to God about where you long for him to intervene in your life or the lives of your family.

'Almighty God, we praise you that you have the power to intervene in our world, and the desire to heal and restore. Increase our faith, we pray, so that we expect you to work miracles in our lives and in the lives of people we love. In Jesus' name, Amen.'

[Discuss]

Have you ever heard of miracles happening today? .

[additional Bible verses]

- Exodus 34:10 – God performs miracles to demonstrate his power.
- Psalm 78:1-7 – reminding us of the importance of remembering all that God has done for us.
- Mark 9:14-29 – a man who asked Jesus to heal his son was honest about the questions he had: 'Lord I believe; help my unbelief.'
- Acts 4:29-30 – the early church prayed for the miraculous.
- Hebrews 2:4 – God confirmed his message through miracles.

36) WHY AM I HERE?

Aim - To instill a sense of purpose and vision and to combat apathy or purposelessness in someone's life

[Teaser]

I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11) [NIV]

What's your purpose in life? Why are you here?

[Thought]

Someone once said... "When it comes to the future, there are three kinds of people: those who let it happen, those who make it happen, and those who wonder what happened". God wants us to be people who make things happen; who are engaged with life and "**making the most of every opportunity**", which is what Paul encourages us to do in Ephesians 5:16.

So how can we be people who make things happen? First, we need to have a sense of **purpose in life** – to know why we're here. You're here on earth because that's the way God planned things. You're not an accident. Psalm 139:13 says that God made each of us by hand: "*You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.*"

God has a plan and a purpose for your life. Psalm 139:4 says: "*Before a word is on my tongue, you, LORD, know it completely.*" That doesn't mean that God has already written a script for your life; but it does mean that God knows you so well that he knows how you'll respond in different situations. You can trust that the plans he has for your life are going to be good ones.

So join in with the purpose God has for your life, and choose to live intentionally; giving everything you have and everything you are to God. God invites you to join Him in His world-changing mission; to love people like he does, to serve people, to point people towards Jesus – **to see God's Kingdom come** and will be done right here, right now on the earth.

How do you do that? First, avoid the things that make you passive. For example, don't spend so much time playing video games or watching TV that your friendships suffer or you forget to spend time with God. Second, avoid people who try to control you and make you do what they want; choose friends who will help you make the most of your life.

There'll be lots of times when you don't feel very enthusiastic, or when life gets hard. But then you can do what David did in Psalm 103:1 where he stirs himself up and chooses to praise God, even though perhaps he doesn't feel like it. He says: "*Praise the Lord, O my soul!*" He reminds himself of how great, and wise and loving God is – and by the end of the psalm he's full of enthusiasm again!

As you get to know God better, you'll find out more about the specific purpose that God has for your life. You have a unique set of gifts that God wants you to use for him. As you spend more time with him, he'll show you exactly how you can do that.

Also, expect God to speak to you through the Bible, sometimes through a key verse that seems to jump out at you. Expect God to speak to you through the wisdom of other Christians that you trust, as you talk to them about what you want to do with your life and ask them to pray for you. Expect to experience the Holy Spirit nudging at your soul, with peace, or excitement, or a sense of conviction that something needs to change.

All that will come as you commit to being a person who works with God to make things happen.

A man came to Jesus once and asked him what the most important thing in life was. Jesus answered that we are to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. The main purpose of your life is to love God, love people, love yourself and love God's world – with your whole being and with God's help. So what are you waiting for?

[Challenge]

Are there things in your life that make you passive – too much time on social media perhaps, or spent in front of the TV? Being with people with whom you can't be yourself? Why not choose to spend time instead asking God to show you his plan for your life? Or meet up with a friend you trust and talk things through with them.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

God created your inmost being; he knitted you together in your mother's womb.

Take some time to thank God that he knows and loves you completely. Breathe in God's love and imagine it filling every part of you.

Thank God that he has a plan and purpose for your life, that he has good things in store for you. Tell God how that makes you feel.

