

An Introduction to Jesus Christ & the Bible

A note to leaders:

This material has been used mainly with postgraduate students who have zero contact with the Bible or Christians. The course is divided into seven sections. Each section contains too much material to cover in one hour, but I hope the material helps you to understand where my questions are coming from! You will need to prepare your own handout for group members. I would suggest this is handed out the previous week to encourage members to prepare from the questions in advance.

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Introduction

Our response to the Bible involves our WHOLE person:

- Mind - we need to study it deeply and rationally.
- Spirit - we need to pray humbly - we need the Holy Spirit of God to help us.
- Will - it is never just an intellectual study, it must lead to action. God, and therefore the Bible, is to be obeyed.
- Whole person - not just when others see us, but all the time.

Reading the Bible on Your Own

We are meant to read and understand God's Word ourselves. We can learn many things from experienced teachers, but it is very important to read the Bible on our own. A good place to start is with the passages we will look at in this course (see below). Read with a humble attitude, ready to learn, looking for what is true. We suggest that you say something like this to God before you read:

“God, I’m an honest seeker after truth. I don’t know if you exist, but if you do, please reveal yourself to me as you really are. Show me if Jesus is your Son and Saviour of the world. If you convince me of this, I will trust Jesus as my Saviour and follow him as my Lord.”

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An Introduction to Jesus Christ & the Bible

Week 1: The Bible and its Message for Today

A Summary of the Bible

It is the story of God acting in human history, not just ideas about living as a human. The main character of the Bible is God. The Bible is about God's relationship with humans in his world, and how he chose one people to bring his blessing to all peoples. God's hero for humans is Jesus - he is our rescuer and our leader to follow.

Correcting some common misunderstandings:

- The Bible is not difficult and not only for experts, but it does take effort.
- The message of the Bible is for all kinds of people, peasants & academics, Chinese, Africans, Westerners, everyone!
- The message is simple to understand, but many people don't understand. To understand its message we need God's help.
- The Bible is not out-of-date and irrelevant - God never changes, nor does human nature.
- The Bible is not a Western philosophy, like Marxism. It was written by Asians, in the Middle East. Jesus was Jewish.
- The Bible is not a political manifesto, but following Jesus affects all of life.
- The Bible is not just a book of religious rules for good people.
- The Bible is very critical of most religious people. (Matthew 23)
- The Bible deals with the most important questions of life. For example: Who am I? Why am I here? Does my life have any purpose? What is real freedom?

Why do we have the Bible?

There are many different ways that human societies decide what is true.

- Majority opinion (e.g. democracy)
- Expert opinion (e.g. scientists)
- Tradition (e.g. elders)

All these ways can be wrong.

The only way we can REALLY KNOW the truth of God is if he tells us. The Bible is a record of historical EVENTS & the EXPLANATIONS OF GOD. This is called REVELATION.

The Bible is God speaking and revealing himself to humans.

Facts about the Bible:

- The Bible is the collection of books used by Christians.
 - The origin of the word "Bible" is the Greek word "biblia" which means "writings" or "little books". It is not one book, but a library of 66 books.
 - The oldest book was written before 1400 BC (3400 years ago); the last was written before 100 AD.
 - It was written by about 40 different authors - some were kings, others shepherds, fishermen, prophets*, even a doctor...
 - It includes many different styles of writing: history & biography, official records, laws, letters to new Christian communities and individual leaders, poetry & songs to God, wise sayings, and prophesy*. It is not made-up stories, but real events.
 - *Note: Prophecy is words spoken by prophets that are recognised as messages from God to the people at the time, and written down for us, because they are important for all people of all times.
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- The original languages of the Bible were Hebrew & Aramaic (Old Testament) & Greek (New Testament).

- The Bible has been translated into many more languages than any other book. There are many translations in English. The “New International Version” (NIV) is a translation that is used by many English-speaking churches today.

A Look at the Bible

Two main sections:

Old Testament - 39 books written before Jesus. Key idea: God’s dealings with one people to bring his blessing to all peoples - God’s promises.

New Testament - 27 books. Key ideas: the life & death of Jesus and its meaning - God fulfils his promises - and how this changes everything for people then, and today.

Note: “Testament” is another word for covenant. This is an agreement set up by God so that humans may have a relationship with him. The whole Bible has one consistent message.

Finding Things in the Bible

Look at page 4 in the New International Version. Some paragraphs have a title that is *in italics*. “*Adam and Eve*”, “*The Fall of Man*”, “*Cain and Abel*”. These were added by the translators to help summarise what that paragraph is about. They are not in the original books, and should not be confused with the text of the Bible itself.

Each book is divided into chapters. The chapters are identified by large numbers. Each chapter is divided into verses. Each verse is identified by a small number. The chapter and verse numbers were added to make it easier to find things in the Bible. The original books were not divided into chapters and verses.

To find a passage in the Bible, identify the book, chapter and verse. For example Micah 6:8 is the book of Micah, chapter 6, verse 8. Look up the book in the Contents to find the page number for chapter 1 of Micah. Then look forward in the book to find the right chapter and verse.

The Message of the Bible

These verses describe some important things God has told us. Find them in the Bible.

Revelation 21:1-4 the wonderful future for humans who go God’s way.

Deuteronomy 32:3-5 contrast the honour of God and human shame.

Psalms 139:1-6,23-24 God knows all about us. Ask him the way.

Romans 10:9-11 God’s rescue plan.

Titus 2:11-14 the motivation to live God’s way now.

God tells us about the world and it’s need; that all people have gone wrong and turned away from God; and how they can come back to know God. The life and death of Jesus are central to God’s rescue plan for the world.

Leaders notes for “The Message of the Bible” section:

Now we’re only very briefly looking at these verses, to help you become familiar with using the Bible, and to give you a little taste of what the message of the Bible is. From next week, we will mainly look at one passage in the Bible quite deeply each week.

Revelation 21:1-4 A vision of the end of the world as we know it, or rather the beginning of the wonderful future for humans who go God’s way. Isn’t this the kind of world we all want? Well, God promises it will be like this for some people - no more pain, no more death! So we all ask what sort of people will be in this fantastic place? Certainly not everyone is there. Revelation 20:11-15 There will be a final judgment of everyone to see if their life has been

lived God’s way, and not everyone will see perfect & full life with God. Many will face a second death that lasts forever.

