



# Messy Basics

## An online discipleship course

exploring what Christians believe through  
faith-based conversations in all-age groups

### Who is this for?

- It is for the many families who have been attending a Messy Church for a number of years picking up lots about what Christians believe, but who maybe have never found the space and time to sit down and talk about what it might mean for them.
- Sometimes it is the children who lead the way in this, asking important questions about what Christians believe, and so this course is for adults and children who would like to talk about these things together at home in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere.
- Attendance at a Messy Church can be irregular for some and so it is sometimes difficult to piece together the stories that are heard in a way that makes sense when it comes to understanding the Christian faith. For these families, this course provides a pathway towards knowing what it means to be a follower of Jesus.
- For others, however, monthly Messy Church attendance may not be enough to explore Christian beliefs and practices. For such, this course provides additional material that adults and children can work on at home together at their own convenience. It could be

something they use in between Messy Church services, allowing them to take what they have experienced at Messy Church to a deeper and more personal level.

- Messy Church offers an experience of Christianity that is firmly rooted in the generations working and learning together. This Messy Basics course stays faithful to this intergenerational principle with material that can be used by all ages working together.
- We hope that some families at Messy Churches will also welcome this course as accessible and appropriate material for a household prayer and Bible time, perhaps in the evening or at the meal table once a week.

### How does the material work?

Each of the ten sessions in this course is both self-contained but also, when taken with the others, provides a framework for understanding what Christians believe and how this affects their everyday lives.

Each session has a Bible story focus with useful notes about the story, which will prompt young and old to understand its context and purpose. There are questions

to generate all-age discussions, as well as a suggestion for a visual aid, an intergenerational activity and a way to pray together. There is a key verse from the Bible linked to each session, as well as a cross-reference to another part of the Bible that is relevant. Finally, each session ends with a summary of some of the key learning points from the story. The language is deliberately uncomplicated and as far as possible tries to avoid too much religious jargon.

The online material available will also be supported by short video clips from Christians talking about what being a Christian means for them and how they work out their faith in practice. There will also be suggestions for weekly challenges, ideas for helpful visual aids that can be put up around the home, prayers, postcards and take-away suggestions with a summary of each session and prompts to remember important Bible verses.

Households that make use of this course are encouraged to be in contact with others who are following the same sessions, so that they can share ideas and thoughts both online and if possible face-to-face. The diocese will invite family groups who use this course to attend a celebration to mark the completion of the material.

For those households or families who complete this course, there is further similar material available in *The Barnabas Family Bible* published by BRF.

## A suggested format for a household using the course

- Start with a meal together, as this will encourage fellowship, fun conversation and inclusion.
- Introduce the suggested visual aid that will kick off the story. This will need to be prepared before-hand by whoever takes the lead on that session.
- Make copies from the web or use Bibles at home to read the story for the session, inviting everyone to take part.
- It is recommended that at least one member of the household reads through the section entitled 'First thoughts on the story' beforehand, to be able to answer any questions about the story's context and purpose.

- Ask someone else to take on the role of questioner, using the questions from the 'Talk about the story' section to prompt discussion together.
- Work with the activity suggestion, which aims to get everyone involved in a response to the story. There are also accompanying video suggestions.
- Look at the related passage from elsewhere in the Bible and see how it could shed more light on the story.
- Ask everyone to come up with a one-sentence or even a one-word summary of the session that best captures what they have learnt. You might like to compare these with what is written in the 'Summing it all up' section of the material. You could also ask one of the questions in the Take Away section.
- Finish the session by using the idea in the 'Pray with the story' section.

## What is covered in this course?

The stories have been carefully chosen to explore who God is and what Christians believe God is like. Alongside this, the course looks at who Jesus is, including why he came and what he said. A strong thread throughout all the sessions addresses the question of whether God cares about us and what this means for you and me. The course takes a family group through to a point of decision as to whether they too want to follow Jesus and experience God at work in them as his disciples through the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

The sessions address the following questions and Bible stories:

- 1 Who is God and what is God like?**  
God makes the world – Genesis 1
- 2 Who is Jesus? It's all about love**  
The good enemy – Luke 10
- 3 Who is Jesus? It's all about grace**  
The loving father – Luke 15
- 4 Who is Jesus? It's all about mercy**  
Blind Bartimaeus – Mark 20
- 5 What did Jesus say? 'I forgive you'**  
The man through the roof – Mark 2

**6 What did Jesus say? ‘You have been saved’**

Zacchaeus – Luke 19

**7 What did Jesus say? ‘Come and follow me’**

The rich young man – Matthew 19

**8 Does God care about me? The cross**

Jesus on the cross – Luke 23

**9 Is God real? The resurrection**

Mary at the tomb and Thomas – John 20

**10 Can I trust God? A new direction**

Saul’s conversion – Acts 9

**What next?**

The aim of this course is to help Messy Church families go deeper on their discipleship journey as Christians. The last session ends with a suggestion that families might like to consider baptism. The following resources and books may be useful for families wishing to take further steps in the Christian faith:

From The Bible Reading Fellowship – see [brfonline.org.uk/messy-church](http://brfonline.org.uk/messy-church)

- *The Barnabas Family Bible*
- *God’s Word for Messy People*
- *Family Question Time*
- *Family Jesus Time*
- *Family Prayer Time*
- *Christmas Family Time*
- *Easter Family Time*

And...

# 1 Who is God and what is God like?

## Genesis 1:1–2:4 (CEV)

In the beginning  
 God created the heavens  
 and the earth.  
 The earth was barren,  
 with no form of life;  
 it was under a roaring ocean  
 covered with darkness.  
 But the Spirit of God  
 was moving over the water.

God said, 'I command light to shine!' And light started shining. God looked at the light and saw that it was good. He separated light from darkness and named the light 'Day' and the darkness 'Night.' Evening came and then morning – that was the first day.

God said, 'I command a dome to separate the water above it from the water below it.' And that's what happened. God made the dome and named it 'Sky.' Evening came and then morning – that was the second day.

God said, 'I command the water under the sky to come together in one place, so there will be dry ground.' And that's what happened. God named the dry ground 'Land,' and he named the water 'Ocean.' God looked at what he had done and saw that it was good.

God said, 'I command the earth to produce all kinds of plants, including fruit trees and grain.' And that's what happened. The earth produced all kinds of vegetation. God looked at what he had done, and it was good. Evening came and then morning – that was the third day.

God said, 'I command lights to appear in the sky and to separate day from night and to show the time for seasons, special days, and years. I command them to shine on the earth.' And that's what happened. God

made two powerful lights, the brighter one to rule the day and the other to rule the night. He also made the stars. Then God put these lights in the sky to shine on the earth, to rule day and night, and to separate light from darkness. God looked at what he had done, and it was good. Evening came and then morning – that was the fourth day.

God said, 'I command the ocean to be full of living creatures, and I command birds to fly above the earth.' So God made the giant sea monsters and all the living creatures that swim in the ocean. He also made every kind of bird. God looked at what he had done, and it was good. Then he gave the living creatures his blessing – he told the ocean creatures to live everywhere in the ocean and the birds to live everywhere on earth. Evening came and then morning – that was the fifth day.