Ask God to reveal his plans for your life when the time is right. Talk to God about your desire to be someone who makes things happen.

'Creator God, we praise you for the immense care and love with which you created us and the world that we live in. Lord, we want to be people who make things happen, who are in line with the purposes of God and seeing your plans unfold in our lives. Show us the steps we need to take. In Jesus' name, Amen.'

[Discuss]

What are your dreams for your future? How would you like to get involved in what God is doing in the world?

[additional Bible verses]

- Proverbs 3:5-6 – Trust God completely and he will show you which way to go in life.
- Proverbs 19:21 – Ultimately, God's will for our lives is more important than our own plans.
- Jeremiah 29:11-14 – God has a plan for our lives, and it's a good one!
- Romans 12:1-3 – Paul encourages us to worship God wholeheartedly.
- Ephesians 1:11-12 – God has chosen us to be part of his family.

37) HOW CAN GOD BE THREE IN ONE?

Aim - to explore the Bible's teaching on the Trinity and the nature of the relationship within the Godhead.

[Teaser]

Baptise people in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
(Matthew 28:19) [NIV]

Why do Christians believe in the Trinity: that God is three in one?

[Thought]

Today we're thinking about an aspect of God that can be hard to get our head around – the trinity. Christians worship one God who is three persons – **Father, Son and Spirit**.

How can God be one and yet three at the same time? Isaiah 55:9 reminds us that God's thoughts and the way he does things are far above ours, so we can't expect to fully understand everything about God.

At the same time, God really wants us to know him and to love him. If you look at his creation, he has given us some other things that are three in one. Take the chemical H₂O for example, which as you know is water. It can exist in three different states depending on the temperature: as a liquid - water, as a solid - ice and as a vapour - steam. All three are distinct, different and yet the same in essence.

The word 'trinity' doesn't appear in the Bible, but the existence of one God in three persons is clearly there. For example, in Mark 1:9-11, when John baptises Jesus in the Jordan River, he sees the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove, and hears God the Father's voice from heaven saying to Jesus "*This is my son whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*" Father, Son and Spirit were present at Jesus' baptism.

Understanding more about the Trinity can really open up more of what God is like. The Bible tells us three things about all three parts of God.

First of all they are **equal**. One is not more important or more impressive than any other. They choose to co-operate together in a constantly honouring way.

Secondly, all three are **eternal**. God is, always has been and always will be there, all three parts of Him. Genesis 1:1 talks about the Spirit of God hovering over the waters before the world is created. Colossians 1:16 says that Jesus was there at creation and that all things were created through him.

Thirdly, each person of the Godhead has a different emphasis. God the Father is the '**Originator**' of Creation; Jesus the Son is the '**Great Revealer**' making the Father known to us; the Holy Spirit is the '**Empowerer**', enabling us to live as God wants us to. We need God as Father, Son and Spirit operating in our lives.

The trinity also reminds us that God is relational. Ephesians 3:14 says that God is the first family, from whom every family on earth takes its name. He is the original team, which is why he always expects us to operate in teams.

The fact that God is three in one shows that God loves unity and diversity. The universe is extravagantly diverse, and yet cohesive; each part affects the whole. The same is true with people. God loves that you are an individual and utterly unique. But he also loves it when we work together in unity, when we co-exist and co-operate and are co-equal.

The trinity also reminds us that God is not male. God made people in his image, both male and female. The Holy Spirit is often referred to in both Old and New Testament in

the feminine form, because ultimately God is neither male nor female. Both men and women are made in his image and are equal in his sight.

The trinity may be a new idea to you, but it's a unique part of the Christian faith. Our thinking, loving God can be seen - by scripture and by experience - to be the trinity; the three in one God, loving and cooperating. What a great example for us to copy and aspire to.