Deuteronomy 32:3-5 contrasts the honour of God and human shame. As we have dishonoured God by ignoring him or rejecting him, and acting corruptly to benefit ourselves, how can we expect God to honour us by welcoming us into his new heaven and new earth?

Psalms 139:1-6,23-24 God knows everything about us - all the good we do, and all the worst thoughts and feelings we have. That could be very frightening, couldn't it? Yet the man who wrote this psalm - a king, David - had stolen another man's wife and murdered her husband, yet he had the courage to ask God to help him live in the way that lasts forever. We may ask God to help us live that way.

Romans 10:9-11 - a short summary of God's rescue plan. We will look at this more over the next few weeks, but it's a plan that shows there is a way for us not to be ashamed before the God we have dishonoured.

Let them read this at home.

Titus 2:11-14 the motivation to live God's way now

Some Applications:

What is the Bible's teaching about history?

The world had a beginning, it has not always existed. Also, it has a purpose (which up to Genesis 2 God has not yet expressed). This means the world is ordered, not random, it is going somewhere to fulfill God's purpose for it. This is also one of the reasons that modern science grew from a Western culture that had been deeply influenced by the Bible's teaching. These scientists believed that God had made the world in a way that meant that if you did an experiment tomorrow, you would get the same result as today. They believed they were "thinking God's thoughts after him".

What is the Bible's teaching about whether some people are more important than others?

All people are like God in some way. All, therefore, have dignity and significance, and are part of God's purpose for his world, not just those who are successful or rich. Treating educated people better than uneducated is horrible to God. Treating poor people badly, or ignoring them, is also horrible to God. This is also true of mistreating children (and killing unborn babies*), because it means we are treating someone who is like God badly, and shows we do not respect God. (*Careful here as many educated Chinese believe abortion is fine for convenience, and some in your group may have already had one.)

We are made to love God and other people, and to be loved by God & others.

A summary of Genesis 1-2:

It's about:

- God
- God's Word - He speaks - [Jesus is God revealing himself to humans]
- God's Pleasure and Purpose - the world is good and ordered.
- God's Image - humans can relate to God (we are like him, so all humans have dignity & significance) & we rule under him.
- God's Rest - where God and humans have a perfect relationship
- God's Rule - he is in charge

God's People in God's Place under God's Rule

But the world we live in today is not like this, is it? Next week we'll learn why.

For the next session:

Read Genesis 1-3. Read John 1:1-18 again. We will concentrate on Genesis 3.

Ask yourself: What do these passages say is wrong with the world? How did it go wrong? What is now the greatest human need? Has God provided any solution to this problem?

If you want to read more of the Bible, then read more John and more Genesis.

An Introduction to Jesus Christ & the Bible

Week 2: Genesis 1-2 In the beginning God...

Introduction:

This is not a series of lectures, but I am trying to help you to be able to read the Bible on your own. So I will be asking questions for you to answer. I don't expect you to know all the answers, but most of the answers are to be found in the passages of the Bible that we are reading together. If you don't understand anything, then please ask. I am not an expert teacher to people from other cultures, so I do not know whether I have communicated something clearly to you or not. Please ask. But it may be hard to answer all your questions until you have some more knowledge of the Bible, so please have patience.

Before we open the Bible today I want you to think about your own ideas about a few things. On your own for a couple of minutes, then ask the person next to you what they think. You can write down your thoughts in the space under the questions.

"Well educated people are much more important for a country than less educated people, so laws should help the educated." What do you think about this?

What do you think history is like? Is it random, or going in circles, or moving from a beginning to an end, or?

Feedback....

Where do most Chinese people believe the universe came from?

[Pray if you like, but explain what you're doing and keep it simple – give thanks for food and open hearts to Bible]

Read Genesis 1-2 [Not a science text book; for all people in all times. Let's ask simple questions]

1) When is this writing about? (Chapter 1 verse 1)

"In the beginning" - nothing was before this in time

2) What is it about? The creation of the universe

3) Who is it about? Who said ...? Who saw ...? Who called ...? Who made? God. He is mentioned 35 times in chapter 1, and is the subject of almost every verb.

4) a) How did God create? By speaking - he did not need to use hands or sub-contractors, his word has enough authority to do it alone.

Note: The Bible makes two assumptions about God:

A) God exists B) God speaks

[Bible never tries to prove God exists]

The Bible is a record of this God telling us what he is like.

b) What does John 1:1-5, 14-18 add to our understanding of how God created? How does God communicate with humans? He “speaks” most clearly to us by sending his living Word to us and becoming one of us - the God-man, Jesus.

Word = Communicator/Communication = Messenger/Message

[Don't try to explain the whole chapter. These key ideas are in verses 1, 14 & 18 - note: v.17 identifies “the One” of v.14&18 as Jesus]

5) Why did God create? (“And God saw that it was” verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31) To satisfy his good purposes.

(At the start of the Bible, **we** don't really know what God's purposes are, but his creation was deeply satisfying to him. “It was very good”.)

6) a) What is the high point (or climax) of God's creation? (26-31) People - man and woman.

b) How are humans the same or different from the rest of creation? Are we just clever animals?
We are all creatures, but humans alone, both men & women, are “*in God's image, in his likeness*”.

c) What are we made to do? (1:26; see also 2:15, 19-20)

To rule the world, to manage God's perfect place for him

7) Where are humans created to be? (2:1-25)

In a beautiful place (Eden) with God, where God is “at rest”. (2, 8) Really THIS is the climax of creation. God at rest with his people in his perfect place.

(If necessary see 3:8 where God is clearly in the garden.)

8) What is the relationship like between God and humans in this place? What does he do for them? (especially 2:15-23)

This is quite a hard question, but try to tease out the following: He is there with humans, not far away; he communicates with them(16); he created them & rules them - telling them what is good & what isn't (16); he delegates authority over the rest of the creatures to them (19-20); he cares for the man & provides woman - who is like him to be his helper/partner (18, 21-23)

9) a) What are humans free to do here? (2:16-17)

Everything, with only one exception

b) What are humans not allowed to do? (17)

Eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (We will look at this in more detail in the next session. Please think carefully about what “*knowing good & evil*” means as you read the first 3 chapters a few times this week.)

