

# WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP: BECOMING LIKE CHRIST



## Session 2: Jesus - His death

How is it possible that I can approach God?  
Where do we see this being saved in the New Testament?  
Does thinking I need forgiveness lead to low self-esteem?  
In what ways do we need to be realistic about approaching God?  
In what ways do we need to be realistic about ourselves and the world?  
What are the results of this Fall?  
What did Jesus do for us on the cross?  
What helps me understand Jesus' death?  
How does Jesus' death reconcile us to God?  
Did Jesus protect us from an angry Father?  
How does Jesus' life and death help me to become like Christ in my lived experience?  
How do I receive salvation in my lived experience?  
How does the habit of confession help in this and change me?

# How is it possible that I can approach God?



We have already seen that the kind of relationship God invites us into is one of covenant love – because God IS love in Himself. Daily discipleship means 'being with God' – paying attention to Him and responding to Him.

As apprentices, we are also looking to become like Christ, and join in with what God is doing. In session 1 we have explored two of the three reasons why disciples seek to “become like Christ”-

because **He is the one through whom we can know God** – He is 'Emmanuel', God with us and the 'Son of Man' who reveals God in human likeness – and

because **He deserves our allegiance** - He is the anointed King (Messiah) who in His coming brings God's kingdom – God's healing and loving rule – on earth as it is in heaven.

However, the possibility of experiencing all of this first requires that all that is wrong in our lives and in the world needs to be put right. This is something which human beings cannot do in our own strength or merit.

The third reason we are exploring for becoming like Christ is because **He is the one who has made this possible**. He is the one who rescues us from evil, or what the Bible diagnoses as sin.

The name 'Jesus' in itself reveals this as the centre of His purpose – it means “God saves.”

At the heart of being able to know God and become like Christ is receiving forgiveness and salvation – being completely restored by God to the dignity and calling for which He made us.





# Where do we see this being saved in the New Testament?

One of the stories that is found in all four of the gospels describes how a 'sinful woman' anoints Jesus' feet with perfume and her tears and dries them with her hair. She is pouring out her love and gratitude to Him because she has experienced the freedom of forgiveness.

Jesus tells a story to show the guests who are there that, "her many sins have been forgiven – as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little". (Luke 7:47).

When Jesus asks Zacchaeus a corrupt tax collector if He may stay at His house, the result is "salvation", as Zacchaeus' life is transformed and he is restored to being one of God's covenant people:

“

*Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” (Luke 19:10-11).*

We also see how the more people recognised the goodness and purity of God in Jesus, the more they became aware of their need for forgiveness. When Peter saw God's power through Jesus being able to enable a miraculous catch of fish, his response was to fall down and say, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8)

In the middle of the prayer Jesus taught us is the invitation to pray regularly, "Forgive us our sins..."

In one of his letters Paul writes, "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (Colossians 3:13)



He also wrote that not only was Jesus "... the image of the invisible God" in whom "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him" but He is also the one through whom God is able "to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." (Colossians 1:15-20)

Being restored (saved) through forgiveness is at the heart of the good news of being a Christian, and at the heart of who Jesus is.

For Jesus, His death and resurrection were necessary to fulfil God's plan to bring the world back to Himself.

After His resurrection, He comforts two of His disciples by showing them, "Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

He came "for us and our salvation" (Nicene Creed). By becoming human, dying and rising again, God through Christ has rescued the world from sin and death.



# Does thinking I need forgiveness lead to low self-esteem?

In one of his letters Paul gives himself a blunt assessment, but without any hint of this being anything but a healthy approach:

“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst.” (1 Timothy 1:15)

While most religions teach about 'sin', it's true that there are many examples of people who have been crippled by guilt, shame and even 'bad religion' in a life and soul-destroying way.

Even while coming as Saviour, Jesus angrily criticised religious leaders who “tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders”.

At a time when identity and mental health can be fragile, it is vital to have an understanding of sin, forgiveness and salvation which offers a real diagnosis of our condition and is about restoring people in God's image.

The best starting place for our wellbeing has to offer a realistic view of God and of ourselves and the world.



# In what ways do we need to be realistic about approaching God?



Moses once came across the presence of God in the desert. Yet when he approached the bush God said, “Do not come any closer...Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”

Similarly, the prophet Isaiah had a vision of God being worshipped by angels singing, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” His response to seeing God was, “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

Again and again throughout the Bible God is described as “holy”. The more realistic our approach to God, the more we will be overwhelmed by His holiness.

We think of being holy as simply being good or unholy as being bad. While God is good, He is holy because He is unique, different, set apart from anything else. He is the only Being with the power to create the universe and to give and sustain life.

It is not that He is holy and loving (as if they are separate), but that He is “set apart” by being pure Love, in all its intensity. The unique holiness of God is like the sun which is life-giving to all around it.

But the sun is also dangerous - you cannot get too close. The paradox at the heart of God’s holiness is that it will destroy anything that is not equally holy, not because it is bad, but because it is good.