[Challenge]

Your challenge today is to think about the relational nature of the trinity – how God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit cooperate and work together. How good are you at working with others? How could you be a better friend and be better connected to the people around you? Ask God to help you to love just like God does.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

God hears and responds to all our prayers, whether we pray to God as Father, or to Jesus, or to the Spirit.

Focus your thoughts on God the Father, thanking him for his love and care for you.

Think about Jesus the Son, and ask him to make God known to you.

Open yourself up to God's Spirit, and ask the Spirit to fill you with God's power.

'Loving God, we thank you that you make yourself known to us in so many ways, but we also recognise that you are God and we struggle to understand you fully. Please show us more of yourself as Father, Son and Spirit. Help us to grow in relationship to you and to each other. Amen.'

[Discuss]

Do you find the trinity mind-boggling? Can you think about other ways to explain how God can be one and three at the same time?

[additional Bible verses]

- Genesis 1:26 – when God creates the heavens and the earth, he refers to himself in the plural: 'Let *us* make...'
- Romans 8 – read it all and see how all of the members of the trinity work together for your good.
- 2 Corinthians 13:14 – Paul ends one of his letters with a prayer to the Father, Son and Spirit.
- Ephesians 2:18 – Paul writes about how the trinity works together for our salvation.
- 1 John 4:16 - God is love, and even before God created the world and the people in it, the three persons of God loved and were loved.

38) WHAT'S THE TRUTH ABOUT THE END OF THE WORLD?

Aim - To look at what the Bible teaches about the end times and the implications of that for how we live now.

[Teaser]

The disciples asked, 'What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the world?' (Matthew 24:3) [NIV]

Have you ever wondered how the world will end... and what will happen to you?

[Thought]

Today we're talking about a nice, easy topic: the end of the world! Hollywood has given us films that imagine the world ending when aliens invade, or when a huge comet hits us. Some religions teach that the world won't have an end; that through a process of recycling, history goes round in a circle for ever and ever.

What you believe about the end of the world affects how you live in it now.

So it's really important that we get our ideas about the end of the world from the Bible, and let the vision it gives us of the future impact our lives now.

So what does the Bible say? Jesus talked about the fact that he would return to earth at some point in the future. Mark 13:26 says that people will see the Son of Man (Jesus) coming in clouds with great power and glory.

Revelation 21:1 talks about there being "*a new heaven and a new earth*" – and the word 'new' there means 'renewed', so this earth will be restored to the way God originally made it. Colossians 1:15-23 says that Jesus created all things, rules over all things, and will redeem all things. That means that he'll put right everything that was spoilt and broken by sin, including this world that we live in.

Perhaps that's the first thing to understand then – that we look forward to a time when this world will be restored, when Jesus will return and we'll live for eternity with God, in his presence.

That means that the scientists who predict that the world will be completely destroyed in some kind of nuclear explosion are wrong. It means too that we need to be careful about how we understand some bits of the Bible. When we read in 2 Peter 3:12 that "*the heavens will be destroyed by fire and the elements will melt in the heat*" – that must be pictorial language because we know there will be a world for Jesus to come back to.

What does the Bible tell us about Jesus' return? What will it be like? There are three Greek words used in the New Testament to describe it. The first - apokalypsis - gives us the word apocalypse, and means a dramatic, earth-shaking revelation. The second - epiphaneia - means the revealing of that which was hidden. And the third word - parousia - means the arrival of the Divine. So Jesus' return will dramatically reveal to everyone in the world the arrival of God in all His Glory. (Mark 13:26)

We won't be able to miss it! The first time Jesus came to earth, it was deliberately low-key; there were just a few shepherds there at his birth. The second time won't be like that at all – it will be an amazing event!

When will Jesus come back? Jesus himself said that no one knows when the second coming will be except God himself (Mark 13:32). So if you hear the papers reporting someone saying the world will end on a particular date, you can be confident that they're actually clueless! Only God knows when Jesus will return.