[Do NOT try to explain this until next week.]

c) What did God say would happen if they rebelled (17)? They would surely die

d) Why? Who is the best qualified to decide what is really good and evil in the world? Who is the overall ruler?

We aren't told why yet, **but** God is the creator, ruler & owner, humans are his managers. So it makes sense that God knows best, not us.

10) From these first 2 chapters, what do you think it means to be “made in God's image”, to be like God? How are we like God? He made us to relate to him, to communicate with him in a way that other creatures cannot do. We are to be rulers, like him. Rulers of everything else he has created. Ruling for God, under his perfect rule.

Some Applications:

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God's People in God's Place under God's Rule**For the next session:**

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Week 3: Genesis 3 - What's Wrong with the World?

Summary of Genesis 3

What happened?

God's Word was questioned (1); God's Word was added to (3); God's Word was denied (4); God's Word was disobeyed (6)

What attitude was behind their actions?

Doubting God's integrity & goodness; Rebelling against God - wanting to be God; Pride caused humans to dishonour God - the only one who is truly honourable.

Not just being a law-breaker, but deciding to be the law-maker.

The Consequences

The world is cursed, making work difficult.

Human relationships are damaged - in particular between men and women.

Humans are thrown out of God's place of perfect rest, cut off from God's presence.

All humans are now born outside of paradise in a place of shame.

The Tree of Life - fullness of life, eternal life - is out of reach.

Why?

Because we won't let God be God in our lives

Now No Longer God's People in God's Place under God's Rule

- Is eternal life possible now?
- Are we cut off from God for ever? Can we ever stand before God without shame?
- Is there a way back to God?
- Is there a rescue from the curse?

According to the Bible, the greatest human need is

.... to deal with our rebellion & shame,

.... to be forgiven by God.

Who is the serpent-crusher? (3:15)

Will he be able to bring the forgiveness & shame-covering we need?

Further Reading

As we read more of the Bible, it becomes clear that the serpent is the devil, also known as Satan, the accuser (Revelation 12:9). He makes himself look good and attractive (2 Corinthians 11:14), but he is a deceiver (2 Corinthians 11:3) and the father of lies (John 8:42-47). In John 8, people who don't listen to Jesus and don't believe Jesus are described as children of the devil. Another way of saying this is "offspring of the serpent" (Genesis 3:15).

For the next session: Read Revelation 21-22 (A vision from God about the end of time.)
Ask: Is eternal life possible? Read more of John.

Questions

- What do you think is the greatest problem in the world?
- What is the greatest human need?

Read Genesis 3:1-24

What happened in 3:1-13? The serpent speaks to the woman.

1) Does he accurately quote God? (2:16) No.

2) What was he trying to do? What idea of God's character does the serpent give to the woman?
He tries to persuade the woman that God isn't good; that God doesn't want good things for her and her husband; that God is a liar. He is trying to deceive the woman so that humans dishonour and rebel against God.

3) What did the serpent promise would happen if the woman ate from the tree?
Be like God. Eyes opened.

4) Was he right? (7, 22) Yes.

5) Where was the man when all this was happening?
With his wife.

6) What should the woman and the man have done? Who was supposed to be in authority over who? (Note: who did God give the command to in the first place? 2:16-17)
They should have listened to God, no-one else.
Authority levels: God first, then man & woman, then all other creatures (including the serpent).

Notice that God had given the command to the MAN before the woman was made (2:16-17). The man was there when the woman was tempted by the serpent, so he should have reminded her what God had said and prevented her from eating the fruit. When they ate, they reversed the authority structure - they allowed a creature to tell them what to do, instead of God, so the levels became: creature first, then woman & man, and lastly God. They didn't treat God as God. They gave away their authority to the serpent, so now he had some power over them.

7) What does it mean to "know good and evil"? (2:9, 16-17; 3:4-5, 22-23)

(This is the key question of this study, so try hard to tease the answer out of them. However, usually they will need quite a bit of help. Usually better to give out the other handout at the end of the session.)
It's not about eating an apple! It represents something that is very important indeed. Can't be the ability to tell the difference between good & evil because God assumed they knew that what he said was good and disobedience was evil. Can't be that they experienced doing evil for the first time, because it makes them "like God" (22) and he does not do evil. It is clearly something that it is good for God to have and bad for humans to have. "Knowing good and evil" means choosing, deciding, what is good and evil. But this is God's job, not humanity's, because he really does know best, whereas we only think we know. Sin is not being a law-breaker, but deciding to be the law-maker. So eating the fruit is not a silly mistake, but a revolution to replace the best leader that exists!

8) In verses 8-9, why did God ask “Where are you?” Didn’t he know?

Of course he knew! He asked because like any relationship, he wanted a response from them. This shows there was a close personal relationship between God and humans in the Garden, where they rested together and enjoyed each other’s company.

9) Who do they say is responsible for their rebellion? (11-13)

Adam says it was the woman AND blames God for her! Eve blames the serpent.

In other words, it was someone else’s fault! They fail to take responsibility for their rebellion.

God had given them so much, but they still wanted more. Rebellion - even revolution - is at the heart of what they did wrong. It wasn’t just a silly mistake or a small disobedience? They didn’t treat God as the one true God that he is.

Genesis 3:14-24 The Results of Human Rebellion (or Sin)

God reinforces the results of what humans have done.

10) What does God say against... (Don’t spend too long here. I usually don’t ask them question 10, but simply read the answers myself. Notes for leaders benefit only, if questions are asked.)

- a) the serpent? (14-15) (see further reading) cursed, in conflict with the woman and her descendent
 - b) the woman? (16) pain in childbearing; power struggle with man (Note: see the equivalent phrase in 4:6, sin desires to have Cain, but he must rule over it)
 - c) the man? (17-19) Ground cursed (because he listened to Eve instead of listening to God); work, even survival is difficult. Return to dust = physical death.
- (Note: also results in earthquakes & floods, see Romans 8:18-22)

Note: The results are really serious, and not out of proportion. God is a perfect judge. “The punishment always fits the crime”. Sin really is this bad.

