

CONNECT I

WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

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

How do you think of God?

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

First read through the story in its entirety (in the left column and overleaf). Then re-read it one paragraph at a time, discussing the questions as you go.

LUKE 15 v 11-13

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. 13 "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

v 14-19

14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

v 11-13

What did the son ask for?

Why was this so outrageous?

Why do you think the younger son wanted to leave home?

What was the younger son's attitude to his father?

What was the father's attitude to his son?

v 14-19

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

What did the younger son discover?

How did this change his attitude?

17 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'

20 So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 21 "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 "Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 31 "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

What did the son decide to do?

v 20-24

The son would have been regarded as spiritually "unclean" because of his contact with pigs and to have brought disgrace on his family by leaving. The robe, ring and sandals represent forgiveness and restoration to the family.

How did the father respond when his son returned?

When did the father accept him back?

What does this tell us about the father?

How does he describe the change in his son?

What does he mean?

v 25-28

Why do you think the elder son was so angry?

How does the father respond?

What does this tell us about the father?

v 29-32

What reason does the son give for his resentment?

What word does the older brother use to describe his relationship with his father?

What do we see of the older son's view of and attitude towards his father?

How does this attitude compare with his brother?

How does the father answer his son?

How does the older son's description of his brother compare with the father's description of him?



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

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

What has most stood out for you from looking at this parable?

What do we learn about God's character from the father in the story?

Which son do you most identify with? Why?

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



CONNECT 2

WHY DOES GOD MATTER?

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

Do you think God matters?

If God exists, what do you see as the implications for us?

The heart of following Jesus is getting to know God and learning to bring our life into line with his. The Bible claims to be the record of God revealing himself to mankind in human history. It teaches us what God is like so that we can learn to interact with him as he intended us to. In this study we'll look at three foundational aspects of God: God as creator, God as judge and God as rescuer.

GOD AS CREATOR

GENESIS 1v1

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

PSALM 24v1-2

The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.

PSALM 95v4-6

In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker

PSALM 139v2-4, 13-16

You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely...

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

Psalms 24 clearly states that the earth, and all that's in it, is owned by God.

What does it mean to own something?

The end of the quote from Psalm 95 gives us several key insights about how to relate to God as our creator. Firstly, relating to God is not automatic; we have to come to him. Secondly, because he made us and everything else, he deserves to be treated with honour; we're to submit ourselves to him. The creator has the right to rule over everything he's created however he sees fit.

...O LORD... you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

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

GOD AS JUDGE

ROMANS 14v10-12

You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God." So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

1 SAMUEL 16v7

... The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.

2 PETER 3v7-10

By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

What do each of these verses tell us about us and God?

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

What is the role of a judge?

Do you see it as a good thing that God will judge our lives?

Why?

GOD AS RESCUER

EZEKIEL 18v23

Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?

LUKE 15v1-7

The tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

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

The Bible teaches that although we're guilty of evil and heading for judgement, God loves us and wants to rescue us.

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

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

CONNECT 3

A BROKEN RELATIONSHIP

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

How do you think our culture would define sin?

ROMANS I v 18-25

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. 25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

What are God's actions and man's actions in these verses?

According to the passage, how would you summarise man's attitude toward God?

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

How have you seen these things reflected in our society?

Can you see any of these things in your own life?

PSALM 14 v 1-3

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good. The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.

PSALM 5 v 4-6

You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong. You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the LORD abhors.

PSALM 36 v 1-2

An oracle is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no fear of God before his eyes. For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin.

What do each of these verses teach us about man's attitude toward God?

According to Psalm 36, why are people often unaware of the seriousness of their sin before God?

The Bible teaches that the ultimate consequence of sin is death, (Romans 6v23). Death is essentially separation. On a physical level we're separated from our bodies. On a relational level we're separated from other people. On a spiritual level we're separated from God for all eternity. The agony of eternal separation from God, the source of all goodness and life, is what the Bible calls hell. As we saw earlier, death and hell is not what God wants for people. However, death cannot be overcome unless the problem of sin is dealt with.