However, Jesus said that we should live as if he is about to come back any minute! That means being right with God, and living wholeheartedly for him right now. We look forward to Jesus' return to earth; to him making everything new. We look forward to a literal eternity living in God's presence. We don't know when that will begin, but we need to be ready for it today!

[Challenge]

If you knew that Jesus was coming back to earth tomorrow, what would you do today to put things right with other people? He may come back tomorrow, so sort those things out today!

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

How do you feel about the idea that the world is ending?

Perhaps you're unsure about whether you'll be with God for eternity – if you've committed your life to Jesus then you will, so thank God for that.

Perhaps you feel afraid – talk to God about that fear and ask him to replace it with his love.

Perhaps you feel worried about people you love who don't yet know Jesus – ask God for opportunities to share your faith with them.

'Lord, thinking about the end of the world is mind-blowing. Thank you that we can trust that you have everything under control. You know when and how it will happen. Thank you that you have given us the promise of eternal life with you. Help us to live today as if you were going to return tomorrow. In Jesus' name, Amen.'

[Discuss]

How does talking about the end of the world make you feel? Excited? Afraid? Confused? What questions do you have?

[additional Bible verses]

- Isaiah 65:17-25 – God's vision for the new creation.
- John 14:1-3 – Jesus is preparing a place for us to spend eternity with him.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 – the Bible says we will meet Jesus in the air!
- 2 Timothy 3:1-5 – as this world heads towards its end, many people are going to descend into greater and greater sin; the culture is going to get worse, not better.
- Revelation 22:12-21 – the last words of the Bible.

39) WHAT'S THE TRUTH ABOUT HEAVEN?

Aim - To root our understanding about our eternal destiny in scripture; where do we go, why, when and what's it like?

[Teaser]

We are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness lives (2 Peter 3:13) [NIV]

What do you think heaven will be like?

[Thought]

Now you are a Christian, your eternal destiny has changed! After you die, you will spend eternity in heaven.

I wonder how that makes you feel? If we're not careful, we can end up with funny ideas about what heaven is like. We usually don't actually get these funny ideas from the Bible but from kind, but perhaps unhelpful ideas, like when our gerbil died: "Oh, Squeaky is now a shining star in the sky." Or from films showing clouds, wings and harps, people in all-white suits and pearly gates.

So what does the Bible actually say about heaven? The Bible talks more about Heaven being God's Kingdom rather than just a place. God is the King of heaven, and we are citizens of heaven, not just when we die, but right now! Kingdoms also have their own culture, based on values and laws. Heaven is where the values of love, peace, joy, generosity, kindness and justice are lived out, and where pain, suffering, sickness, sin and Satan are outlawed.

We can begin to experience heaven on earth here and now, seeing our friends become Christians, seeing people healed, seeing justice come; seeing forgiveness given and received. We always know there's more to come, and we look forward to it in faith as we live here on the earth now. Hebrews 11:15 talks about the heroes of the faith in the Old Testament and how they were all longing for a better country; a heavenly one.

It's a mistake to think that Jesus died for us just to get us to Heaven. Jesus died for us so that we might have fullness of life, starting right here and now, not just after we die. Jesus said in John 10:10: *"I have come that you might have life, and life in all its fullness."*

What will heaven be like? You can forget the harps, wings and fluffy clouds! The idea that we 'escape' the physical world which is filthy and corrupt, and end up in a 'spiritual' world of purity and light is not Biblical. Its roots come from a Greek philosopher called Plato. He thought that everything we can experience here on earth is rubbish and only a pale imitation of what it should be like in the 'spiritual' world. He had a split view of reality - earth 'over here' which he called the Land of Shadows, and spiritual truth 'over there'. That view is called dualism.

The Bible however overlaps the 'here and now' and the 'there and then'. We are to live as Christians pulling the future into the present, bringing bits of heaven such as forgiveness, healing and love to earth.

Eventually, instead of us going to heaven, heaven comes to us. Revelation 21:1 says there will be a new heaven and a new earth where God comes to live with his people. That word 'new' actually means 'renewed'; it will be a world where everything is put right like God originally intended. No more sadness, no more sickness, no more suffering, no more sin and no more death. How awesome will that be?