This attribute of God is described as a “consuming” or “refining” fire in the Bible. (See the Bible Project more on this image and detailed notes on God’s holiness).

This is really important when talking about God’s wrath. This word doesn’t describe an unrestrained destructive God, but the way evil experiences God’s holiness as judgement.

Just as the same radiant light and heat from the sun gives life or destroys depending on how close you are to it, so God’s intense love for people, and His “wrathful” judgement are from the same burning ‘white heat’ of His Holy Love - but experienced in different ways.

The more accurate our view of the unique, loving, holy God the more we will have a realistically healthy understanding of ourselves...



# In what ways do we need to be realistic about ourselves and the world?



The writer Donald Miller has this reflection on trying to be good: “I found myself trying to love the right things without God’s help, and it was impossible.

I tried to go one week without thinking a negative thought about another human being, and I couldn’t do it. Before I tried that experiment, I thought I was a nice person, but after trying it, I realised I thought bad things about people all day long, and that my natural desire was to love darkness.”

If we are made to love God and love other people as ourselves, Miller is honest that he both fails to do it and finds it impossible to do. He knows what is good but falls short.

Or as St Paul says, “For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.” (Romans 7:19)

This reflects the robust description of the reality of the human condition we find in the Bible, and which accurately portrays our world today. As G.K. Chesterton put it, “Sin is the one doctrine you can’t dispute.”

We see it right from the beginning. In the story of Adam and Eve, choosing to eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil – deciding for themselves how to live rather than listening to God. We see it in Cain killing his brother Abel, God warning Cain that, “But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

We see it throughout the Bible in countless examples of people destroying themselves and each other.

The story shows how we have fallen from our original calling and identity – and that the consequences are around us every day. Something pulls us towards destruction and evil and key biblical words illustrate the effects of this.

Sin is not a religious word for bad behaviour, but a description of **what happens when we fall short of the goal – it’s a failure of the truly human calling to love God and love others**, and the Bible views it as embedded in the story of humanity like a chain reaction, creating a kind of slavery to sin.

There is a word which describes the **break down of relationship between people or between people and God** – when we betray trust we transgress. By ignoring God’s will, Adam breaks trust.

There is a word which describes what happens when **something originally good has been bent out of shape or distorted**, or when what should be a blessing is corrupted – iniquity is distorted behaviour which leads to wickedness and guilt.

(In the Bible, the idea of punishment is more often about people being left to deal with the consequences of their own disfigurement.)

The Bible also describes the human capacity for self-deception – in the way we can be unaware of sin, or even call it good, or find it easier to see others’ faults than our own.

It warns that “The heart is deceitful above all things” (Jeremiah 17:9) and Psalm 139 ends with the honest prayer, “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.”

# What are the results of this Fall?



Sin has to be dealt with. In order to be a disciple experiencing God's covenant love there is a direct need for every person to be able to be put right with God, and for the consequences of sin to be reckoned with.

If it's true that, as the Russian writer Solzhenitsyn said, "The battleline between good and evil runs through every human heart", everyone is equally in need.

As fallible people, our longing for justice is a small reflection of the need we have to be put right before a holy God. The destructive effects of sin need to be defeated.

The Bible reflects a world in which the effect of this fall affects not just the individual person, but in which the environment of our relationship with God, with others and with creation has been polluted. The world is not as God wants it to be.

We long for liberation in two ways:

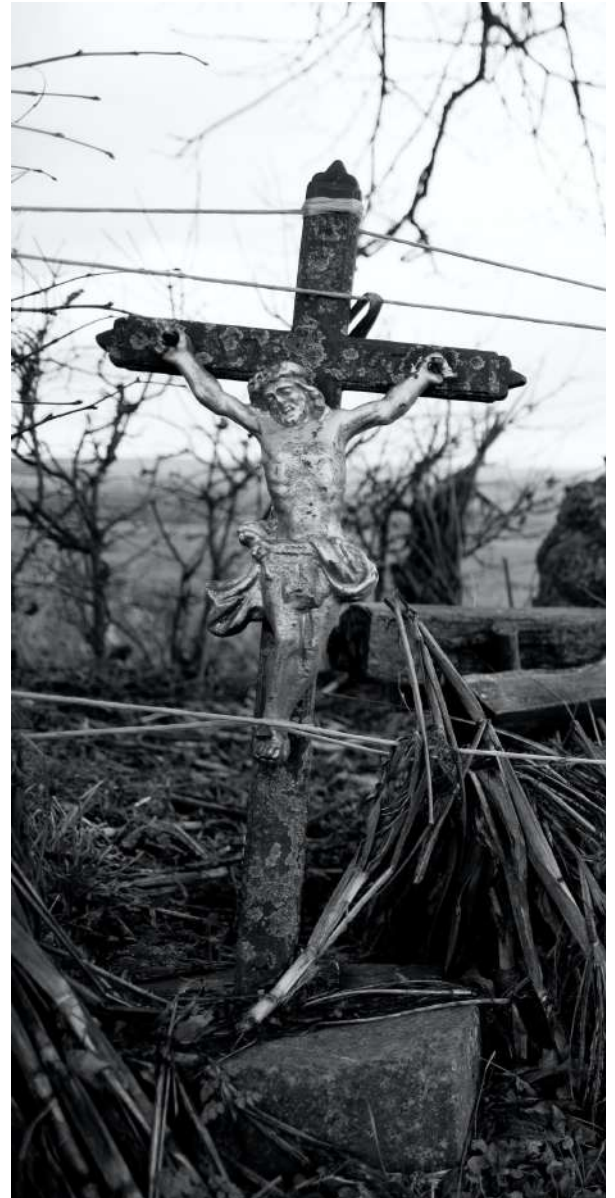
from the chaos, disease, war, decay and ultimately death which dominate **the physical world**.