11) In 2:17 God said that the consequence of eating this fruit would be death. Was he wrong? (Genesis 3:19, 21-24, see also 4:8, 5:5)

They did not immediately die physically, but physical death of humans came into the world at this time. But the main idea of death that is explained in the Bible is the separation from God that is permanent (... unless God will do something which we don’t deserve). This is what happens in 3:23-24. Could this be the end of the 7th day - God’s blessed rest? (Note: 7th day in 2:1-3 does not seem to end like the other 6.) After Adam and Eve rejected God’s rule, humans make a mess of their lives & society (Genesis 4, 6:5-6). So is there any hope for humans now? Has God abandoned humans and the world altogether? God would have been fully just if he had destroyed all humanity in Genesis 3. But his good judgment does still seem very bad news.

12) There are two things in chapter 3 that suggest there could be some good news - a way to defeat the power of the devil and the certainty of death. What are they? (21, 15)

- a) 3:21 God covers their nakedness. He still cares for them. (Skin garments suggest a death was necessary to cover their rebellion & shame.)
- b) 3:15 one descendant of the woman - at war with the devil - will crush his head and destroy his power.

So at the end of this chapter we should be asking ourselves: “Who will be the serpent-crusher”. This is the main question the rest of the Bible is answering.

** The heart of their sin is a desire to become like God. They are not satisfied with what God has given them, even though he had provided so much. They want to know what God knows. Their sin is not simply breaking some test of obedience; they are trying to take the place of God. They reject God’s authority and his knowledge of what is good and best for them. In other words, their sin is much more than a momentary lapse of obedience. It is an act of revolution.*

This is important to understand, because it is opposite to the beliefs of most people in the world. Most people believe that sin is breaking rules. They believe that for his own reasons, God has established certain rules and that we sin when we break them. Genesis 3 teaches us that sin is much more than breaking a rule - it's not like a parking offence. Sin is revolution - it is denying the way God has made things, rejecting his authority and his Word, and trying to put ourselves in the place of God. We want to make the rules.

The consequence of Adam and Eve's rebellion is that God reinforces the natural consequences of their sin. Humans upset the order of creation and now they must live with the consequences: conflict between man and woman, painful childbirth, and an environment that is hostile and yields crops reluctantly. Most significantly, they are banished from God's presence and his paradise, and cut off from access to the tree of (eternal) life.

[Adapted from Beyond Eden (Genesis 1-11) by Jensen & Payne (The Good Book Company)]

Extra Handout for week 3

What does it mean to "know good and evil"?

Bible References:

Genesis 2:9 And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground - trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

2:17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.

3:5 "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

3:22 And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live for ever."

Note also: 2nd Samuel 14:17 "And now your servant says, 'May the word of my lord the king bring me rest, for my lord the king is like an angel of God in discerning good and evil*. May the LORD your God be with you.'"

**In the original language, this is the same phrase.*

What Did They Eat?

Despite all that God had given them, Adam and Eve were not satisfied. But what was it that they actually did? What was it that they ate? What was the nature of their 'sin'?

The forbidden fruit is described as coming from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil". Before looking at what this fruit was, or symbolised, we should note what it was not.

It was not an apple. Despite the mythology that has grown, and the widespread use of the apple as a symbol of temptation, there is no mention of apples in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve did not disobey God and subject the entire world to his judgment by eating an apple. It is important to say that the forbidden fruit was not some random choice on God's part. It is not that he decided that apples would be forbidden, whereas oranges and watermelons were okay - that would be saying that God is random, and forbids things for no reason except to make life less fun. God is not like this.

It was not sex. Advertisers like to link half-eaten apples with semi-naked women, and this reveals another popular but wrong idea. The sin of Adam and Eve was not that they had sex. Sex is part of God's good creation. It is there Genesis 2:24, where man and woman are united by God and become "one flesh".

If the sin was not eating an apple, or having sex, what was it? Clearly, it had something to do with wanting to "know good and evil", but what does that mean? Let us note the following things:

* There were two trees in the centre of the garden, one of which was forbidden to Adam and Eve: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:17). It represented characteristics of God - that is, eating fruit from it would make humans like God: knowing good and evil (3:22).

* Humans had some idea of obedience before they ate the fruit. God's command in 2:17 assumes that the man understood that he was to obey. God also assumes the man understood the result of disobedience was death. In other words, he was capable of moral choice. He understood 'right' and 'wrong'. (This is against those who argue that humans had no idea at all of what is good and what is evil before eating the fruit of the tree.)

* Humans had a certain naiveté (innocence), which is destroyed by eating from the tree. Before eating, they were hardly aware that they were naked - it made no difference to them. But having eaten the fruit of this tree, their "eyes were opened", they received a new level of perception, and their nakedness bothered them. They needed to cover it up. They needed to hide it from God and each other. In the passage, this is the key illustration of humanity's new knowledge - that they were now aware of their nakedness and were ashamed of it. "Who told you were naked?" asks God.

* After eating, humans have a new level of moral perception. Their eyes have been opened. They understand good and evil in a way that they didn't before. The passage does not make clear the precise nature and extent of this new-found knowledge, but, at the very least it:

- a) made them 'like God' in some sense, and
- b) prompted them to cover their nakedness.

Adam and Eve's rebellion is a rebellion against the order of creation. In Genesis 1-2, there is an order of authority: God, man/woman, the animals. In Genesis 3, that order is overturned. The rebellion starts with the animal who prompts woman, and then man, to take the place of God.

An Introduction to Jesus Christ & the Bible

Week 4: Revelation 21-22 New Heaven & New Earth

1) What is the great problem humans have had since we were thrown out of God's perfect place - Eden - in Genesis 3? What are the results of this for our relationship with God?

We are rebels against God, the life-giver, & have dishonoured him, and he has cut us off from himself and the tree of life. So is a full & perfect (eternal) life possible? Will God's curse on the world because of human rebellion ever end? Can we ever be forgiven and have our shame removed? Will people ever really want to live God's way - the only way that will be best for all people?

Can we ever again be God's people in God's place under God's rule?

Note: The belief that all people are rebels against God has deeply affected cultures that have been influenced by the teachings of the Bible.

For example: the spreading of power (politicians, police & judges kept separate) so that no-one can take total control; democracy is not a perfect system, but it makes sure that no-one can keep hold of power for life. This is an effect of the Bible's teaching that every person is a rebel - in a position of shame before God, and is able to be corrupted.

2) What sort of world would you like to live in, and who would be in your perfect world?