How do you feel about the verses we've just looked at?

ISAIAH 59 v 1-2

Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.

How do these verses describe the consequences of sin?
Where does the problem lie?

How would you define sin in light of this study?
Can you see these attitudes in the world around you?

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

CONNECT 4

GOD'S RESCUE PLAN

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

How did we describe the essence of sin?

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

ISAIAH 53 v 3-8

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

How did the writer predict that Jesus would suffer?

What would be the significance and meaning of Jesus' death?

Because Jesus is God in human flesh, what do we learn about the character of God?

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

ROMANS 3 v 19-28

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. 20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. 21 But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished, 26 he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. 27 Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. 28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

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

What does the law do?

What can’t it do?

How can we be put right with God?

What’s God’s part in this?

What’s our part?

Who’s eligible for God’s forgiveness?

Why?

How would you explain God’s solution for sin in your own words?

What are the implications of our acquittal being based on our faith, not our good deeds?

What does this passage reveal about God’s love?

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

The fact of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is of crucial importance for many reasons. Firstly, it validates his claim to be God’s son, not simply a leader of a Jewish group who was executed by the Romans. Secondly it demonstrates that he has overcome death. Since death is the ultimate consequence of sin, if he’s overcome death then he’s defeated sin and evil. Thirdly it demonstrates what he will one day do for all who trust and follow him, and ultimately for the whole creation, raising it from decay and death and renewing it. Because of the resurrection sin and death no longer have the last word, Jesus has the last word (1 Corinthians 15, Romans 8:17-25).



The claims of Jesus stand or fall on his resurrection. Paul, who wrote the book of Romans we've just read from, also wrote that if Jesus wasn't resurrected those who follow him are wasting their time and are the most pitiful people alive! (1 Corinthians 15:19)

What's new to you from this study?

From the first four studies, how would you summarise what we have seen so far?

God now offers everyone forgiveness and new life and so we're faced with a choice: to respond to his offer or to reject or ignore it. This is the most important choice we can make, determining the direction of our life and our eternal destiny. In the next two studies we'll look more deeply at this choice as well as the implications of receiving God's forgiveness and a new life, entering into a relationship with him and bringing our life into line with his.



CONNECT 5

WEIGHING IT UP

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

MATTHEW 8 v 19-22

Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." Another disciple said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

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

Why do you think Jesus talked so strongly to such a deeply religious man and to another who was already identifying himself with Jesus?

Why do you think Jesus seems to be discouraging both of them from following him?

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

What might these warnings mean for us?

What do you think would be some of the changes involved in following Jesus wholeheartedly?

The term "gospel" means "good news". Why would choosing to follow Jesus be seen as a good thing?

JOHN 3 v 1-7

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." 3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." 4 "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" 5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'

According to Jesus, what was Nicodemus missing?

What does it mean to be born physically?

How is this like becoming a follower of Jesus?

In terms of length, what's the difference between the life we have with our first birth and the life we would have with our second birth?

JOHN 1 v 12-13

To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

What promise does Jesus give in these verses?

What does it mean to believe Jesus and to accept him?

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

- Agreeing with God that you are sinful and cut off from God;
- Believing God to forgive you completely because Jesus died to pay the penalty for your sins;
- Choosing to turn away from anything that would hold you back and let Jesus take first place in your life.

What do you understand by this?

Does it make sense?

PHILIPPIANS 3 v 7-9

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

What has the writer gained?

How important is it to him?

How does this affect his view of life?

What does Paul mean when he says “I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather I become righteousness through faith in Christ”?

How could knowing Jesus be so important?

Like the younger son in the parable we looked at in the first study, to connect with God we need to leave our old life of independence and come back to the father. We cannot come back on the basis of us being good but on the basis of God’s mercy and love for us. In the next study we’ll continue to consider how we can connect with God.

CONNECT 6

A CHOICE TO MAKE

In the last session we looked at what is involved in starting to follow Jesus.