But this is linked to **an unseen conflict in 'the heavens'**, in which prideful spiritual forces of evil, represented as a snake, or satan, or 'principalities and powers', seek to undermine God's kingdom.

Much of the origins of this are mysterious, yet the fundamental picture is that, just as human beings can ignore God with destructive consequences, so unseen spiritual beings have chosen to do the same.

While they cannot control humanity, they can influence through the power of suggestion or lies – think of the snake in the Garden of Eden.

Early Christians were keenly aware that much of our suffering is the fallout of this earthly and spiritual struggle.



That we fight "not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12).

We struggle against the values of a world which seeks to go its own way (the world), the personal selfish instincts which might pull us away from self-giving love for God and others (the flesh), and unseen spiritual forces which seek to influence us (the devil).



# What did Jesus do for us on the cross?

The meaning of the cross is like a diamond – one gift but with many different ways to see it.

Over the next few sessions we will explore a number of these (and handout summaries are available).

But in the letter to the Colossians Paul writes that by dying and rising again Jesus achieved (at least) two things for us which we could not do for ourselves:

## **Dealing with sin through complete forgiveness which saves us and puts us right with God:**

"When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross."

## **Dealing with its destructive effects through victory over the fallen powers which pollute the world and lead to death:**

"And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." (Colossians 2:14-15)

So the meaning of the cross is personal and cosmic – and it is at the centre of God's purpose.

This is why the four gospels focus as much on Jesus' death as His life. (One writer said that the gospels are like "passion narratives with extended introductions".)

In one of his letters, when Paul outlines the things that are "of first importance" he says, "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures ..." (1 Corinthians 15:1-4)

For Paul, the meaning of the cross and the meaning of the good news were one and the same thing. He wanted to know nothing, "except Jesus Christ and him crucified." (1 Corinthians 2:2)





# What helps me understand Jesus' death?



The word 'crucial' refers to something that we cannot do without – and literally means 'like a cross'.

The teaching of the Bible is that we cannot put ourselves right with God. But through His torture, death and resurrection Jesus “ransoms, heals, restores and forgives” us in a way that nothing else can achieve.

At the heart of the cross is 'atonement'. God always wants to be reconciled with His covenant people.

But in order for the forgiveness which restores the relationship to be possible, there must be a way to make amends for the damage caused – to 'atone' for it in a way that heals its effects forever.

To atone literally means to cover over someone's debt – whether that is a direct debt because of specific harm done or, as in much of our experience, how our sin can indirectly pollute our relationships with God, creation and each other.

As God's relationship with people developed, He gave the people of Israel a system of animal sacrifices as a sign of this atonement – the animal was taking on or substituting for the death-bringing consequences of human beings' sins.

Animal sacrifice was common as a way of 'appeasing the gods' at the time. But for the Israelites it was different - it was not that God needed the death of animals to deal with His anger, but by the shedding of blood which gives life He was communicating the seriousness of their sins and the need for holy justice.

The death of the animal also showed how God wanted to deal with sin in a complete and final way. Rather than the sinner ceasing to exist because of sin, the animal had taken their place. Not only that, but the priests would then sprinkle the animal's blood to show that the animal's death dealt with the destructive consequences of sin in the wider community.

Not only did God want to forgive His people, but to restore them in His image – to purify them again.

The story of the Old Testament is that this became a temporary solution – it did not effect the change God was looking for. While they continued with the outward rituals of sacrifice, these became increasingly meaningless to God.

While He longed to live in love and forgiveness with them (“Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” [Isaiah 1:18]) He was looking for a covenant people after His heart, living in love and grace. (“Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.” [Isaiah 1:17])

God promises an atoning sacrifice which will deal with sin once and for all, through a person – a King – who would become a “suffering Servant” – and die for the people.

Isaiah promised that this person would bear the consequences of all the kinds of brokenness we have described: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all...”

For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished...Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin.” (Isaiah 53: 4-10 abridged)

# How does Jesus' death reconcile us to God?



Jesus and the New Testament writers rarely use the actual word 'atonement' to describe His death and resurrection.