When Jesus came back to life after he died, he had a resurrection body which was the same as his old one, but also different. He could cook fish and be touched, but it seemed

to take people longer to recognise him. He could also suddenly appear in a room without going through a door! You can read about it in John 20:11-29. That's the kind of body we will have too.

So Jesus didn't come from his father to get us to heaven, but to bring heaven to us. He didn't come to make us more spiritual, but to make us fully human; the way God originally intended. We can start to experience that now, but we've got a lot more to look forward to when we spend eternity in the new heaven and new earth with Jesus.

[Challenge]

Think about how accurate your view of heaven is. Maybe you've thought of it as a place full of clouds and angels, instead of the new heaven and new earth that the Bible describes. If that's true, why not draw a picture of how you imagined it. Then rip that up, and draw or write a description of what the Bible says heaven will be like!

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Spend some time thanking God for the gift of eternal life that he has given you.

Think about how you would like to see heaven come here on earth now. Talk to God about it and ask for his Spirit to be at work.

Tell God how you feel about the thought of heaven and spending eternity with him. You can be completely honest. Ask God to help you capture a vision of what that future will be like.

'Creator God, we thank you that you have the power to restore everything that has been spoilt by sin. We look forward to a future in the new heaven and new earth with you. Empower us by your Spirit to bring parts of heaven here on earth now, so that people will see what you are like and want to join in. In Jesus' name, Amen.'

[Discuss]

How do you feel about the thought of spending eternity with Jesus in the new heaven and the new earth?

[additional Bible verses]

- John 14:1-4 – Jesus promises to bring us home to home.
- 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 – Paul talks about how we will be changed when Jesus returns.
- Ephesians 2:6-7 – we will rule and reign with Jesus in the new heaven and new earth.
- Philippians 1:21 – Paul wasn't afraid of dying because he knew it would be even better than living!
- Revelation 21:1-5 – God's future vision of heaven.

40) WHAT'S THE TRUTH ABOUT HELL?

Aim - Exploring what the Bible says about Hell, what it's like and who it's for.

[Teaser]

God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment. (2 Peter 2:4)

What's the truth about hell? What is it and who is it for?

[Thought]

If someone says the word 'devil', what image springs to mind? Often we visualise the devil as a horned red monster with a tail, wielding a pitchfork he uses to shovel people into hell. The devil was first depicted like that in medieval times, when people couldn't read and artists wanted to show how evil the devil was.

Many people today treat the devil almost like a comedy cartoon character. Yet there's no doubt that **the devil is real**, and is utterly evil. We can forget about the horns, the pitchfork and the red skin, but never make the mistake of underestimating how evil the devil is. The Bible calls him a **liar** and a **murderer** in John 8:44, and says he's like a **proving lion** looking for victims, in 1 Peter 5:8.

We need to have a grown-up view of the devil. We also need a good understanding of the devil's final destination – hell.

No-one likes to think or speak about hell but the problem is that Jesus Christ did speak about it. Jesus didn't just speak about the reality of life with God in Heaven after we die, but he also spoke in numerous places about life without God in Hell. And when he spoke about Hell, he used a number of different pictures or metaphors.

In Matthew 22:13 Jesus describes Hell as a place of '**outer darkness**' where there will be '*weeping and gnashing of teeth*'. In Mark 9:48 Jesus describes Hell as a place where "*where the maggots never die and the fire never goes out.*" In Matthew 10:28 Jesus describes Hell as a place where "**your soul and body are destroyed.**" Yet in Matthew 25:46 Jesus describes Hell as a place of "**eternal punishment**". But then John 3:16 Jesus says that if you don't have eternal life with God then you will "**perish**" – things that are perishable eventually cease to be.

But Jesus descriptions create some problems for us if we try and take them literally.