God said, 'I command the earth to give life to all kinds of tame animals, wild animals, and reptiles.' And that's what happened. God made every one of them. Then he looked at what he had done, and it was good.

God said, 'Now we will make humans, and they will be like us. We will let them rule the fish, the birds, and all other living creatures.'

So God created humans to be like himself; he made men and women. God gave them his blessing and said:

Have a lot of children! Fill the earth with people and bring it under your control. Rule over the fish in the ocean, the birds in the sky, and every animal on the earth.

I have provided all kinds of fruit and grain for you to eat. And I have given the green plants as food for everything else that breathes. These will be food for animals, both wild and tame, and for birds.

God looked at what he had done. All of it was very

good! Evening came and then morning – that was the sixth day.

So the heavens and the earth and everything else were created.

By the seventh day God had finished his work, and so he rested. God blessed the seventh day and made it special because on that day he rested from his work.

That's how God created the heavens and the earth.

## First thoughts on the story

The opening chapter of the Bible offers us a beautiful God-centred poem about how this world evolved, unpacking the wonders of the universe and of planet earth stage by stage. Each big God-day adds another layer to the story, including both you and me, made in God's image, and the presence of rest. This story from the Bible is telling us that life on earth isn't a chemical accident or some random explosion in space but a planned gift for us all from God, who is love. We are here because God wants us to be here. God's words started everything off!

There is so much to enjoy in this world – light, water, plants and trees, the stars and the moon, the fish and birds, all the animals and people – and the amazing part of this story is that God wants you and me to look after it and work with him to make the earth a safe home for all. This is an awesome responsibility but one which, sadly, we have not responded to very well. Rather than working with God to protect the land, the oceans and the huge diversity of plant and animal life on this planet, we have acted selfishly, hunting many creatures to extinction, choking the air with greenhouse gases and pouring our plastic waste into the oceans. We must, of course, face up to our part in all this, and the Bible has more to say about that later. Nevertheless, it is clear from this first story that we are each especially loved by God and made to be like him in creativity and compassion.

## Suggested visual aid

Use a small globe – either a model desk globe or a blow-up world – as you talk about this story together. Point out the land and the sea; talk about the places where certain animals and sea creatures can be found; name some countries, and also any friends and/or family

who live in another part of the world. We call this amazing planet 'earth', but I wonder what other name(s) God might give it?

## Talk about the story

- 1 Which 'day' of this creation story is your favourite and why?
- 2 From this story, what can we learn about God? What is God like?
- 3 What can we learn about ourselves? What's so special about you and me?
- 4 How does this Bible story differ from a scientific description of how this world was made?
- 5 Is there anything that puzzles you about this story?
- 6 Why do you think this story is important to Christians?

## An activity together

As a group of adults and children, give each other five minutes to search the home for any objects that are somehow linked to the different 'days' of creation – light, water, land and plants, stars and moon, fish and birds, animals and human beings, rest. Arrange them in an ordered line that matches the Bible story and then talk about which parts of creation you like best, which parts are the most important and how we should be looking after the world better, just as God asked us to.

## Video suggestions

- Kids explain God and the universe (fun, insightful, American!) – [youtube.com/watch?v=XSODYy5jP\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XSODYy5jP_Y)
- Celebration of creation (beautiful images to Christian worship song) – [youtube.com/watch?v=AE\\_BX1XUSC4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AE_BX1XUSC4)

## Highlighted verse

'God looked at what he had done. All of it was very good!' (Genesis 1:31).

## A related Bible story

Read Psalm 139:13–18, where the writer is blown away by how special God has made each one of us.

## Pray with the story

Turn your conversation and thoughts into thank-you prayers to God for the many beautiful things in the world. As you do so, encourage each other to pick up objects from your creation line (see the activity) and say one-sentence ‘Thank you, God, for...’ prayers. Depending on what else you may have talked about, you might want to include prayers of saying sorry for how we have not looked after this world and also prayers for help to do better.

## Summing it all up

- The universe exists because of the overflow of God’s love.
- We are the jewels in God’s creation crown.
- Christians believe that planet earth is a gift from God for us to enjoy and to look after.

- We share in God’s likeness and were created to be part of God’s family.
- Each one is special to God, wanted and loved.

## Take away

What difference will this make in your everyday life this month?

Or: How will this connect with your everyday life this month?

## 2 Who is Jesus? It's all about love

### Luke 10:25–37 (CEV)

An expert in the Law of Moses stood up and asked Jesus a question to see what he would say. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to have eternal life?'

Jesus answered, 'What is written in the Scriptures? How do you understand them?'

The man replied, 'The Scriptures say, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind." They also say, "Love your neighbours as much as you love yourself."'

Jesus said, 'You have given the right answer. If you do this, you will have eternal life.'

But the man wanted to show that he knew what he was talking about. So he asked Jesus, 'Who are my neighbours?'

Jesus replied:

As a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, robbers attacked him and grabbed everything he had. They beat him up and ran off, leaving him half dead.

A priest happened to be going down the same road. But when he saw the man, he walked by on the other side. Later a temple helper came to the same place. But when he saw the man who had been beaten up, he also went by on the other side.

A man from Samaria then came travelling along that road. When he saw the man, he felt sorry for him and went over to him. He treated his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put him on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next morning he gave the innkeeper two silver coins and said, 'Please take care of the man. If you spend more

than this on him, I will pay you when I return.'

Then Jesus asked, 'Which one of these three people was a real neighbour to the man who was beaten up by robbers?'

The teacher answered, 'The one who showed pity.'

Jesus said, 'Go and do the same!'

### First thoughts on the story

The lawyer who came to Jesus already knew the answer to his question about what mattered most in the world. God had told Moses long ago that the most important thing in life was love – love for God, love for others and love for ourselves. So why did he test Jesus like this? Maybe he, like many of us, thought there should be some limits to love. Surely God can't want us to love everyone, even those who hate and hurt us? The lawyer wanted Jesus to define 'others', so he asked, 'Who are my neighbours?' and Jesus told a story.

And what a story! It was one where the hero is someone everyone hated and the people who are meant to be kind turn out to be the villains of the piece! No wonder the people who first heard this story – known as a parable – were shocked and perhaps confused. But it's also why they never forgot this famous story. Not long before this, Jesus and his disciples had been turned away from a Samaritan village on their way south to Jerusalem. Samaritans and Jews despised each other; they wouldn't normally even exchange a simple greeting and certainly never shook hands, and yet here in this story it is the Samaritan who stops, has compassion on the man who was beaten up and applies first-century medicine to his wounds.

Jesus was saying that a 'neighbour' isn't just someone close to you, who you get on with. Instead, Jesus expands

the word way beyond this narrow definition. Anybody in need is your neighbour, even if he or she is your deadly enemy. God really does want us to love without limits, just as God does. Sadly, like the priest and the temple helper, we too often limit our love to those who are like us. And what is more, the poor man on the ground had to learn about receiving love from a neighbour who was his enemy. Jesus is reminding everyone that it is all about love – a radical, even shocking, love that is world-changing.

### Suggested visual aid

Find pictures of two local, rival sports teams – perhaps represented by team colours, scarves or mascots. The hatred between Samaritans and Jews was even more deadly than this!