Revelation is a difficult book to understand. It is full of symbols. This is a style of writing (called apocalyptic) that we are not familiar with, but was used in the Middle East region for a few hundred years around the time of Jesus. Many of the symbols are mentioned in some other part of the Bible. It is dangerous to be too certain about what all the symbols mean. There is some mystery. Many false teachings have been based on this book. However the overall meaning is clear if we avoid trying to explain all the details (like an Impressionist painting.)

[Suggestion: cover such a painting with a sheet of paper with a small hole in it, and ask what that detail is. Then draw away the sheet to show the whole picture.]

The book of Revelation is describing the universe from God's point of view - the way it really is, not just the way we see it from where we are. Revelation & Apocalypse both mean "taking away the curtain", in other words, taking away what hides reality from us, so that we can see what only God knows, and what we could not see by ourselves.

This book of Revelation is describing what is happening now, and what will happen "soon". It is not detailing historical events in order. The last two chapters are revealing the great climax of history, and they teach us important things about now too.

Note: Jesus is called "the Lamb" here (see John 1:29 & Leviticus 5:14-19).

[pray]

Read 21:1-11; 21:21-22:21 [possibly read the whole 2 chapters]

3) What big picture do you get from this passage compared with Genesis 3?

A wonderful new world; No more curse; Some humans are there; God is with his people; The tree of life is accessible. But don't answer this question yourself if they don't get it yet.

4) What's new?

Nothing less than a new heaven and new earth (1); new everything (5).

5) What's it like? (1-5)

Wonderful! Too beyond our experience to describe. No tears, no death, no pain, no "old world" problems. God is living with his people. It's the kind of place that people everywhere long to live in.

6) What or who is being described here? (21:2, 9-10)

A mixed symbol that cannot be drawn! The Holy City, the New Jerusalem = the bride (2) of the Lamb (9). Not many brides would like to look like a city!
It is certainly not the city called Jerusalem in present-day Israel.
We need to try to understand what these symbols mean.

7) When this place/bride is being described in 21:9-21, what impression do you get? (Remember: big picture not details.)

Beauty, precious, order, huge, security, purity, perfect, glory (the exact identification of each gem is much less important).
It shines with the glory of God.

Note: "12" is a very important number in the Bible - 12 tribes of Israel, 12 apostles of Jesus (21:12,14) - symbolic of "the people of God". All the 12's & multiples of 12 in the city are telling us, what this city represents. It doesn't really matter how many miles or kilometres it can be translated into!

8) So what is the Holy City? Who is the bride of the Lamb?

It isthe people of God, the real church. Real Christians together are the city and bride. This is what we look like as God sees us - no longer as shameful - not because we are "beautiful" & "perfect" now, but because this is what we WILL be and he is changing us to be like this. Jesus is our perfect husband; not as individuals but the whole body of the church is his bride. [Also read later Jeremiah 31:31-34; Mark 2:19-20; Ephesians 5:22-33]

9) What is missing?(21:22-27; 21:8; 22:3; 22:15-19)

[spend most time on "impurity"]

No... temple (21:22) - no need for priests. (God & the Lamb)

No... sun or moon (21:23) – no dimming of light ever again (God & the Lamb)

No... night (21:25) - no need to ever lock your house again - perfect safety.

No... impurity, no-one shameful or deceitful (21:27 read also 21:8; 22:15)

No... curse (22:3) - creation is no longer groaning under God's judgment.

Wouldn't you love to live in a place like that?

Imagine what it would be like never to have lied, never to have lusted, never to have trusted a superstitious tradition.... Can you imagine it? Can you imagine what it would be like to have always loved God and your neighbours with all of your everything?

10) If there is no impurity in the new heaven & new earth, do you deserve to be there? Where do you and I deserve to be? (22:15; 20:12-14; 21:8) No! God is a perfectly good judge and we deserve to be with the liars and the shameful, outside the City (22:15) & in the lake of fire - the second death (20:12-14; 21:8).

11) What and who is at the centre of the City? (22:1-5)

Life-giving water from God, with eternal-life-giving Tree of Life - better than Eden.

God & the Lamb ruling (throne 21:5, 22:1,3) - his people will see him face-to-face. Without God & the Lamb there is no heaven, only hell. It is being with him forever that makes it heaven. So if your ideal world did not have God & the Lamb at the centre, it would soon be a terrible place. It is God's presence that makes it perfect.

12) Who can enter the Holy City, the people of God?

21:27

22:17

21:6

21:7

22:14

(read also 7:9,13-14)

Summary

Only those whose names are in the Lambs book of life will see God face-to-face in the wonderful & perfect new heaven & new earth, where there is no more curse.

Who are these people?

Anyone who will come spiritually thirsty to Jesus (& only Jesus), and who is willing to receive his free gift of full & perfect life. The only condition is that we receive the gift God's way: symbolically, by "washing in the blood of the Lamb".

How can we be washed clean in the blood of Jesus?

God's solution to the greatest human problem is found in the death of Jesus. And that is who and what we will study for the rest of the course.

[Read also Revelation 5:6-14]

Note: The serpent, the devil, is defeated by the blood of the Lamb (12:7-11; 20:2,10). So Jesus is the serpent-crusher (see Genesis 3:15).

And Jesus is coming back to make all this happen (22:20).

"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

Further Reading:

"Sea" in Jewish thought was full of chaos, danger & evil. "No longer any sea" (21:1) is not a statement about geography, but symbolic for the removal of chaos, danger & evil.

The City is shaped like a cube (21:16). There is only one cube in Old Testament - the Most Holy Place in the temple (1 Kings 6:14-22). This was the only meeting place between God and people (represented by the high priest, once a year) (Leviticus 16). Now the whole of God's people make up the Most Holy Place.

Note: 21:26 the glory & honour of the nations (all peoples) - there is something in every culture that glorifies & honours God. That will be present in God's people.

[Note: Alpha & Omega, Beginning & End (21:6; 22:12-13) shows that he has the only authority to bring history to an end, just as he is the only one who could bring it into being.]

For the next session: Read Genesis 3, Genesis 11:1-9 and John 11. We will study John 11 in detail. If you want to read more of the Bible, read more John.