- Is Hell a place of fire or outer darkness?
- Is Hell a place where we suffer in eternal conscious torment or after a period of suffering are we eventually destroyed –we eventually cease to be?

Perhaps the main purpose of Jesus teachings is to inform us of the reality of Hell and most importantly, to lovingly warn us that this is not a good life choice to make? That life without God is Hell – in this life and the next.

The Bible is also clear about who hell was designed for. Jesus says in Matthew 25:41 that an eternal fire was prepared for the devil and all his angels. So the devil won't be in charge of hell and torturing people there. The devil and all his angels will be destroyed in hell when Jesus returns.

What about us though? Will people be sent to hell? What will happen to them there? Will they be destroyed, or tortured for all eternity?

2 Peter 3:9 reminds us that God doesn't want anyone to go to Hell. People choose for themselves. Everyone has the opportunity to respond to God's love and forgiveness. If they choose to give their lives to God here on earth, they will spend eternity in God's

presence. However, people who reject God's love and forgiveness are choosing an eternity separated from God. Ultimately, that's what makes hell, hell: being separate from God.

Christians do have different views about the nature of Hell - i.e. do people suffer for all eternity in hell or are people eventually destroyed forever. However, most Christians agree that we only have this life to make a choice to love God – there are no second chances.

But Hell should never be used as a scare tactic to get people into heaven! Instead, let's tell people how great God is and encourage them to choose to receive his love and forgiveness in this life now, and to spend eternity with him in the future.

[Challenge]

Think of someone you know who hasn't yet given their life to God. Pray that God will give you an opportunity to share the good news of Jesus with them. Then go and do it!

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Jesus has defeated death and hell through his death and resurrection.

Spend some time praising him for what he has done.

Spend some time praising him for what he will do in the future when he makes everything new.

Spend some time thanking him for giving you the chance to spend eternity with him.

'Lord Jesus, we praise you that you have defeated the powers of darkness on the cross. You have given us life and a future with you. Help us to share this amazing good news with people who don't know you so that they have a chance to respond to God's love. Amen.'

[Discuss]

What do you think about hell? What have you heard about it?

[additional Bible verses]

- Matthew 10:28 – the opposite of eternal life isn't torture; it's total destruction. Jesus gladly, urgently offers us the former.
- Luke 16:19-31 – Jesus tells a story about a man in a place of torment – we don't know whether this is a literal picture, but the message about about our lifestyle is clear
- Luke 23:32-43 – even at the last moments of life, Jesus gives someone the opportunity to choose to follow him and enter paradise.
- 2 Peter 3:9 – reminds us that God doesn't want anyone to step in to eternity without knowing him.
- Revelation 20:10 – tells us of the final destination for the devil.

41) BAPTISM

Aim - To explore the nature and purpose of biblical baptism

[Teaser]

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

But what can you do to show this is real for you?

[Thought]

Today we're thinking about baptism. You may have been to a baptism before, but in case you haven't we'd better explain what baptism is. It's a ceremony which usually takes place during a church service, and involves water!

Some churches baptise babies, and will sprinkle some water on their heads. Other churches only baptise old children, young people and adults, and some of them will do it by what's called 'full immersion.' The person being baptised is lowered completely under the water, and then brought up again dripping wet! So what does baptism mean and why do people do it?

Baptism is a form of initiation into the church; a way of welcoming in new members and saying that they now **belong to the church family**.

Baptism is also an important step of **obedience to Jesus**. When he left his disciples after the resurrection, Jesus gave them this command in Mathew 28:19: to make "*disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*"

Jesus himself was baptised to set us an example. Mark 1:9 tells the story of Jesus being baptised in the river Jordan by his cousin John. If it was good enough for Jesus, it should be good enough for us!

Baptisms in the New Testament were always very public affairs. In Acts 2:41 it says that 3,000 people were baptised after the Day of Pentecost! So baptism is a way of **publicly declaring your faith** in front of your friends and family, showing how much your commitment to Jesus means to you.