### Talk about the story

- 1 If you were telling this story today, who would you choose as the enemy who turns out to be the hero?
- 2 Can you imagine the thoughts going through the priest's head to justify not stopping? And what was the temple helper thinking about?
- 3 The fact that the Samaritan stopped would have come as a shocking surprise to those who were listening. What do you think made him turn aside to help?
- 4 How does Jesus underline just how amazing the Samaritan's compassion was for this poor man left by the roadside?
- 5 In the light of this story, who is your neighbour?

### An activity together

This timeless and powerful parable begs to be translated afresh within every age and culture. Work on a modern version together that makes sense in your part of the world. Who was travelling and where to? How did he or she get hurt? Who are the equivalents of the priest and the temple helper, i.e. people who should have helped? Who is the surprise enemy who stops? How does he or she help? Try and capture in your story the same dramatic shock that Jesus' original version had.

### Video suggestions

- The thread (clever illustration telling the Christian narrative) – [youtube.com/watch?v=6U3LD\\_6cX-k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6U3LD_6cX-k)
- Great animation all about Jesus' teaching to love and follow him – [youtube.com/watch?v=rk8ERxqCZqQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rk8ERxqCZqQ)

### Highlighted verse

‘Jesus said, “Go and do the same!” (Luke 10:37).

### A related Bible story

Read Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and then Leviticus 19:18. Here is where you can find God's radical rules about love, which God gave for the good of the world.

### Pray with the story

In this story, Jesus is challenging his listeners and us to think more radically about love. He wants our love quite literally to include anybody and everybody. This needs courage and help from God, who is love. For a time of prayer, draw a series of rough concentric circles, starting small and getting bigger and bigger. In each circle, write the names of people God wants you to care for, starting with those close to you in the family; then your friends; then those in your school and at work; then the wider local community; then those in your village, town or city; those in your country; and finally others in distant lands around the world. God's circles of love include you and me, as well as the whole universe. Ask for help from God to grow your love to be this big!

### Summing it all up

- God is love and everything works best when that love guides and inspires all that we do.
- Sadly, we usually limit that love to those we like, deciding that it's impossible to love everyone.
- Jesus sticks to God's definition of love and tells this famous story (often called 'the good Samaritan') to make his point.

- Jesus came to remind us of God's way of love and to live it out in his own life.

## Take away

What difference will this make in your everyday life this month?

Or: How will this connect with your everyday life this month?

# 3 Who is Jesus? It's all about grace

## Luke 15:11–24 (CEV)

Jesus also told them another story:

Once a man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, 'Give me my share of the property.' So the father divided his property between his two sons.

Not long after that, the younger son packed up everything he owned and left for a foreign country, where he wasted all his money in wild living. He had spent everything, when a bad famine spread through that whole land. Soon he had nothing to eat.

He went to work for a man in that country, and the man sent him out to take care of his pigs. He would have been glad to eat what the pigs were eating, but no one gave him a thing.

Finally, he came to his senses and said, 'My father's workers have plenty to eat, and here I am, starving to death! I will go to my father and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. I am no longer good enough to be called your son. Treat me like one of your workers."' "

The younger son got up and started back to his father. But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt sorry for him. He ran to his son and hugged and kissed him.

The son said, 'Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. I am no longer good enough to be called your son.'

But his father said to the servants, 'Hurry and bring the best clothes and put them on him. Give him a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. Get the best calf and prepare it, so we can eat

and celebrate. This son of mine was dead, but has now come back to life. He was lost and has now been found.' And they began to celebrate.

## First thoughts on the story

This is one of the most well known of Jesus' parables. It is full of drama and memorable imagery that must have had his audience on the edge of their seats then, just as it can do today. As so often, Jesus doesn't give any explanation of what the story means but lets it speak for itself. He was telling it for the religious leaders in particular to hear. They were upset that Jesus welcoming all types of people to be his followers, including those with very messy lives and unacceptable behaviour. In the story, the father never gives up hope that his younger son will come home. He never disowns nor forgets about him, but just waits patiently. When the son does come back, it is interesting that the father says nothing to his wayward boy. There are no words of a rebuke or anger; he doesn't say 'I told you so' or even offer words of advice about the future, just an extravagant welcome. This is what Christians call grace – a love that we could never earn nor deserve. The father's gifts of a ring and sandals mean that the boy is fully accepted back into the family, just like the people with messy lives who had been welcomed back to God through the ministry of Jesus.

## Suggested visual aid

Find the following three simple visuals for the story – a bag of coins, a model pig (perhaps from a farm set) and a gold ring. Use these to help you retell the story to each other.

## Talk about the story

- 1 What is it that finally brings the younger son to his senses and prompts him to go back home?
- 2 Why does the father never give up on his lost son?
- 3 Do you think the father treats his younger son fairly?
- 4 The people listening should have guessed that this parable was really about them and God. What is Jesus saying about God's love?
- 5 There are two other lost-and-found stories at the beginning of this same chapter in Luke's gospel. Look them up and think about what sort of picture of God each story offers us.

## An activity together

There is a party at the end of this story, and this is a picture of what it means to God when we come home and put our trust in him again. Party imagery is also often used by Jesus as a picture of heaven. Create some party sound effects and activities to go along with a rereading of verses 22 to 24 to bring them to life. Put on some dance music, share a fizzy drink together and some favourite food; use party poppers and streamers and include lots of laughter and cheering. Catch the excitement of the father's joy that his son is back home. This is what God's grace means in practice – the best welcome-home ever!

## Video suggestion

- Diocese of Bristol/Growing in faith – [youtube.com/watch?v=cv\\_IYvnlSZw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cv_IYvnlSZw)

## Highlighted verse

'But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him... He ran to his son and hugged and kissed him' (Luke 15:20).

## A related Bible story

Read Psalm 103:8–10. This is a description of the grace of God that comes up more than once in the Bible. The father in the story (which is sometimes called 'the prodigal son') is behaving just like God.

## Pray with the story

The younger son wandered far from home, and it was only when things got really bad for him that he remembered his dad. Sometimes it takes problems, failures or even disasters in our lives to make us realise that we have lost touch with God and need God's grace. On a large piece of paper, write 'home' in one corner. Now start drawing a wandering line from home all around the paper, covering as large an area as possible without crossing your own line, and eventually coming back home. As each of you traces this line for him- or herself, pray something like this: 'Father God, help me not to wander away from you and your love. If I do, bring me back home safely. Help me to remember you are always waiting for me, however far away I may go.'

## Summing it all up

- This story about the son and his father is about how much God loves us.
- God's love isn't something we can earn by being 'good enough' or by keeping out of trouble. It is always just there, waiting for us to experience it. This is God's grace.
- Jesus shows us what God's grace looks like by the way he welcomed outsiders and those who had completely messed up their lives.
- Jesus is the human face of God's grace for all of us.

## Take away

What difference will this make in your everyday life this month?

Or: How will this connect with your everyday life this month?

# 4 Who is Jesus? It's all about mercy

## Mark 10:46–52 (CEV)

Jesus and his disciples went to Jericho. And as they were leaving, they were followed by a large crowd. A blind beggar by the name of Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, was sitting beside the road. When he heard that it was Jesus from Nazareth, he shouted, 'Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!' Many people told the man to stop, but he shouted even louder, 'Son of David, have pity on me!'