Yet Jesus clearly understood Himself to be the one who fulfils God's atonement with His people through the cross in ways which are more wonderful and mysterious to be described through one lens.

Instead, a variety of descriptions and images build up an understanding of the atoning work of the cross as God enabling us to be reconciled to Him. (Later sessions will unpack further images of the cross.) Different words emphasise the wonderful way in which Jesus saves us by taking the consequences of sin upon Himself. These different pictures serve to reveal the completeness of what God has done. Who He is on the cross:

## **Ransom**

Through the cross Jesus gives "His life as a ransom for many". (Mark 10:45) He is the "...one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people." (1 Timothy 2: 5-6).

## **Sacrifice**

He is the "sacrifice" (Ephesians 5:2), the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) "...our Passover lamb, (who) has been sacrificed." (1 Corinthians 5:7) He is the way God revealed His love as He "sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:10) "through the shedding of his blood." (Romans 3:25)

## **Representative**

He represents us, standing in our place and bearing the punishment for our sins: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us..." (2 Corinthians 5: 21) "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross..." (1 Peter 2:24) He becomes "a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.'" (Galatians 3:13)

## **Fully God and fully human**

Only by being fully divine and fully human is Jesus able to do this. Because He is divine Jesus lives a sinless life – God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us". (2 Corinthians 5:21)

We "have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (Hebrews 4:15) and is uniquely able to offer the redeeming ransom through "the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect." (1 Peter 1:19)

Only someone who is not standing in quicksand can pull others free. By being divine Jesus isn't only able to take sin into God at the cross – He destroys it as sin dissolves on contact with the undiluted holiness of God.

But only by becoming fully human is it possible for a holy God to enter into the full depths of sin, evil and death, taking our place and responsibility for our history of failure. Unless He is one of us, He can be our judge but not our saviour.

His full humanity means he can take on (assume) all the darkness and suffering of humanity, and so bring healing to every part.

Early Christians, debating the human/divine nature of Jesus came to the conclusion He had to be fully human, otherwise "What is not assumed is not healed." (Gregory of Nazianzus)

In addition, by taking our place and making the chaos of sin and darkness His own God comes to complete knowledge of human beings.



How this reconciles us to God:

### **Redemption and freedom.**

To be redeemed is to be bought out of slavery and the bondage of sin and being under a law we could never keep. "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us..." (Ephesians 1:7-8) "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us..." (Galatians 3:13)

### **Justification and no condemnation**

Atonement also means that the consequences we might expect from a holy God for sin are removed. There is now "no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1) He "rescues us from the coming wrath (the judgment of God's love). (1 Thessalonians 1:10)

All are "justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:24) "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." (Romans 4:25)

Any charge that may have counted against us has been placed on Him. "He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross." (Colossians 2:14)

### **Cleansing and purification**

Just as the sprinkled blood in the Temple symbolically purified the community, so on the cross while Jesus takes on the sin of the world, human beings now receive His purity in exchange: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

This purification is permanent and transforming: "The blood of goats and bulls...sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!" (Hebrews 9:13-14)

### **Reconciliation**

Through the cross, the peace with God we could never earn for ourselves is achieved. "...we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation." (Romans 5:11)

We can return to a holy God as holy people: "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." For "you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." (1 Peter 2:24-25)

We have a new relationship with God because "Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant." (Hebrews 9:15)



# Did Jesus protect us from an angry Father?



One possible understanding of the cross is to see a 'good Son' protecting the world from an 'angry Father' – as if God has a split personality. Some have described it as “cosmic child abuse”.

Rather than being good news of freedom and forgiveness the cross becomes a place of fear and guilt.

Rather than seeing a God of love and grace we see a God of contained anger.

While Jesus certainly died as a substitute, to see this as a way that God “let out His anger” raises several questions.

For example, Can God be truly angry with God? Can God actually punish God? Or if God the father needs someone to 'pay the price' for sin, does the Father ever really forgive anyone? The concept of forgiveness is surely about releasing a debt – not collecting it from someone else.

And how are we to understand the Father justly punishing Jesus when He knew Jesus never did anything wrong? (A handout outlines some of these questions).

If the picture we have of God is the most defining thing about us, it is vital that at the cross we see that:

## **God is fully involved in every way.**

As Jane Williams says, “...through all this, the love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit for each other and for us remains intact. In all things, God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is united in action, in purpose, in will and in love...God remains at all times God.”  
(Why did Jesus have to die? SPCK)

It is impossible for the Trinity of God to do anything except in loving unity.

So while the various pictures God gives us to understand the atonement speak in many different ways, the foundational truth is that on the cross “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19) pouring Himself out in the only way His nature allows.

## **The love of God for us is on display.**

God IS love and therefore cannot do anything but love. Even before the cross Christ revealed the nature of that love in forgiving sins and restoring people.

John 3:16, perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible, says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.”