Usually at baptisms, there is an opportunity for the person being baptised to give their testimony; to talk about how they came to be a Christian and what God has done in their lives. That might feel like a scary thing to do, but often God uses this to bring other people to know him. It's also a great reminder to look back on if things get tough, to recall the stand you made for God in front of others and to hold onto God's promises from that time.

Baptism then is about belonging, obedience and a public witness. There are also two very important things that are symbolised in the water involved in baptism. Just as having a bath makes us physically clean, so baptism is a brilliant reminder that **Jesus** has washed our sins away and has **made us spiritually clean**.

Also, being baptised symbolises us **dying to our old way of life** – to sin and selfishness – and then being **raised up as a new creation**. Romans 6:4 says "*we were buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.*" Baptism by full immersion is a vivid picture of that. The person being baptised is lowered under the water... and if they stayed there, they would die! But then they are brought up out of the water again, to symbolise being raised to life with Jesus.

Not only then is baptism about belonging, obedience and making a public stand for Jesus; it's also an illustration of our being washed clean of all sin, and the new life we begin in Christ. It's an amazing thing to do!

Churches celebrate baptism in different ways. If you were baptised as a baby, then your family were making a statement of faith about their expectation that you would follow Jesus as you got older. It's called covenant theology: the belief that God will save future generations of people who already know and love him. If you were baptised as a baby, then you can probably get confirmed in your church as a teenager or adult. This is a way of saying that you own for yourself the promises that were made on your behalf when you were a baby.

Getting baptised is a fantastic thing to do and something you will never regret.

[Challenge]

Talk to someone in your church and find out about their baptism process. If you feel God is nudging you to get baptised, then talk to someone you trust and explore that further, finding out what you need to do.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

Find a place where you can be quiet. Breathe deeply and become still on the inside as well.

Think about what you've heard about baptism. Tell God how you feel about it. Then ask God to show you if he wants you to be baptised, or to publicly show your commitment to him in some way.

You may not sense anything straight away, but you can be sure that God will make it clear whether he wants you to be baptised or not.

'Jesus, thank you for all that you have done in our lives, giving us new life, washing us clean, enabling us to live for you. Thank you for baptism as a way of demonstrating our commitment to you. Help us to be obedient to what you're calling us to. In your name, Amen.'

[Discuss]

Do you need to be baptised?

[additional Bible verses]

- Mark 1:9-11 – When John baptises Jesus, it is an extraordinary holy moment!
- Acts 9:18 – Saul was a man who persecuted the first Christians. But then he met Jesus, changed his name to Paul and wrote most of the New Testament! He was baptised to show his commitment to Jesus.
- Acts 16:16-34 – a jailer and his whole family are baptised when God rescues Paul and Silas from prison.
- Romans 6:3-6 – Paul explains what happens when we are baptised; we die to the old self, and we're raised with Christ!
- Galatians 3:26-28 – Paul talks about baptism bringing unity, showing that we are all children of God.

42) KEEP GROWING

Aim - to encourage the follower of Jesus to engage in a regular and thorough 'D.I.Y. Check over' spiritually, and enlist help in a spiritual 'spring clean'.

[Teaser]

Examine me, God, from head to foot. Make sure I'm fit inside and out so I never lose sight of your love, but keep in step with you, never missing a beat. (Psalm 26:2-3) [The Message]

Are you fit inside and out?

[Thought]

All of us can benefit from a spiritual check-over: an intentional examination of our body, mind and soul to see how we're doing with God. Of course, we need a regular habit of prayer; talking to Jesus, confessing what we've done wrong and asking for forgiveness. It's also really helpful though to set aside time once a year to sit down and examine our lives. Having a regular check-over can help identify what's holding us back and enable us to deal with it. It can help to do this with a friend or mentor.