Jesus stopped and said, 'Call him over!'

They called out to the blind man and said, 'Don't be afraid! Come on! He is calling for you.' The man threw off his coat as he jumped up and ran to Jesus.

Jesus asked, 'What do you want me to do for you?'

The blind man answered, 'Master, I want to see!'

Jesus told him, 'You may go. Your eyes are healed because of your faith.'

Right away the man could see, and he went down the road with Jesus.

and they do so all the more when he starts calling out for Jesus. He is an embarrassment and what's more, he is holding up Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. But Jesus hears and sees this nobody and treats him with dignity. Again and again in the gospels, Jesus bothers about the ones no one else cares about and this is a sign of God's love in action through him – this is mercy. Bartimaeus knows who Jesus is and even gives him his proper royal title of 'Son of David'. He is showing more understanding and faith in Jesus than many in the crowds around him. His faith is rewarded, his sight is restored and now he sees Jesus for himself. As he looks at Jesus, he is looking into the face of God, who wants everyone to see properly with new eyes the wonders of this world and all the people he has created.

## Suggested visual aid

Cover a walking stick with white tape. Those who have difficulty with their eyesight often walk with a stick like this.

## Talk about the story

- 1 I wonder how Bartimaeus knew that Jesus was there. And how did he know what sort of person he was?
- 2 Why do the crowds want to silence blind Bartimaeus?
- 3 Bartimaeus is a determined man. His shouting just gets louder and louder! How determined are we when it comes to wanting to find out more about Jesus and come close to him?
- 4 I wonder why Jesus picked out Bartimaeus's cries above all the noise of the crowd.
- 5 Imagine what Bartimaeus and Jesus may have gone to talk about after the healing. I wonder if he was among

## First thoughts on the story

As usual, Jesus is surrounded by crowds of people. This time, he is on his way from Jericho to Jerusalem. He was going up for the Passover festival there, and this was going to be his last visit. His attention was now increasingly on the coming events of Holy Week and Easter, yet despite this he still finds time to bother about one person in the crowd – a person no one else was interested in.

Bartimaeus was a regular beggar on this route. Bartimaeus is this man's surname not his first name, because sadly in those days, people who were sick or disabled were treated with little respect. The crowd were probably used to ignoring him or telling him to shut up,

those who stayed with Jesus all through what happens in the days to come up in Jerusalem.

## An activity together

Bartimaeus must have had some friends who helped him each day to get down to the road from Jericho to Jerusalem where he would sit and beg. Play a trust game where one of you is blindfolded and has to let the others guide him or her around a simple obstacle course. When people lose their sight, they have to learn how to compensate by using the others senses better, such as touch and hearing.

## Video suggestion

- Jesus explained (easy to watch, informative, engaging and light-hearted) – [youtube.com/watch?v=dZ9LmlgwHbA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZ9LmlgwHbA)

## Highlighted verse

‘Jesus told him... “Your eyes are healed because of your faith” (Mark 10:52).

## A related Bible story

Read Isaiah 35:5–10. Isaiah was a prophet who looked forward to the day when God would come and change everything for the better. Jesus was doing just what this prophesy spoke about.

## Pray with the story

In some parts of the world, it is customary for Christians in worship to pray all at the same time and out loud. This is a useful reminder that when we pray we are not talking to impress each other but to address God. Bartimaeus’ prayer was shouted out loud above the noise of the crowd. Why not try this type of prayer? On the count of three, everyone should pray their prayer out loud at the same time. Don’t worry; God is quite able to hear each individual through the noise!

## Summing it all up

- Jesus cared about the people no one else bothered about. This is God’s mercy in action.
- Bartimaeus had been labelled as someone beyond hope, but God’s mercy breaks through all that.
- The crowds and even the disciples were surprised that Jesus stopped to help Bartimaeus. God’s mercy is so much greater than we expect.
- Once again, Jesus was showing everyone what God is like – full of love, grace and now mercy.

## Take away

What difference will this make in your everyday life this month?

Or: How will this connect with your everyday life this month?

# 5 What did Jesus say? ‘I forgive you’

## Mark 2:1–12 (CEV)

Jesus went back to Capernaum, and a few days later people heard that he was at home. Then so many of them came to the house that there wasn't even standing room left in front of the door.

Jesus was still teaching when four people came up, carrying a crippled man on a mat. But because of the crowd, they could not get him to Jesus. So they made a hole in the roof above him and let the man down in front of everyone.

When Jesus saw how much faith they had, he said to the crippled man, ‘My friend, your sins are forgiven.’

Some of the teachers of the Law of Moses were sitting there. They started wondering, ‘Why would he say such a thing? He must think he is God! Only God can forgive sins.’

Right away, Jesus knew what they were thinking, and he said, ‘Why are you thinking such things? Is it easier for me to tell this crippled man that his sins are forgiven or to tell him to get up and pick up his mat and go on home? I will show you that the Son of Man has the right to forgive sins here on earth.’ So Jesus said to the man, ‘Get up! Pick up your mat and go on home.’

The man got right up. He picked up his mat and went out while everyone watched in amazement. They praised God and said, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’

the four men with their sick friend had to check it out for themselves. These four were certainly determined. Nothing was going to make them give up on helping their friend even when it meant hard work, possible social embarrassment and even criminal damage! It was their faith and compassion that got them through to Jesus and he surely recognised this.

But there was an unexpected twist to the story that must have taken them by surprise as much as it did the crowds in the house. Jesus didn't heal the sick man straight away, but instead forgave his sins. Jesus wanted to give healing on the inside first, before mending broken limbs. This outraged the teachers of the law, who knew that only God could do this and therefore Jesus was acting like God. The outer healing that did come was indeed a great miracle and the four friends must have been ecstatic when they saw their friend walk out of the building carrying his mat. But even more importantly, this miracle proved that what the teachers were muttering about was true. Jesus is God and he can forgive sins. No wonder people were all amazed.

## Suggested visual aid

Find an old cardboard box. Turn it upside down and then draw on windows and a door to make it into a house with a flat roof. Now cut a hole in the roof just as the friends did.

## Talk about the story

- 1 Have you ever been caught up in the middle of a big crowd? What was it like? Who or what was the big attraction?
- 2 Imagine a house being so full that you can't even get through the door. I wonder what the home owner –

## First thoughts on the story

Wherever Jesus was, crowds gathered. He was such a great storyteller and had such a compassionate way about him that people wanted to be near him. And there were miracles, too! Reports of healings soon spread and

who may well have been the disciple Peter – felt about it all.

- 3 I wonder why the friends didn't give up when they saw how impossible it was to get close to Jesus.
- 4 Can you imagine what the people inside the house said to each other when they saw the roof above them being opened up?
- 5 What do you think is the most important part of this story?

## An activity together

In many ways, the first miracle of this story is the strong friendship between the four men who took their friend to Jesus on the mat. Have a go at picking up the youngest member of your household on a piece of carpet like a stretcher. Carrying someone like this is hard work! And how does the one on the mat feel?

## Video suggestion

- Why God? (powerful song with lyrics about trusting God) – [youtube.com/watch?v=s3Cruc3PYS4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3Cruc3PYS4)

## Highlighted verse

'[Jesus] said to the crippled man, "My friend, your sins are forgiven"' (Mark 2:5).