An Introduction to Jesus Christ & the Bible

Week 5: John 11 - Jesus is the Life

We've looked at the beginning and the end so far. This is like doing the edge pieces of a puzzle, it helps to fit everything else in its right place. Now we are looking at the main character, which is like concentrating on the main face in the jigsaw.

What do you feel about dying? What happens after we die?

Why do people die? Has death a purpose? What is death for?

Can you think of any examples of a person's death having an important purpose?

[This is a powerful story of sacrificing one's life for others. But tell a different one if you prefer.] Sometimes people sacrifice their own life for others. Not often, but sometimes. In December 1982 millions of people watched on their TV's a man struggling to survive in the icy water of the river in Washington DC. The water was so cold that no-one could live in it for more than a few minutes. A helicopter arrived and let down a rope to pull him to safety. He grabbed it, but then deliberately let it go. The same thing happened 5 times, until he was exhausted and drowned.

.... It doesn't seem to make sense, does it? He had the chance to save himself, but he wouldn't take it. Was he mad?

Well, we need to understand the whole picture before we decide. What had happened was that a plane had been forced to land on the river because of engine failure. The helicopter arrived to save the passengers who were all in the freezing water. The man who took the rope was a strong swimmer. He took hold of it, then swam to the nearest person, gave them the rope and watched as they were pulled to safety. This he did 5 times before he was exhausted and he drowned....

Maybe at first you thought this was a crazy waste of life, but it makes sense when you understand the whole story. He was a hero. He died to save others.

Over the next 3 weeks, we'll see this is what Jesus did too by dying, but he didn't only save 5 drowning people. He has rescued millions who were facing being separated from God forever.

If you still think this sounds crazy, then make sure you have heard the whole story before you dismiss all Christians as just nice people with weird beliefs.

(Adapted from Turning Points by Vaughan Roberts (OM Publishing) Chapter 5 Dying to Meet You p102-103)

Read John 11:1-53

1) A close friend of Jesus, called Lazarus, dies. How does Jesus feel about Lazarus and his sisters? (3, 5, 33-36, 38)

He loves them all.

2) Both Martha and Mary say the same thing to Jesus when they meet him after their brother has died (21, 32). What do they think about Jesus?

They think he has power to heal diseases, even to prevent death.

3) Who does Martha say Jesus is? (27)

Christ, the Son of God = The special rescuer-king God promised - the name the Jewish people gave to the serpent-crusher from Genesis 3:15.

[Christ (Greek) = Messiah (Hebrew)]

4) Who does Jesus say he is? (25)

The resurrection & the life - the one who prevents death, but also gives life even to some people who have died.

[Optional Question]

5) His disciples questioned (7-8) whether he should go back to Judea after he was nearly killed by stoning there (10:31-33). How do Jesus words in verses 25-26 help us to understand what he meant before? (9-10) (see also John 1:4-5,9; 8:12)

If the light of the world doesn't go to people who are in darkness, they will never believe, so they will never find real life. He must go to them for their sake, because they are "walking by night".

6) What do you think Martha means by saying that her brother "will rise again in the resurrection at the last day"? (23-24)

She believes (like most Jews of her day) that at the end of time God will judge everyone who has ever lived, and some who have physically died will be given eternal life & a beautifully transformed physical body.

7) What does Jesus offer to people who believe in him?

(25-26) Eternal life even if you die physically - real "life to the full" (10:10)

[Realize that eternal life may be seen as a negative thing if they have any Buddhist influence, because their heaven (nirvana) is an escape from the eternal cycle of life-death-reincarnation. Stress that the life Jesus offers is full, wonderful and experienced as the unique person you were made to be, i.e. not losing your personality & becoming ONE with the universe.]

8) When does this real life begin and end? (25-26)

Starts now, never ends. (It gets a lot better than now, when we are given our new body!)

9) What does Jesus do to bring Lazarus back to life? (41-43)

Thanks his Father in heaven for answering his prayer (so he must have asked his Father to do this), then tells Lazarus to get up. Note: the Word gives life.

10) What is the purpose of Lazarus' death? Why does Jesus bring Lazarus back to life?

Note: Lazarus didn't die to show that Jesus had some weaknesses (i.e. that he was afraid to go back earlier.) Jesus did not bring him back to life primarily because his friend has died, & he wants to see him again, nor to show that he will do the same thing today for our friends or us if we die young of some illness.

4, 40 Lazarus died for God's glory, that Jesus may be glorified (i.e. to see the glory of God in Jesus). To show that Jesus has the power of life over final death (that final separation from God and all that is good - the second death).

14-15, 42, 45 Jesus did bring him back to life so that some people may believe (or put their faith/trust) in Jesus, and believe that the Father sent him

11) Some do put their faith in Jesus, but what is the other response to Jesus raising Lazarus back to life? (45-46)

Some report him to the religious leaders who hate Jesus.
Jesus still generates these very different responses today.

12) The religious people and the rulers know Jesus has the power to do miracles, but they are angry with him. Why are they angry? (45-48)

They don't doubt his power to do miracles, but they fear their own authority will be lost over the people. 'our place' or temple = their religious power. They fear that the ruling Roman authorities may take away their religious power, that they had tolerated so far.
'our nation' = their national or ethnic power over "their" people. They fear that the Romans may even destroy them as a people, if this new religious leader gains too large a following. Both temple & nation were given to them by God, but they have corrupted them.

13) What do they plan to do, and why do they think this is better? (48-53)

They plan to kill Jesus because this would be far better in their eyes than losing everything that they believe God has given them (but especially their personal power?)

14) What does John (the author) say about their plan? What does he say about the purpose of Jesus' death? (51-52)

John writes that this plan of theirs was really revealed to them by God. They did it for their own gain, but God planned the death of Jesus to be a substitute for all the scattered children of God - to give them life and to unite them under one ruler.

15) What do you think now about Jesus death and your death?

[Don't push them to answer this, but see if any will]

They think that by killing Jesus they will be doing God a favour because it would save God's people from being destroyed by the Roman imperialists. Instead they are rebelling against God by planning to kill the one he sent to save them from their rebelliousness & the second death.

Yet in God's amazing plan, Jesus' death was the way God achieved this rescue. Jesus will die to give life to people (opposite to the result of Genesis 3), & to unite the scattered peoples (opposite to the result of Genesis 11).

For the next session: Read John 18-19. If you want to read more of the Bible, read more John.