The cross is not just something that God who is love does; it is the expression of who He is. One saint said that “God’s Incarnation is not only an act of restoration in response to our sin, but also and more fundamentally as an act of love, an expression of God’s own nature.”





St Catherine of Siena said, "Nails were not enough to hold God-and-man fastened to the cross, had not love held him there."

The Catholic priest Brennan Manning tells a story about how his name changed. His real name was Richard Xavier Francis Manning. While growing up, his best friend was Ray. The two of them did everything together: went to school together, bought a car together as teenagers, double-dated, and so forth. They even enlisted in the Army together, went to boot camp together and fought on the frontlines together in the Korean War.

One night while sitting in a foxhole, Brennan was reminiscing about the old days in Brooklyn while Ray listened and ate a chocolate bar. Suddenly a live grenade came into the trench. Ray looked at Brennan, smiled, dropped his chocolate bar and threw himself on the live grenade. It exploded, killing Ray, but Brennan's life was saved.

When Brennan became a priest, he was instructed to take on the name of a saint. He thought of his friend, Ray Brennan. So, he took on the name "Brennan."

Years later he went to visit Ray's mother in Brooklyn. They sat up late one night having tea when Brennan asked her, "Do you think Ray loved me?" Mrs. Brennan got up off the couch, shook her finger in front of Brennan's face and shouted, "What more could he have done for you?"

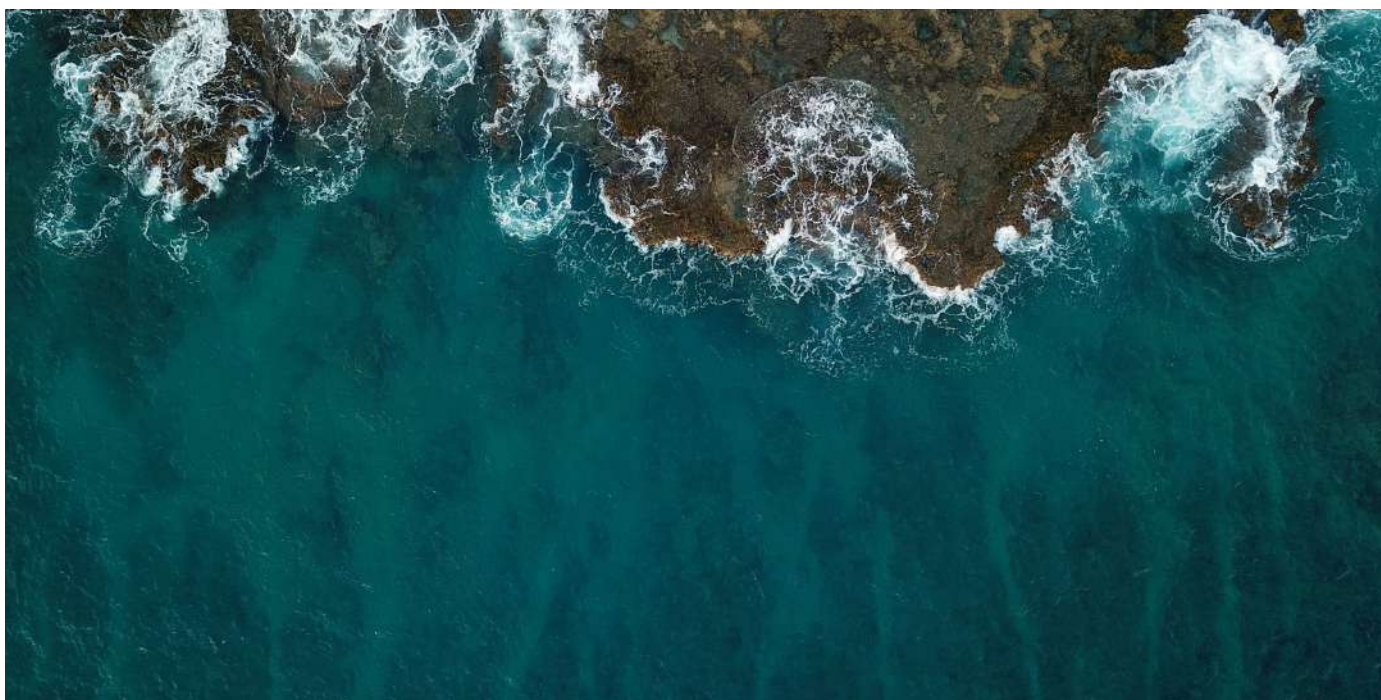
Brennan said that at that moment he experienced an epiphany. He imagined himself standing before the cross of Jesus wondering, Does God really love me? And Jesus' mother Mary pointing to her son, saying, "What more could he have done for you?"

In a vision Julian of Norwich was asked by Christ, "Are you well satisfied with my suffering for you?" 'Yes, thank you, good Lord,' I replied. 'Yes, good Lord, bless you.'