## A related Bible story

Read Psalm 32:1–8. In this poem from the Old Testament, we hear of the joy that comes with being forgiven. Forgiveness is at the heart of good relationships – with God and with each other. Jesus made this part of the special prayer he taught his friends ('Forgive us for doing wrong, as we forgive others', Matthew 6:12).

## Pray with the story

The friends didn't give up, despite aching muscles, rope burns, blisters and all the cuts and bruises they must have sustained as they tore open the roof. Faith in God calls for determination, and part of that is not giving up praying for people in need. Write the names of people you know on Post-it notes and stick these on to a rectangular piece of fabric. Now take a corner each and lift it up to God in prayer with words such as: 'Lord Jesus, help us not to give up lifting these people to you, asking for your healing both on the outside and the inside'.

## Summing it all up

- Saying sorry and meaning it, as well as sincerely accepting someone else's apology and genuinely letting the hurt go, are what true forgiveness is all about.
- It has been said that the heart of the human problem is the human heart. If our heart remains hard and unforgiving, then we remain 'paralysed' and can't become all that God planned us to be.
- Although Jesus brought physical healing to many people, the key aspect of any healing is the inner release that forgiveness can bring.
- Being forgiven and being set free are related, and this is what Jesus offers to all who trust in him.

## Take away

What difference will this make in your everyday life this month?

Or: How will this connect with your everyday life this month?

# 6 What did Jesus say? ‘You have been saved’

## Luke 19:1–10 (CEV)

Jesus was going through Jericho, where a man named Zacchaeus lived. He was in charge of collecting taxes and was very rich. Jesus was heading his way, and Zacchaeus wanted to see what he was like. But Zacchaeus was a short man and could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree.

When Jesus got there, he looked up and said, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry down! I want to stay with you today.’ Zacchaeus hurried down and gladly welcomed Jesus.

Everyone who saw this started grumbling, ‘This man Zacchaeus is a sinner! And Jesus is going home to eat with him.’

Later that day Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, ‘I will give half of my property to the poor. And I will now pay back four times as much to everyone I have ever cheated.’

Jesus said to Zacchaeus, ‘Today you and your family have been saved, because you are a true son of Abraham. The Son of Man came to look for and to save people who are lost.’

worthy of God’s love and rescue – tax collector Zacchaeus belongs to that group who had betrayed their country and their God by working for the Romans. And Jesus turns lives around for the better – just as rich Zacchaeus becomes a blessing to Jericho, repaying thefts many times over and providing money for the poor of the city.

Zacchaeus turns from being public enemy number one to public benefactor. Only an encounter with Jesus can produce such a miracle. We have no record of what they said to each other at the meal in Zacchaeus’ home, but whatever it was, everyone is astounded by the change that comes over this little man. Here is a Jew who had lost his way, but who, on meeting Jesus, had come home to God again in a profound way, discovering his true identity as one of God’s people. This is what Jesus means when he says, ‘You have been saved.’ What happened to Zacchaeus is a picture of what happens to all who came close to God through Jesus, and this still goes on today. Rescuing the lost is what Jesus came to do, and this will also be at the heart of the coming Easter events in Jerusalem.

## Suggested visual aid

Collect together half a dozen leaves. Put them in a pile as a focus of those leaves that might well have been knocked off by Zacchaeus as he climbed the sycamore tree.

## First thoughts on the story

We are near the end of Jesus’ ministry of teaching and healing. After about three years on the move around the villages of Galilee, as well as regular journeys south for festivals, Jesus is now in Jericho, from where he will set out next to Jerusalem for the last time. The story of what happened when he meets Zacchaeus is typical of all the encounters that have gone before. Jesus notices the ones others don’t see – in this case Zacchaeus hiding in the tree. Jesus cares about the ones others think aren’t

## Talk about the story

- 1 I wonder what prompted Zacchaeus to want to see Jesus.
- 2 What were the crowd’s reactions when they heard about Jesus inviting himself to Zacchaeus’ home?
- 3 As far as the people of Jericho were concerned, Zacchaeus was beyond rescuing. Are we ever in danger of writing people off like this?

4 What do you think happened at the meal to bring about such a transformation in Zacchaeus in his attitude to his money?

5 What do you think Zacchaeus and his family did next?

## An activity together

This story is full of emotions: the excitement of the crowd because Jesus was in town; the anger that Zacchaeus wanted to see him too; the curiosity and bewilderment that Jesus was bothering with Zacchaeus; and the shock around what Zacchaeus says he will do with his money. Have a go at the facial expressions and sound effects that go with these feelings. What other feelings can you find and re-enact from the story?

## Video suggestion

- Diocese of Bristol/Faith in the workplace – [youtube.com/watch?v=1ppCUDbvewc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ppCUDbvewc)

## Highlighted verse

'The Son of Man\* came to look for and to save people who are lost' (Luke 19:10).

(\* This was the way Jesus often described himself.)

## A related Bible story

Read Ezekiel 36:25–28. The prophet Ezekiel looks forward to the day when God will forgive the wrong things we do and instead give everyone a new heart that wants to love and serve him.

## Pray with the story

Zacchaeus turns over a new leaf because of his meeting with Jesus. This is one way to understand what it means to be saved. Cut out some leaf shapes from paper. On one side, write words or draw pictures to represent those things that you are sorry about before God. Zacchaeus might have written: greed, hurting others, betrayal or pride. Now turn over the leaves and write new words or draw new pictures that express how you want to be different with God's help. For example: more generous,

more caring, more faithful or more humble, etc. Make these leaves your prayers to God.

## Summing it all up

- From the very beginning, when the gift of this world was spoiled by our decision to do things against God's instructions, God had planned to 'save' the world.
- God's rescue plan of 'salvation' involves renewing us from the inside out, changing the world one heart at a time.
- Jesus tells Zacchaeus in this story that this is why God sent him. Through his words and actions, and particularly though what happens on Good Friday, Jesus is the way each one of us can be 'saved' – this means being forgiven, changed on the inside and restored to a family friendship with God.
- When he was born, Joseph was told to give the baby the name 'Jesus', which means 'God saves'. The story of the Bible could be summed as 'God makes' and then 'God saves'.

## Take away

What difference will this make in your everyday life this month?

Or: How will this connect with your everyday life this month?

# 7 What did Jesus say? ‘Come and follow me’

## Matthew 19:16–30 (CEV)

A man came to Jesus and asked, ‘Teacher, what good thing must I do to have eternal life?’

Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you ask me about what is good? Only God is good. If you want to have eternal life, you must obey his commandments.’

‘Which ones?’ the man asked.

Jesus answered, ‘Do not murder. Be faithful in marriage. Do not steal. Do not tell lies about others. Respect your father and mother. And love others as much as you love yourself.’ The young man said, ‘I have obeyed all of these. What else must I do?’

Jesus replied, ‘If you want to be perfect, go sell everything you own! Give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven. Then come and follow me.’ When the young man heard this, he was sad, because he was very rich.

Jesus said to his disciples, ‘It’s terribly hard for rich people to get into the kingdom of heaven! In fact, it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into God’s kingdom.’