An Introduction to Jesus Christ & the Bible

Week 6: John 18-19 The trials & death of Jesus

Now we come to the heart of the Christian message, the central event in history that has changed everything: death of Jesus. But first how did you answer...

What is truth? Are truth & justice more or less important than personal gain or saving face? Why or why not?

“If the Truth is in your way, then you’re on the wrong road.”

Read John 18:29-19:42

1) What charges did the religious leaders make against Jesus? (18:30; 19:7, 12)

[Note: Caesar was the Roman Emperor]

That he’s a criminal, a blasphemer and a traitor against Caesar.

2) Who did Jesus claim to be? (18:36-37; 19:7, 21)

A king (not of this world); the truth-teller (who is listened to by everyone on the side of truth); Son of God (according to the Jews testimony)

3) What did Pilate, the Roman Governor, say about Jesus? (18:38; 19:4, 6b, 12)

Innocent, should be set free

4) Was this a fair trial and a just verdict? (19:16) Compare with Barabbas. (18:38-40)

Obviously not.

Note: Barabbas didn’t get the judgment he deserved either - explain substitution of Jesus for Barabbas, i.e. Jesus got the punishment Barabbas deserved.

5) Why did Pilate change his mind? (19:8, 13)

A weak judge. He would have lost the support of the Jewish leaders & people, and risked a national revolution if he had been just. He feared the people (maybe also Caesar), rather than fearing God, who is truly just.

6) Is it possible to be a fair judge if you don’t know what real truth is? (18:38) How do you discover truth?

No. Is truth discovered by majority vote? ... or by expert opinion? ... or by what?

The Bible says by God revealing it to us. He decides what is good and evil.

“Jesus is the truth” [see also John 14:6]

7) Is there anything strange about who recognises who Jesus is? (19:14-15, 19-22)

The ones who should have been expecting God’s rescuer, and preparing the people for him to arrive, have too much to lose, and won’t recognise him. So they reject him (19:7).

[High Priest's position as a leader is at risk. He, & other leaders, have been made to look foolish by Jesus. They have lost face and they will do anything to restore their honour. Yet there doesn't seem to be too much for the High Priest to worry about at the moment! Jesus has been deserted by his closest followers, even Peter (18:25-27). The High Priest looks certain to win.]

Pilate knows nothing of what God has done before Jesus came - only the Jewish people had God's word then. But Pilate recognises he is special, and seems to think Jesus is King of the Jews (19:19-22). Sadly, he is more afraid of the people than of the God who sent Jesus, so he authorises Jesus death.

It is often not the most religious people who recognise who Jesus really is.
In the end, both Jews & non-Jews (Gentiles) reject the true kingship of Jesus.

8) According to Jesus, who is really on trial and who is the judge? (19:10-11; 18:37)

On trial - the chief priests, Pilate, (& the people?). Jesus is the judge.

9) Who is in control of this whole situation? (18:4, 32, 36-37; 19:10-11, 26-27, 28-30)

Jesus.

10) Why do you think John (the writer) keeps referring to promises coming true? (18:31-32; 19:23-24, 28-30, 36-37)

[see also John 12:32-33; Psalm 22:18]

So that the arrest and death of Jesus can be seen to be God's plan, not a tragic mistake.

11) What do you think Jesus means in 19:30 when he says "It is finished."

The plan of God is completed and fulfilled. There is nothing left for him to do on earth. It is a cry of success not failure.

12) Apart from the fulfillment of promises, why does John tell us about the breaking of the legs of the other two men, and piercing Jesus side with a spear? (19:31-37)

To show that Jesus really died. Roman executioners knew how to kill someone and what a dead man looked like. The spear was to make sure he was dead. The flow of blood and water means that he definitely was dead - this only happens to a dead person when they died under torture or other extreme pain. The red blood cells and the plasma separate.

[Optional Question]

13) Read Zechariah 12:10; 13:1. (This prophet was writing 500 years before Jesus, about the death of Jesus - who was the descendant of King David.) What did Zechariah say that the death of Jesus would achieve?

To show that God's real people will be cleaned from the dirtiness of sin and impurity.

Jesus was betrayed by a close friend, and denied by another friend. He was attacked by the religious leaders. He was accused falsely, and was tried by a weak judge. He was humiliated by foreign soldiers, and violently flogged before the verdict of his trial. His verdict was chosen by a mob and he was publicly executed in the most shameful way possible for a Jewish person. [see Deuteronomy 21:22-23]

These events, on this day nearly 2000 years ago, sound like very bad news for the followers of Jesus Christ (certainly Peter thought so). Their leader, their king, who was totally innocent, was killed at the early age of about 33 years old. Yet, because of the importance of the events on this day, followers of Jesus have always called this day 'Good Friday'.

14) Why is it good?.... (18:11, 14, 36; 19:30, 35)

[This is a vital question]

God's wrath against human rebellion has been dealt with. His justice is satisfied.

Jesus died for many people as their substitute* - the innocent one took the place of the guilty ones. Though the king was killed, he is king of another place.

God's rescue plan for humans is now complete - "It is finished". We don't have all the benefits yet, but the hard work has been done on the cross.

It's good because all this has really happened and it has been written down for us so that we can know it and believe it.

15) How much does God love us?

Enough for him to give his son to die for us.

16) How serious is our sin/rebellion?

Serious enough for God to have to send his son to die to deal with it.

17) If all this is true, do you think God would have provided other ways to be forgiven as well as the death of Jesus?

It is unthinkable that God would have put his own Son through this death & hell, if there was another way to rescue people. There is no other way.

18) So is there any truth you would be willing to die for?

[Maybe, leave them with this question, rather than expecting them to answer in a group.]

Note: Blasphemy is speaking in a way that dishonours God, such as making yourself equal with God. The punishment is death.

Further reading:

Broken bones: The fact that none of Jesus' bones were broken points us to Exodus 12, where God rescues his people, Israel, from slavery in Egypt (about 1400 years before Jesus). Jesus death is like the Passover lamb that was sacrificed to protect God's people from his wrath against human rebellion. The firstborn child of everyone who didn't kill a lamb (the Egyptians) died. The lamb was the substitute for those who did what God said, instead of someone having to die. (Exodus 12:46 states that the Passover lamb was not allowed to have any broken bones.) Remember Jesus is known as the Lamb of God.

"Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (18:11)

The cup symbolises God's wrath (anger) against the human rebellion of all nations. See Isaiah 51:17-20; Jeremiah 25:15-16, 27-29. Jesus is saying that he will take on himself God's just punishment that rebellious people deserve. He says he must do it. He is deliberately advancing towards his death, in full control. He does this to die for people, as our substitute, instead of us having to face God's wrath for our rebellion against him. He is the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'. (John 1:29,36)

The following passages in the Old Testament may also help in understanding the significance of Jesus death: Psalm 75:6-8; Isaiah 53; Leviticus 16.

For the next session: Read John 20-21 If you want to read more of the Bible, finish reading John.

An Introduction to Jesus Christ & the Bible

Week 7: John 20 The Resurrection of Jesus*

Christianity is not a philosophy for our minds. Jesus affects the whole of our life, even in very difficult times.

“What a person believes is not what he says in his creed, but only what he is willing to die for” (Richard Wormbrand - a Romanian church leader who was in prison for 15 years and tortured for being a Christian.)

[Creed = an official statement of what someone believes]

What do you think about this statement?

[Not what you think I want you to say]

1) What is real life, and how do you think you get it?

The Bible says the greatest human problem is separation from God for ever (now and second death) because of human rebellion. We've seen the importance of the death of Jesus in solving this problem, now we look at the importance of his resurrection* from the dead, and our response.

* Resurrection = raised from death to new, perfect, physical & everlasting life.

Read John 20.

The Jewish religious leaders and the Roman imperialists strongly opposed the early Christians. Yet no one argued with the fact that the tomb of Jesus was empty on the third day.

2) What are the possible explanations for the tomb being empty?

[Just take their answers, don't give the following] not dead; disciples stole body; authorities stole body (Mary thought this); Jesus raised from the dead.

3) What evidence is given by John for the resurrection of Jesus? (1-2, 10-16, 19, 20, 24-28)

No body; Mary not expecting to see Jesus, yet seeing him; Jesus appearing in a locked room to the disciples, who were not expecting to see him; his hands & side; Thomas doubting until he saw Jesus with crucifixion marks. (Also strips still there; 2 angels.)

4) Does the evidence suggest that it is simply Jesus spirit that was resurrected or his body as well?

No body in tomb; when Jesus is seen his body can be touched and has the marks of crucifixion. The Bible does not just teach the immortality of the soul, but the resurrection of the body.

[Optional question]

5) Compare John 14:2 with 20:17 - “my Father” becomes “my Father AND your Father”. So what have the events of the last few days achieved for Jesus' followers?

Restored relationship with God as our Father - so what problem has been overcome? sin, separation, death - all the results of Genesis 3.

6) Jesus twice says, “peace be with you”, and in between “he showed them his hands and side”- the wounds from his death. What is the link? (19-23)

His death took the punishment for, and shame of, our rebellion, so now we can have peace with God, instead of facing death & condemnation from his certain anger. They are forgiven and sent to proclaim forgiveness to others.

7) We do not see Jesus because we live at the wrong time in history! In what ways does the experience of Thomas help us today? (24-28)

He wouldn't believe the evidence of the witnesses, unless he saw Jesus himself. But then this doubter did see the risen Jesus and worshipped him as his Lord and his God. If we are doubters we can look at Thomas and trust that he was not easily fooled. This can help us to trust Jesus ourselves.

8) Some think that Thomas (and the other disciples) were the lucky ones, because they were able to see the risen Jesus face-to-face. However, who does Jesus say are the ones who are blessed - favoured by God? (29)

Those who trust (believe) Jesus but have not seen him.

9) Why do we not have to see to believe?

We have a book which is the record of eye-witnesses, like Thomas. Also the evidence of so many OT predictions coming true.

10) Does it matter if Jesus is really alive or dead now? What difference does it make? (30-31) [Vital question]

The resurrection (and other miracles) show that Jesus is the unique Christ - God's rescuer-king, the Son of God - and he must be listened to. By trusting (believing) that Jesus is God's rescuer we can have life - real life, life in all its fullness. That's a massive difference from eternal death! This is why John wrote his book. If Jesus is still dead, the whole of Christianity is false & a lie, and when you are dead that's the end! The resurrection gives real hope in life now, for life beyond death.

Summary

Jesus resurrection from the dead has shown that:

- Death can be defeated.
- God has accomplished his plan to rescue people.
- God has shown that Jesus is the unique Son of God and his teaching must be listened to; by trusting (believing) that Jesus death is God's way of rescue, people from every nation on earth can have life - real life, life in all its fullness - knowing God and no longer having to be separated from him.
- God is willing to take a real human - Jesus - from a position of shame to a position of great honour. This will be true for us too, if we trust in the death of Jesus.

11) What response does Jesus require from us? from you?

God gives each of us the dignity not to force us to follow him, but he gives us the responsibility to choose.

Your response [Give them a few moments to read the choices and decide]

- I'm not convinced by what Jesus claims about himself, and I'm not really interested to continue to find out more
- I'm not convinced yet, but I am interested to find out more and would like to join another course.
- I am now convinced that Jesus is who he claims to be, and I want to turn my life over to him as my Lord and my God

Prayer [I'm going to say some words for you if you made the 3rd choice. Not magic. Be honest]

Dear Father God, I know I am not good enough for you to accept me. I don't deserve your gift of a full and perfect life forever. I deserve to die. I am guilty of living my life without you and against you. I need you to forgive me. I need you to take away my shame before you.

Thank you for sending your son, Jesus, to die instead of me. Thank you that he died so that I could be forgiven. Thank you, Father, for giving Jesus new life, so now I may have a new life that is honoured by you. Please God, forgive me and change me. Now I want to live in this world with Jesus as my ruler. Amen.

If you have honestly said these words to God, then do tell one of us before you leave tonight. The changing of your life is a process that will go on for the rest of your life. But God will be with you always.

- **God will speak to you (as you read the Bible).**
- **God will listen to you and help you (as you pray to him).**
- **God will give you the strength inside you that you need to change (by his Holy Spirit inside you).**
- **God will give you other Christians to be your brothers and sisters. They will encourage you as you live and change (in everyday relationships, and as you meet as church).**

Keep on trusting Jesus, and his death. Never stop relying on him.