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

Jesus told these two short parables about putting him first in our lives:

MATTHEW 13 v 44-46

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and

What do you think is the main point Jesus is making here?

One Christian author elaborates on these parables like this:

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

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

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

Does anything that John Piper is saying resonate with you?

What does God desire to be in our lives?

What do you see as some of the benefits and costs of following Jesus?

Does it seem worth it?



Jesus gives us this picture to help us understand what it means to open up to him:

REVELATION 3 v 20

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

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

What is the door that Jesus is talking about here? Why does he use this metaphor?

What promise does Jesus give in these verses? How reliable do you think this promise is?

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

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

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

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

"I don't want to explore following Jesus any further at this time."

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

"I am already following Jesus."

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

"I would like to begin to follow Jesus."

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

"I am not yet ready to follow Jesus but would like to discuss things further."

Are there further issues it would be helpful to explore? What would make it possible for you to say "yes" to God?



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

2 CORINTHIANS 5 v 17

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

JOHN 3 v 16

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

COLOSSIANS 2 v 13-14

God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.

HEBREWS 13 v 5-6

God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

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

If you would like to explore further how you can grow in your relationship with Jesus, Agapé produces a series of studies called [Online](#). They explore foundational principles for building a sure, deep and productive friendship with God.

CONNECT A LEADERS GUIDE

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

Connect has been designed to help people explore what the Bible has to say about following Jesus in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. The series is easily transferable and can be used in any number of contexts. Though the studies work best in a small group, they can also be used one on one. Those at any level of spiritual maturity can gain valuable insight from the rich Bible passages used in Connect, but the guiding comments and questions assume little or no previous Biblical knowledge or understanding.

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

THE GROUP

It can be a benefit to have other Christians in your group. But if your group has been advertised as being for non-Christians, make sure that non-Christians are in the majority. Before the first meeting, ask the Christians to initially hold back from answering questions in order to give others time to think and respond.

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

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

WHOSE JOB IS IT?

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

GROUP LEADER'S ROLE

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

GOD'S ROLE

- To have been preparing people to meet him
- To provoke questions in their hearts
- To soften people's hearts and convict them of the truth
- To save people.

FACILITATING

One of your aims is to develop a balanced group dynamic. Your job is to help people share what they think, not just to tell them what you think. It's worth asking yourself beforehand whether your tendency in a small group setting is to say too much or too little.

As facilitator, you will lead the group through the material in each session, taking no more than one hour to complete each session. Get different people to read the paragraphs. Your role is not to teach the content of each card. Few people appreciate being "preached at" in this setting. Instead, direct the group to the Bible by asking the questions and helping the group explore the passages and setting the pace of the discussion. It's important not to go too fast. Don't be afraid of silence. People need time to think and engage with the Bible and there are many insights to be gained from each passage and question. Don't settle for the first "right answer" that's given. But don't let the discussion drag either.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Avoid questions where you are obviously looking for a particular answer. If you need to make a point, make it. The best questions are those which cannot be answered "yes" or "no" as they will open up discussion:

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

CORRECTING

It's not your job to trap people with the gospel. Avoid the temptation to correct people every time you disagree with something they've said. A mark of a good leader is knowing when to keep quiet. Sometimes, however, things will be shared that are misunderstandings of the passage and are important enough to correct. There are several ways to do this. You can ask the person how they have come to the particular conclusion about the passage. Or you can ask others what they think about the point that has been made. If neither of these work you can gently share your understanding; "I think I would see it a little differently...". After you've shared your view, give them a chance to respond to what you've said.

TANGENTS

During the study people will ask questions other than those in the sessions. If the question is important to understanding the study, reflect it to the group. It's better for them to think it through for themselves than for you to answer. If the group can't answer it, you'll need to respond. If you don't know the answer, simply share that you're not sure and will do some research before the next study. If the question will be dealt with later in Connect, ask them if you can note the question and come back to it. If the question is a tangent to the study or not an issue for others in the group, offer to discuss the question with the person after the study.

DIFFICULT DYNAMICS

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

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

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