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly surprised and asked, ‘How can anyone ever be saved?’

Jesus looked straight at them and said, ‘There are some things that people cannot do, but God can do anything.’

Peter replied, ‘Remember, we have left everything to be your followers! What will we get?’

Jesus answered:

Yes, all of you have become my followers. And so in the future world, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, I promise that you will sit on

twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. All who have given up home or brothers and sisters or father and mother or children or land for me will be given a hundred times as much. They will also have eternal life. But many who are now first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

## First thoughts on the story

Jesus’ teaching and his miracles attracted lots of people to want to become his disciples. Sometimes this was just people going with the crowds, but there were those who had a genuine longing to live God’s way and be part of God’s kingdom. The young man in this story is one of these sincere would-be followers, and he certainly seems to be trying to do the right thing. He knew the ten commandments and tried to keep them, although Jesus’ first words to him are a sharp reminder that even the best of human efforts fall short of the mark and only God is truly good.

This young man was very rich and Jesus sees that this is perhaps where the real stumbling block may lie for him. The last commandment is about attitudes to property and wealth, and quite possibly this was the one he found most difficult to obey. Once people become rich, they still never seem to have enough, and money can gain a hold on people’s hearts and minds in a way that can distract them from putting God first. This rich young man was in this situation and, as far as we know, walked away unwilling to let go of his love of money.

This surprised the disciples, who had always assumed that having money was a sign of God’s blessing on a person’s life. On the contrary, Jesus says it can be a huge problem and that it can be much harder for these people to get into God’s kingdom – but not impossible! Peter

and the others had already given up a lot to follow Jesus and he reassures them that they will one day be richly rewarded, because things are all topsy-turvy in God's kingdom where the last end up coming first and the first, last!

## Suggested visual aid

Fill up a piggy bank with lots of money so it rattles noisily and temptingly. Use this as a focus for all the riches that belonged to the young man. He was being asked to part with a lot!

## Talk about the story

- 1 I wonder why the young man wanted eternal life. What were his motives?
- 2 What is behind the young man's question about which of the commandments he should obey?
- 3 Do you think Jesus wants everyone to sell everything they have or is this just a command for the rich man in the story?
- 4 Why are the disciples surprised by what Jesus says about those with wealth?
- 5 In what way were the disciples going to be given far more than they had ever given up? What does Jesus mean?

## An activity together

If you have a version, or can borrow a set, play the board game 'Go for broke!', where the only way to win is to lose all your money. Alternatively, play with an imaginary £10,000 family-win in a competition and together work out how you can give it *all* away to good causes. Talk about how you would share it out to best effect and who deserves what; but also reflect on how it feels not keeping any back for yourselves.

## Video suggestions

- Diocese of Bristol/Liz invites Liz – [youtube.com/watch?v=dqV51AOD2c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqV51AOD2c)

- Life with God (powerful video illustrating the invitation to follow Jesus) – [youtube.com/watch?v=9hRH5MA8eQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hRH5MA8eQ)

## Highlighted verse

'There are some things that people cannot do, but God can do anything' (Matthew 19:26).

## A related Bible story

Read Ecclesiastes 5:10–16. These are some wise words from King Solomon about money and wealth.

## Pray with the story

Remind yourself of the ten commandments (see Exodus 20:1–17) and in particular of the tenth, 'Do not want anything that belongs to someone else.' It is possibly this commandment that the young man found most challenging. Although he may have earned his money fairly, he was unwilling to let it go. His wealth had left him wanting more, not less. Hand out a small amount of money to everyone in the family and together make up some thoughtful prayers asking God to help you have a right attitude towards it, and ask God to help you spend it or save it wisely. To help you, imagine what this money could buy for yourself and then for someone else you give it to. This may influence your prayers.

## Summing it all up

- Lots of people said they wanted to follow Jesus, but when it came to the crunch, only a few disciples remained faithful followers to the end.
- There are many distractions and temptations in this life that seem to be more attractive than putting God first.
- For the young man in the story, it was his wealth that was a stumbling block. Whatever we hold on to too tightly can spoil us. Christian teaching is that, once God has first place in our loyalties, then everything else can find its proper place.
- Jesus invites each one of us to follow him, to become a disciple... learning the way of love and service that God will show us.

## Take away

What difference will this make in your everyday life this month?

Or: How will this connect with your everyday life this month?

# 8 Does God care about me? The cross

## Luke 23:38–49 (CEV)

Above him [on the cross] was a sign that said, 'This is the King of the Jews.'

One of the criminals hanging there also insulted Jesus by saying, 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and save us!'

But the other criminal told the first one off, 'Don't you fear God? Aren't you getting the same punishment as this man? We got what was coming to us, but he didn't do anything wrong.' Then he said to Jesus, 'Remember me when you come into power!'

Jesus replied, 'I promise that today you will be with me in paradise.'

Around noon the sky turned dark and stayed that way until the middle of the afternoon. The sun stopped shining, and the curtain in the temple split down the middle. Jesus shouted, 'Father, I put myself in your hands!' Then he died.

When the Roman officer saw what had happened, he praised God and said, 'Jesus must really have been a good man!'

A crowd had gathered to see the terrible sight. Then after they had seen it, they felt broken-hearted and went home. All of Jesus' close friends and the women who had come with him from Galilee stood at a distance and watched.

### First thoughts on the story

Even when he was hanging from the cross, Jesus continued to show love and bring hope to others. The criminals either side of him were going through the same agony he was, only, unlike Jesus, they had committed crimes and deserved to die. One joined in with the crowd's

taunts, while hoping at the same time that Jesus would do a miracle and rescue him dramatically. The other was clearly sorry for his crime and just hoped to be part of God's kingdom when he dies. He believed Jesus could get him to heaven and that is what Jesus promised him. Anyone who trusts Jesus can be sure of a home with God for ever.

By now it was the afternoon and the end was close. It is almost as if the whole world goes dark at this terrible time, but it is also the moment when Jesus defeats all the powers of darkness. He hasn't been corrupted by all the evil done to him. He has loved to the end and this is why he is the winner. The curtain in the innermost part of the temple, where the high priest used to go and meet with God once a year, is torn open. Just as for the second criminal, the way to God is now open because of what Jesus has done. Only a completely innocent man could have achieved this and, as if to underline that fact, even the Roman soldier agrees that Jesus had done no wrong. The crowd and his friends saw only defeat and went away broken-hearted; but in fact what had happened that day was the greatest miracle Jesus had ever done.

### Suggested visual aid

Find an old piece of fabric which will tear easily from top to bottom. Drape it over the word 'heaven' and then pull it away to reveal what is hidden behind it.

### Talk about the story

- 1 The two criminals had quite different attitudes towards Jesus. What could explain this, do you think?
- 2 The second criminal ends up getting into heaven because of what happened at the cross. Is this a surprise?

- 3 Why do you think it went so dark that afternoon?
- 4 The officer on guard duty had probably only just met Jesus, so what made him believe that Jesus was such a good man?
- 5 Can you imagine what was going on in the minds of Jesus' close friends and the women who were watching at a distance?