And the kind Lord Jesus said, 'If you are satisfied, I am satisfied too. It gives me greater happiness and joy and, indeed, eternal delight ever to have suffered for you. If I could possibly have suffered more, I would have done so.'" She reflected, "In his word 'If I could possibly have suffered more, I would have done so,'

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*I saw that he would have died again and again, for his love would have given him no rest until he had done so.”*



# How does Jesus' life and death help me to become like Christ in my lived experience?



If God is to genuinely change us, we need to be able to come to Him with confidence and trust. As the writer to Hebrews puts it, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Hebrews 4:16)

Religion can be about how human beings build a bridge to God through a series of outward behaviours or sacrifices. This can lead to 'performance anxiety' – we are never quite sure if we have done enough to earn God's favour.

But through His life, death and resurrection, Jesus reverses this direction – God builds the bridge towards humanity and becomes the sacrifice. His "perfect love casts out fear". (1 John 4:18)

As a result, this is how Saint Bernard of Clairvaux says Christians can be: "So what are you frightened of? Why are you trembling before the face of the Lord when he comes? God has come not to judge the world, but to save it! Do not run away; do not be afraid. God comes unarmed; he wants to save you, not to punish you.

And lest you should say 'I heard your voice and I hid myself,' look - he is here, an infant with no voice. The cry of a baby is something to be pitied not to be frightened of. He is made a little child, the Virgin Mother has wrapped his tender limbs in swaddling bands; so why are you still quaking with fear? This tells you that God has come to save you, not to lose you; to rescue you, not to imprison you."



To become like Christ, we need to be set free from guilt or shame at our core. In our Western context, we are familiar with the idea that our guilt has been dealt with through Jesus' atoning death making us righteous before God. Instead of us having to be pure to come to Him, His purity transforms us.

But other Christians (from the more Eastern Orthodox tradition) have emphasised that the cross takes away the shame that creates distance from God and others.

In fact, the idea that God replaces our shame with honour and restored relationship has been called "the pivotal cultural value" of the Bible. (See handout on three ways to understand salvation.)

Most people in the world identify more with an honour/shame understanding than a guilt/innocence one, and the issue of shame is referred to far more widely in the Bible than that of guilt.

In a 'guilt culture' we could say that God deals with what I have done by taking its consequences away.

In a 'shame culture' we could say that God restores who I am and my relationship with Him and others. This is the message of the lost sheep or coin that has been found. Of the Prodigal Son who returns to His father and is restored to relationship.



In a world where 'honour/shame' cultures are increasingly more relevant, the good news is how God "puts a ring on our finger and a robe around our shoulders", restoring our dignity and relationship.

James Brian Smith tells this story: "John of Kronstadt was a nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox priest at a time when alcohol abuse was rampant. None of the priests ventured out of their churches to help the people. They waited for people to come to them.

John, compelled by love, went into the streets. People said he would lift the hung-over, foul-smelling people from the gutter, cradle them in his arms and say to them, 'This is beneath your dignity. You were meant to house the fullness of God'."

Genuine change begins with choices we make in the light of who we are as people "housing God's fullness", not to determine who we are.

Linked to this is being freed from the need to earn God's favour. The elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son illustrates how difficult human beings can find it not to have a relationship with God based on a "contract".

But the basis for becoming like Christ is knowing that God's favour is given to us without regard to whether we deserve it or not. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

The cross shows that nothing can stand in the way of God's love for us. "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one...

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:31-39 abridged)

For Paul it was this grace that was transforming: "The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 1:14)

And a sentence later he demonstrates how the meaning of Jesus' life and death helps us become more like Christ by growing humility: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst." (1 Timothy 1:15)





The most revealing aspect of our sinfulness can be the easy way in which we mentally judge or compare ourselves with others.

But the more we understand the cross, and the more we see people as those for whom Christ died, the less likely we are to judge others. "When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died, My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride."

When Paul reminds the Philippian Christians of how Jesus, "humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross" he frames it by reminding them to "have the same mindset as Christ Jesus....in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." (Philippians 2: 4,5,8)

Ultimately genuine change comes not from fear, but from love for a Saviour (and, as we shall explore next week, allegiance to a Lord). Paul wanted to "live for God...who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2: 19-20)



The more disciples are rooted in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the more the desire and power to 'become like Him' grows. "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

And so, as one Orthodox writer puts it, "The spiritual life is not a life of laws and precepts but a life of participation, affection and love, a life mingled and mixing with God."



# How do I receive salvation in my lived experience?



As we grow in being with God and becoming like Christ in our lived experience, the covenant relationship God offers us means that He never forces His love on us but invites us to respond in our daily lives.

In doing so, the confidence, healing and restoration that God offers can move from idea to reality through embracing two attitudes which are expressed through one habit.

The attitudes are *repentance* and *faith*.

The habit of *confession* can help us to be rooted in these attitudes in our daily lives.