Romans 12:1-2 is a good place to start. It says: *"offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."*

So we need to present ourselves to God; to intentionally put our lives under the spotlight and ask God to show us the areas that we need to deal with. Then we're to be living sacrifices, not just a one-off sacrifice like in the Old Testament. We need to keep on giving our lives to God, so how about committing to do this once a year - perhaps on your birthday, or on the 1st January to help you remember?

Paul says we need to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, so it's good to think about the different parts of our bodies and what needs clearing out and cleaning up. Think about the things you've done over the last year; the places you've been, the things you've handled and the habits you've formed. Is there anything that you know isn't pleasing to God? Tell him about it and ask him to transform you by his Spirit.

Then Paul says we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. It's very easy for our minds to get cluttered up with bad memories, negative thoughts or unhelpful stuff that we've seen or heard.

Taking time to pray through negative thoughts, choosing to fill our minds with God's word, and asking someone to pray for healing from our negative memories can all help to renew our minds. We also need our consciences to be cleansed and renewed. Satan is called the 'accuser' of God's people in Revelation 12:10. He's always trying to make us feel guilty, and condemned. Taking time to examine our consciences, to ask for God's forgiveness, will help us to see that Satan's accusations are false.

Doing this kind of check-over will probably show you different areas where you need to do some work, or where you haven't followed Jesus as closely as you could.

Don't be tricked into thinking that you've failed or that you're not good enough. Use this opportunity to set yourself some goals that will help you grow in relationship with Jesus.

For example, if this check-over shows that you need to spend more time reading the Bible, you might decide that for the four weeks, you're going to read a chapter of Matthew each day and write down one thing that strikes you about it.

That's a brilliant example of what's called a SMART goal – a goal that is **Specific**, not waffly; that is **Measurable** so you know if you've hit it. It's **Achievable** – rather than being too extreme; it's **Relevant** to you and what you're interested in; and it's **Time-related**: doing something for a period of time.

All of this will result in the development of your character, which means you'll become a little more like Jesus. By the time your next annual check-over comes round, you'll be able to push for more. So take time to examine your life, set some goals for the year ahead and enjoy the stretch!

[Challenge]

Your challenge today is to decide when you're going to do a spiritual check-over and who you're going to do it with. As you reach the end of 42, it would be a good opportunity to reflect on how you've got on. Choose someone you trust, who you can be honest with. Talk to them about how to do this spiritual check-over. Then get a date in the diary.

[Prayer]

(pause to pray between phrases)

As you prepare for doing a spiritual check-over, spend some time reminding yourself of God's love for you. There is nothing you can do to make God love you less; there is nothing you can do to make God love you more.

Invite God's Spirit to begin to work in your heart, bringing things to light that God wants you to deal with.

Ask God to bless the person that you'll do the check-over with. Ask him also that you'll be able to be completely honest with them, and that God will use them to help you get closer to him.

'Thank you Lord for your deep love for us, that never changes or fails. No matter what we do we will always be your children. We invite you Lord to work in our hearts and show us the things we need to deal with, so that we can follow you more faithfully. In Jesus name, Amen.'

[Discuss]

How do you feel about the idea of a spiritual check-up? .

[additional Bible verses]

- Galatians 4:8-20 – Paul is concerned about this church which is sliding backwards in the faith; use this as an inspiration not to likewise. Instead, aim to see 'Christ formed in you.'
- Ephesians 6:10-18 – Use Paul's description of the armour of God as something to measure yourself against.
- Philippians 1:4-6 – God has begun a work in you – of making you more like Jesus – and he intends to see it through to completion.
- Hebrews 10:22-23 – no matter how you've done in the last year, you can come to God in confidence knowing that he loves and forgives you.
- Hebrews 12:1-3 – the writer compares the Christian life to a race that's worth training for.

CONGRATULATIONS!

YOU'VE COMPLETED 42.

**WHY NOT GO THROUGH IT AGAIN,
SPENDING MORE TIME READING,
UNDERSTANDING AND APPLYING
THE ADDITIONAL BIBLE
READINGS.**