## An activity together

Strange things happened around the time Jesus died. Luke describes the unnatural darkness; Matthew says there was an earthquake; and the curtain was torn inside the temple. It was as if the whole world was being shaken from top to bottom. Something was happening that would change everything forever. Talk about what it would have been like to witness all these things. Strangely, Christians call this day Good Friday. Talk about why they call it 'good'. Now take the letters of the phrase 'Jesus dies' and move them about to read instead 'Jesus' side'. Because of his death we can all come close to God alongside Jesus.

## Video suggestions

- Cardboard testimony – [youtube.com/watch?v=QTSKZTGYNKw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTSKZTGYNKw)
- Brilliant kids' animation that explains why Jesus died – [youtube.com/watch?v=HL8R158Ujp4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HL8R158Ujp4)

## Highlighted verse

- 'Jesus replied, "I promise that today you will be with me in paradise"' (Luke 23:43).

## A related Bible story

Read Isaiah 53. This remarkable prophecy was written hundreds of years before Good Friday, but it describes in detail how God's special rescuer King (Messiah) would die to set the whole world free from the power of sin.

## Pray with the story

Anyone can get to heaven because of Jesus. The second criminal discovered this. Make today's story the moment each of you in the family offer a special prayer – either out loud or quietly – to say that you will trust Jesus just like the thief on the cross did. Heaven starts right here and now for everyone who prays this sort of prayer.

## Summing it all up

- What happened on Good Friday was the climax of all that Jesus came to do.
- By becoming a willing victim and never once letting all the injustice and cruelty he experienced spoil him, Jesus cancels out the power of all that is wrong about our world and which has poisoned our hearts from the beginning.
- Now, because he is stronger than the bad outside and inside us all, each one of us can share in that victory as we put our trust in Jesus.
- There is nothing that can cut us off from God anymore, and so we can become God's adopted sons and daughters, just as God planned back when God created the world.

## Take away

What difference will this make in your everyday life this month?

Or: How will this connect with your everyday life this month?

# 9 Is God real? The resurrection

## John 20:11–29 (CEV)

Mary Magdalene stood crying outside the tomb. She was still weeping, when she stooped down and saw two angels inside. They were dressed in white and were sitting where Jesus' body had been. One was at the head and the other was at the foot. The angels asked Mary, 'Why are you crying?'

She answered, 'They have taken away my Lord's body! I don't know where they have put him.'

As soon as Mary said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there. But she did not know who he was. Jesus asked her, 'Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?'

She thought he was the gardener and said, 'Sir, if you have taken his body away, please tell me, so I can go and get him.'

Then Jesus said to her, 'Mary!'

She turned and said to him, 'Rabboni.' The Aramaic word 'Rabboni' means 'Teacher.'

Jesus told her, 'Don't hold on to me! I have not yet gone to the Father. But tell my disciples that I am going to the one who is my Father and my God, as well as your Father and your God.' Mary Magdalene then went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord. She also told them what he had said to her.

The disciples were afraid of the Jewish leaders, and on the evening of that same Sunday they locked themselves in a room. Suddenly, Jesus appeared in the middle of the group. He greeted them and showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they became very happy.

After Jesus had greeted them again, he said, 'I am sending you, just as the Father has sent me.' Then he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'

If you forgive anyone's sins, they will be forgiven. But if you don't forgive their sins, they will not be forgiven.'

Although Thomas the Twin was one of the twelve disciples, he wasn't with the others when Jesus appeared to them. So they told him, 'We have seen the Lord!'

But Thomas said, 'First, I must see the nail scars in his hands and touch them with my finger. I must put my hand where the spear went into his side. I won't believe unless I do this!'

A week later the disciples were together again. This time, Thomas was with them. Jesus came in while the doors were still locked and stood in the middle of the group. He greeted his disciples and said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and look at my hands! Put your hand into my side. Stop doubting and have faith!'

Thomas replied, 'You are my Lord and my God!'

Jesus said, 'Thomas, do you have faith because you have seen me? The people who have faith in me without seeing me are the ones who are really blessed!'

## First thoughts on the story

Jesus' dead body had been hastily taken down from the cross just before sunset on the Friday. Next day was a special Jewish sabbath, and so no one travelled anywhere. It wasn't until early on the Sunday morning that Mary could go to the tomb where she hoped to pay her last respects. To her surprise, the stone had been rolled away. She ran to fetch Peter and John, who came to see for themselves what had happened. After they left, Mary was alone in the garden in tears, trying to make sense of what had happened. This is when she saw the angels and then heard a voice asking her why she was

crying. Clearly, Jesus looked different from before. Their last sight of him had been of a terribly disfigured body on a cross and perhaps that is why she did not recognise him at first. Only when he said her name did she realise this was Jesus himself, back from the dead. Mary longed to hold on to Jesus again, but he wanted her to learn not to cling to his earthly body anymore but to trust him as a spiritual presence, just as everyone else would do who would come to believe in Jesus later.

Later that evening, Jesus appears to all his disciples. It seems that his new resurrection body can walk through walls, but at the same time it is a real body. He shows them the nail marks in his hands and where the spear went into his side to prove he had really died. None of them had expected this; it came as a complete surprise. Jesus needed to bring them back to reality by giving them a new job to do and so, just as God had breathed into Adam at the beginning to give him life, Jesus breathes God's Spirit into his disciples to give them new life as his representatives on earth. Poor Thomas missed out on this first visit, but a week later, Jesus appeared to Thomas, too. But unlike his friends, on this occasion Thomas did have something to say. He worshipped Jesus as God. This neatly sums up what it means to be a Christian: to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and God. Good Friday opened up the way back to God for everyone, and these resurrection appearances assure people one by one that God cares for them.

## Suggested visual aid

Learn the British Sign Language for the name of 'Jesus', which is simply pointing to each wrist in turn, one after the other. In other words, Jesus is recognised by the sign of the nail marks in his hands.

## Talk about the story

- 1 Why didn't Mary recognise Jesus at first?
- 2 What helped Mary recognise it was Jesus?
- 3 Why didn't Jesus allow Mary to touch him?
- 4 What were the disciples afraid of?
- 5 What sort of body did Jesus have now?

- 6 What was the new work Jesus gave them to do?
- 7 What had Thomas understood about Jesus that the others had not yet grasped?

## An activity together

The cross is the usual symbol for what happened at Easter, but it could just as easily have been the empty tomb. Use some craft materials – possibly air-drying clay or Play Dough™ – create a cave with an entrance over which you place a round stone. Alternatively, create a tomb and entrance from some of the furniture and blankets that you can find around the home. Inside the cave place some cloths, piled neatly like the grave clothes that Jesus left behind.

## Video suggestions

- Mark's powerful and emotional story/Woodlands Church Bristol – [youtube.com/watch?v=iOoAo-GUMUM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOoAo-GUMUM)
- I am a disciple (powerful video based on 'running the race') – [youtube.com/watch?v=sWDa\\_7Q9ryI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWDa_7Q9ryI)

## Highlighted verse

'Thomas replied, "You are my Lord and my God"' (John 20:28).

## A related Bible story

Read Zephaniah 3:14–17. Zephaniah tells us of the day when God will bring victory for his people and refresh their lives with his love.