## **Repentance.**

Jesus' call to people was to, "repent and believe". (Mark 1:15) In the Bible, being able to repent is the first step that "leads to life". (Acts 1:18) It is much more than feeling sorry. It means 'return' or 'turn round', literally to change your mind. It is the decision to go God's way - the first essential step towards change and healing.

The first steps of Alcoholics Anonymous illustrate repentance well:

- We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.
- Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
- Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
- Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
- Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
- Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
- Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.



When we repent, we surrender to God being in control. "When we fall through our weakness or blindness our Lord in his courtesy puts his hand on us, encourages us, and holds onto us. Only then does he will that we should see our wretchedness, and humbly acknowledge it.

It is not his intention for us to remain like this, nor that we should go to great lengths in our self-accusation, nor that we should feel too wretched about ourselves. Rather he wants us to look to him. For he stands there apart, waiting for us to come to him in sorrow and grief. He is quick to receive us, for we are his delight and joy, and he our Salvation and our life." Julian of Norwich

## **Faith.**

The Bible repeatedly contrasts the fruitless path of trying to be put right with God by obeying the law with instead receiving His righteousness through faith.

Paul writing to the Romans reminds them that "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness (and so)... to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness." (Romans 4:3-5)

Receiving God's salvation is about turning towards Him and having confident trust, "faith in" Christ. John's gospel is written so that, "...you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." (John 20:30-31)



As we explored in module 1, faith is not so much about giving intellectual assent to Jesus' existence, but more about entrusting and surrendering to Him.

However, in recent years a healthy discussion has been happening in the church about what this actually means, prompted by questions such as, "If I need to have faith in Christ, how do I know if I have enough faith to receive salvation? What happens if my faith feels weak?" How can our faith level not become another way in which we suffer from 'performance anxiety'?

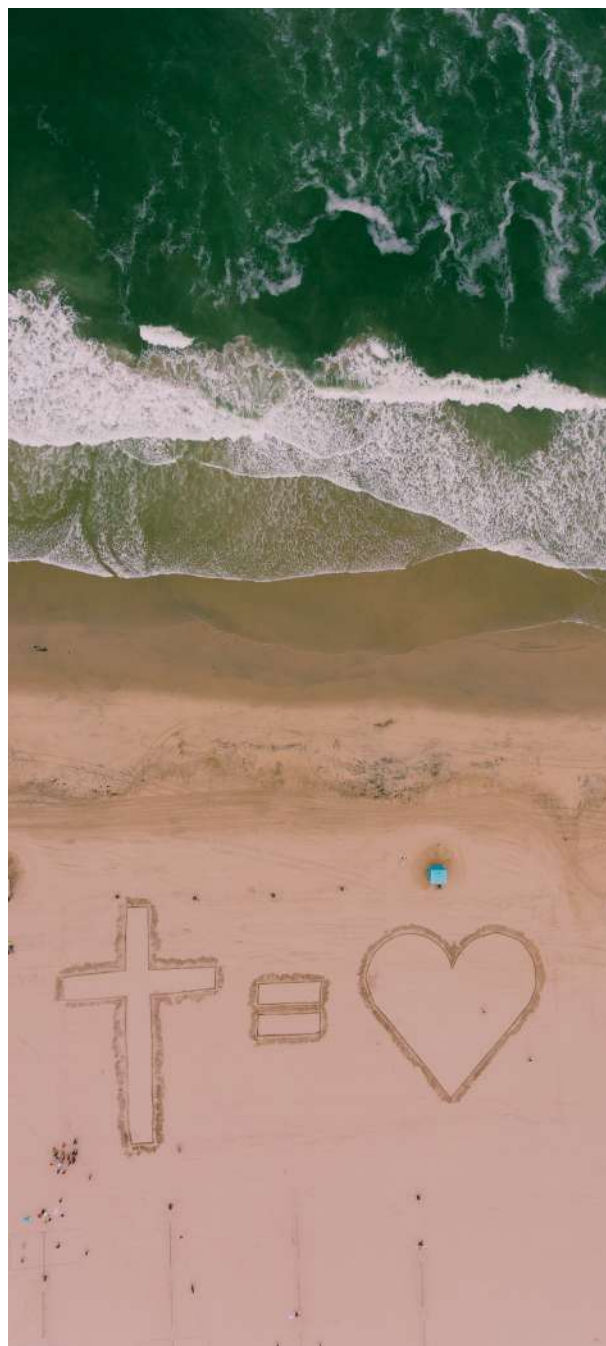
Apart from the fact that this approach might lead us to come to God with more of a 'contract' mentality than through a loving covenant, it highlights a potentially life-changing difference of the way two words in the New Testament (which was written originally in Greek) are translated.

Does *pistis Christou* mean that we are saved by

faith IN Christ – in other words by the trust we place in Him –

or by the faithfulness OF Christ?

In other words, which is more important – how much you or I can place our trust in Christ, or how faithful He has been in carrying out God's saving plan? (There are links to a short video by N.T. Wright and a couple of web articles about this.)



