

Way of Discipleship Small Groups

Jesus and the Cross 1: Why do we need a Saviour?



Touching base (5 minutes)

Open in prayer as is helpful for your group.

If this is your first session take time to introduce yourselves and set any ground rules you want to for your time together.

If you met previously take the opportunity either as a group or in pairs to check in with each other about how your response from last time has gone.



Introduction: These sessions explore the many different meanings of the cross and, if possible, it is good if they can be used in order to help build up the picture of what it means.



Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

What is wrong with the world?

Understanding the information (25 minutes)

Share these thoughts in your own words or read them together:

For Christians Jesus 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. But He is the one who has made knowing God 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'.



We see this being saved throughout 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)

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

Recognising our need forgiveness does not 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.

The Bible is realistic about our approaching God from its beginning. 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. 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 God’s holiness is bad, but because it is good. 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. This attribute of God is described as a “consuming” or “refining” fire in the Bible. The more accurate our view of the unique, loving, holy God the more we will have a realistically healthy understanding of ourselves.

Just as we need to have a real view of God, 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.” Sin is not a religious word for bad behaviour but has many aspects. It is 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 this 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 breakdown 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 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 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 in Scripture 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. This is why 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)

In summary, Paul describes this situation, while pointing to its ultimate solution. “So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7: 21-25)

Discuss: How do you respond to the idea of God being holy?

Reading the Bible (15 minutes)

Read Luke 18: 9-14: the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Discuss the Discovery Bible Study questions:
What does this passage teach me about God?
What does this passage teach me about people?
How does this passage call me to obey God?
What might I do in response to this this week?



Seeing how it looks in real lives (10 minutes)

There is no video, but you are invited to discuss your experience of God’s holiness.



Responding to God's leading (5 minutes)

Give people an opportunity to think about, "What might God be showing me and how might I respond?" They may like to write this down and/or share it with the group and/or share it with one other person. A friendly question is to ask each other, "Is there anything that would be helpful to ask you next time?"



Group prayer (5 minutes)

God of everlasting love,
we confess that we have been unfaithful
to our covenant with you and with one another.
We have worshiped other gods:
money, power, greed, and convenience.
We have served our own self-interest
instead of serving only you and your people.
We have not loved our neighbour as you have commanded,
nor have we rightly loved ourselves.
Forgive us, gracious God,
and bring us back into the fullness
of our covenant with you and one another.
Through Christ, our Lord.
Amen.





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