## Pray with the story

'*But Jesus is alive*' are four powerful words that sit at the heart of what Christians believe. Make up a series of short prayers together, starting off each time, 'Lord, I know you are alive because...' Add different phrases, starting with the facts of the Bible story itself, but moving on to the things that God has done in history and finally what he has done to show he is alive in your own family life. Each time, thank God for what you have prayed. You could use,

for example, the traditional greeting between Christians on Easter Day which is 'Christ is risen', to which the reply is 'He is risen indeed. Hallelujah'. Why not use this at the end of each prayer you make?

## Summing it all up

- The resurrection on Easter Day was proof for the disciples that Jesus had won the battle against the darkness on Good Friday.
- The resurrection is also that moment when that victory became personal to each of those who saw Jesus alive again. They came to know in a deep way that God cared about them.
- Lots of people today, like Thomas, say, 'I won't believe until I see him for myself.' Thomas did see Jesus alive, of course, but also he saw something deeper and that's

what really convinced him. In the same way today, people who believe in God, even without seeing Jesus, have the same experience. When they accept Jesus as God, as Thomas did, and recognise what Jesus has done (like Thomas seeing the nail marks in Jesus' hands), they have their own personal resurrection moment deep in their hearts.

- This resurrection moment is when each of us comes to know that God cares about us.

## Take away

What difference will this make in your everyday life this month?

Or: How will this connect with your everyday life this month?

# 10 Can I trust God? A new direction

## Acts 9:1–18 (CEV)

Saul kept on threatening to kill the Lord's followers. He even went to the high priest and asked for letters to the Jewish leaders in Damascus. He did this because he wanted to arrest and take to Jerusalem any man or woman who had accepted the Lord's Way. When Saul had almost reached Damascus, a bright light from heaven suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice that said, 'Saul! Saul! Why are you so cruel to me?'

'Who are you?' Saul asked.

'I am Jesus,' the Lord answered. 'I am the one you are so cruel to. Now get up and go into the city, where you will be told what to do.'

The men with Saul stood there speechless. They had heard the voice, but they had not seen anyone. Saul got up from the ground, and when he opened his eyes, he could not see a thing. Someone then led him by the hand to Damascus, and for three days he was blind and did not eat or drink.

A follower named Ananias lived in Damascus, and the Lord spoke to him in a vision. Ananias answered, 'Lord, here I am.'

The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the house of Judas on Straight Street. When you get there, you will find a man named Saul from the city of Tarsus. Saul is praying, and he has seen a vision. He saw a man named Ananias coming to him and putting his hands on him, so that he could see again.'

Ananias replied, 'Lord, a lot of people have told me about the terrible things this man has done to your followers in Jerusalem. Now the chief priests have given him the power to come here and arrest anyone who worships in your name.'

The Lord said to Ananias, 'Go! I have chosen him to tell foreigners, kings, and the people of Israel about me. I will show him how much he must suffer for worshiping in my name.'

Ananias left and went into the house where Saul was staying. Ananias placed his hands on him and said, 'Saul, the Lord Jesus has sent me. He is the same one who appeared to you along the road. He wants you to be able to see and to be filled with the Holy Spirit.'

Suddenly something like fish scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see. He got up and was baptised.

## First thoughts on the story

After Stephen had been murdered – he was the first Christian to die for his faith – it became much harder in Jerusalem to be a follower of the way of Jesus. The Jewish authorities had threatened the disciples several times to stop preaching about the one they had crucified. Saul, a leading Pharisee, was particularly outraged at the claims this new group were making about who Jesus was. He was determined to stop their lies and dangerous teaching. He was given the authority to hunt down believers wherever they were, including up at Damascus in Syria.

However, his journey there turned out to be quite different than he could ever have imagined. Jesus quite literally stopped him in his tracks with a blinding light. He heard Jesus speak to him personally and he was forced to rethink everything that he believed in. He entered into his own three days of darkness before finally coming to his own personal resurrection moment.

Ananias knew of Saul's fierce reputation as a persecutor of Christians, so it took great courage for him to go and bring healing to Saul. But his obedience opened the door to a brand-new chapter, not only in Saul's life, but in the story

of the Christian church. Saul went on, under his Roman name Paul, to be one of the most effective and influential disciples of Jesus ever. It is through his ministry that huge numbers of people come into the light of Jesus and churches begin to spring up all over the Roman Empire. Saul never forgot what happened to him on the Damascus road, and he often told his story to others to help them to believe in Jesus too.

## Suggested visual aid

Arrange for a camera flash to go off once or twice, but taking care not to look straight at it. This can leave us blinking and having difficulty in refocusing our sight. God's flashlight blinded Saul but it was because he needed to see everything with fresh eyes.

## Talk about the story

- 1 It became increasingly difficult to be a follower of Jesus in Jerusalem. What was it that kept people believing when it was so dangerous?
- 2 Why was Saul so opposed to what Christians were saying about Jesus?
- 3 Why did Jesus need to appear to Saul so dramatically?
- 4 What must have been going through Ananias' mind when he set off for Straight Street?
- 5 What was the biggest change that happened for Saul?

## An activity together

There was no doubt that Christians, both in Jerusalem and in Damascus, had to watch their backs now. Anyone might be a spy for the Pharisees and be ready to turn them in. Possibly they had to develop secret codes or passwords to protect each other. For example, they would have to find a way of letting everyone know that 'Saul is on his way'. Challenge each other in the family to put this short message into some sort of code. Maybe you could rewrite it turning every letter into the next but one letter in the alphabet? Or perhaps turn it into a message with a double meaning, such as 'the vulture is flying north'? Who can come up with the best ideas? What other messages about what happened in the story would need to be

shared secretly like this?

## Video suggestion

- Diocese of Bristol/Finding faith – [youtube.com/watch?v=U6G1HdYvhhI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6G1HdYvhhI)

## Highlighted verse

“Who are you?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus,” the Lord answered’ (Acts 9:5).

## A related Bible story

Read Philippians 4:4–9. This is from one of the letters Paul wrote to one of the new Christian churches around the Mediterranean. He never regretted his decision to follow Jesus. He knew that he could trust God whatever happened.

## Pray with the story

If Jesus could turn a man like Saul from being full of hate into full of love, surely no one was beyond God's power to transform their lives for the better. By changing one letter at a time, the word 'hate' can become 'love' in five simple moves: hate – gate – gave – give – live – love. Try to use each of these separate words in five simple prayers to God. For example: Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you are our *gate* into heaven; thank you, Lord Jesus, that you *gave* your life for us on the cross, etc.

## Summing it all up

- Deciding to follow Jesus is to turn our lives in a new direction, because we have chosen to put God at the centre of everything we do and say.
- However, things don't necessarily all change overnight. God works in us slowly by the Holy Spirit (God in us) and with our cooperation, to help us to become all that God planned us to be.
- We need the encouragement of Christian friends, as well as stories from the Bible and prayer, to keep to this new way of life.

- One of the first things that Saul, who became known as Paul, did to mark this new direction in his life was to be baptised. Baptism is being washing in water publicly to show everyone you want to make a clean start with God, because Jesus has made it possible for all that has messed up our lives to be washed away. Ask at your church about baptism if this is something you would like to do.

## Take away

What difference will this make in your everyday life this month?

Or: How will this connect with your everyday life this month?