However the Greek is translated, it is probably safe to assume that God does not want the level of our faith in Him to become the kind of legalistic demand from which Jesus' death was meant to release us.

It is good to know that Christ is faithful to us ("if we are faithless, he remains faithful - for he cannot deny himself." 2 Timothy 2:13), that He taught that faith can be as small as a mustard seed (Matthew 17:20) and that "a smouldering wick He will not put out." (Matthew 12:20)

# How does the habit of confession help in this and change me?



Confession is a practice or habit through which we can consciously receive God's forgiveness. It involves repenting and placing our faith in the faithfulness of Jesus.

## Why is it necessary?

As we have seen, we do not have to earn God's forgiveness, and once we have put our trust in the cross as the way into our covenant relationship with God we can approach Him with confidence.

Nevertheless, we remain people in process of becoming more like Him, still capable of sinful ways which have consequences. This is why Jesus taught the disciples who were in relationship with Him to regularly pray, "Forgive us our sins". This is why John wrote to disciples, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

There is a symbolic way we can see this in the Bible. During the Last Supper, when Simon Peter refuses to let Jesus wash his feet, Christ replies, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean..." (John 13: 8-10)

The preacher Charles Spurgeon linked this to confession when he said, "We have been cleansed once for all, but our feet still need to be washed from the defilement of our daily walk as children of God." Confession is a practice for those who are fundamentally "already clean".

## How do we do it?

In terms of the attitude we bring to confession, the word used in the Bible means 'to say the same thing'. In other words, to agree with God about our sins – not to cover up.

As we have seen, God wants an honest relationship with us. A helpful insight from Spurgeon is that we come as children to God in confession: "There is a wide distinction between confessing sin as a culprit and confessing sin as a child. The Father's bosom is the place for penitent confessions."

Bernard of Clairvaux offers this counsel in terms of feelings of sorrow: "Sorrow for sin is necessary, but it should not involve endless self-preoccupation. You should dwell also on the glad remembrance of the loving kindness of God." Similarly, Julian of Norwich writes, "Our courteous Lord does not want his servants to despair even if they fall frequently and grievously. Our falling does not stop his loving us."





Practically speaking, there is no specific rule about how often confession is good, but it is always wise to keep short accounts with God and to give time to think through the things we need or want to confess.

We are, first and foremost, confessing to God alone: "I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not cover my iniquity..." (Psalm 32:5) However, the Bible also offers the possibility of confessing before other people, whether this is through using particular forms of words when we gather, or with a specific person. "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed." (James 5:16)

Some Christians - Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and some Anglicans - do this through the sacrament of confession (also called the sacrament of penance or the sacrament of reconciliation), as they confess their sins to a priest. Others find they can confess to trusted Christian friends. Martin Luther said that this "secret confession" to another was not required by Scripture, but can be "useful and even necessary."

Sometimes it is hard for us to be truly set free from guilt or shame and God gives us one another to make His presence and forgiveness real to us. Richard Foster says that if we want to confess before someone else we should look for, "spiritual maturity, wisdom, compassion, good common sense, the ability to keep a confidence, and a wholesome sense of humour."

He writes that if we want to listen to someone's confession these things are helpful:

When someone is opening their griefs to you,

**discipline yourself to be quiet.** Do not try to

relieve the tension by making an offhanded comment, as it's distracting and even destructive to the sacredness of the moment.

**Do not try to pry out more details than necessary.** If you feel they are holding something back due to fear or embarrassment, it is best to wait silently and prayerfully.

**Pray for them inwardly and imperceptibly,** send prayers of love and forgiveness toward them. Pray that they will share the 'key' that will reveal any area needing the healing touch of Christ.

**Once they have confessed, pray for them out loud,** and in the prayer, state that the forgiveness that is in Jesus is now real and effective for them. You can say this in a tone of genuine authority because "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them." (John 20:23)

**Ask God to heal their heart and mind** from any wounds the sin has caused.

### What does it do?

The purpose of the practice of confession is **greater closeness to God**, opening us up to God working in our lives as we are "entrusting ourselves, beyond sin, to the mercy of a loving and forgiving God." (Pope John Paul II)

**It deals with pride and brings psychological wholeness...** "it breaks the build up of shame within which happens when we hoard our mistakes and keep them to ourselves. The fear of rejection gets shattered when we sit in front of someone and get to hear the sweet words, 'You are forgiven'." (KXC website)

**It rebels against individualism** by opening us up to one another and creating community. It helps us acknowledge that our behaviours have consequences while healing the "loneliness of sin".

"Sin wants to be alone with people. It takes them away from the community. The more lonely people become, the more destructive the power of sin over them. The more deeply they become entangled in it, the more unholy is their loneliness. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of what is left unsaid sin poisons the whole being of a person..."

In confession the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and closed isolation of the heart. Sin must be brought into the light. What is unspoken is said openly and confessed. All that is secret and hidden comes to light." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

