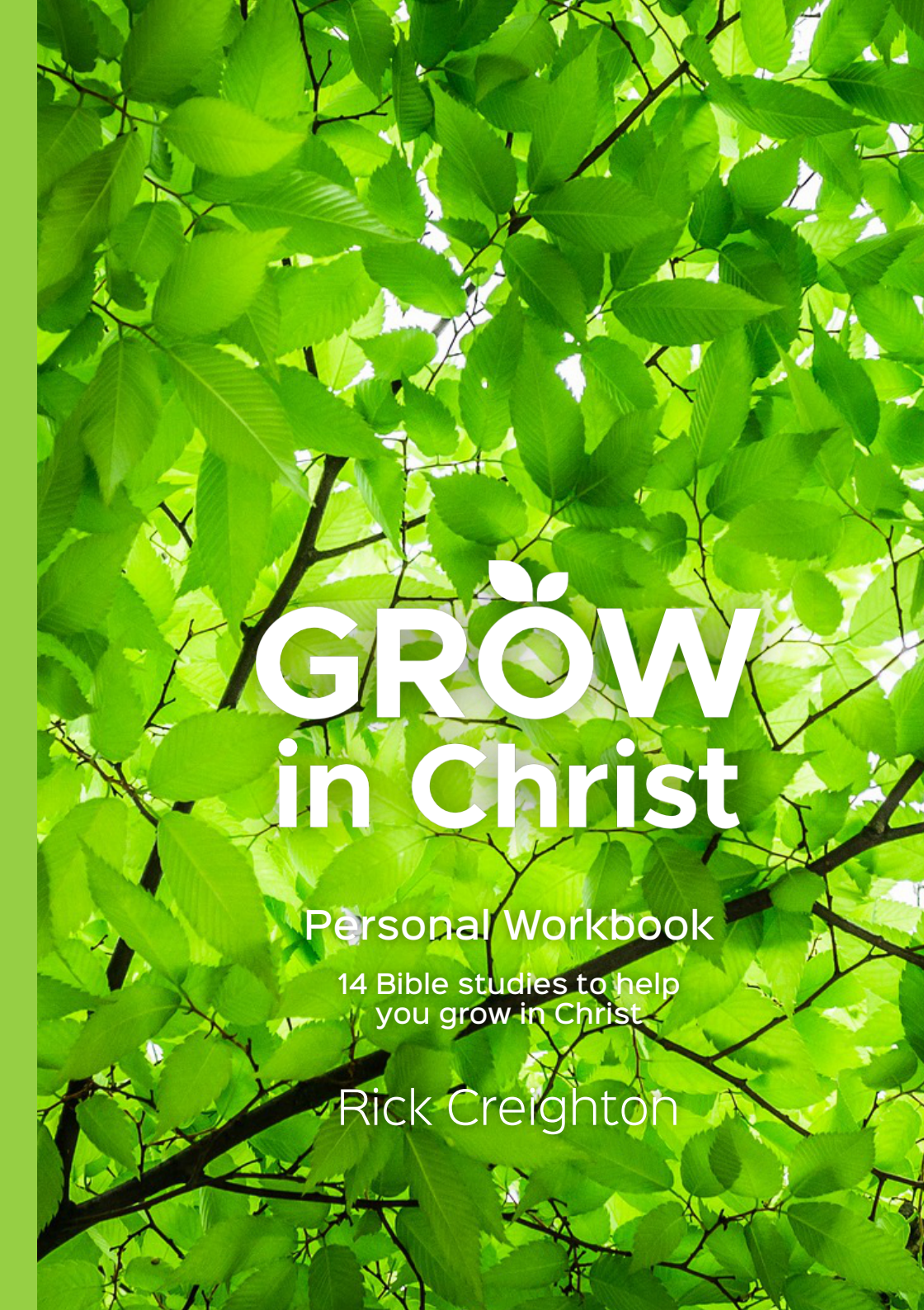




GROW in Christ

Personal Workbook

14 Bible studies to help
you grow in Christ

Rick Creighton

GRÖW in Christ

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14 Bible studies to help
you grow in Christ

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1

As you start ...

What two things does Jesus call us to do as we begin the Christian life?

Mark 1:15

How do we continue in the Christian life?

Colossians 2:6-7

The Christian life is a life of repentance and faith. That's how it starts, and that's how it should continue. Christians are fairly good at continuing with faith; because we don't think faith is something we should leave behind. But we can be embarrassed about repentance. We can think that repentance is great at the start of the Christian life, but that it is something to grow out of.

Mature Christians can be embarrassed to admit that they need to repent of anything. It's OK to admit sin generally ('We are all sinners in need of grace') but not specifically ('I still struggle with bad temper, or lust ...').

Why is it a problem to pretend we don't have struggles with sin?

1 John 1:8-9

Pretending there are no problems, when of course there are, breeds hypocrisy. Pretending leads to ignoring problems - which stalls spiritual growth, and sets you up for a fall. Sin loves darkness. When you keep it in the dark, it grows. It shouldn't be like that. Repentance and faith start the Christian life, and they continue the Christian life. When we repent, we turn to Jesus and we turn from sin - the two things go together. They go together at the start of the Christian race, as well as in the middle, and all the way to the end of the Christian race. So, as you do these studies, be serious about faith in Jesus, and be serious about repentance from sin.

Why is it important to fight against sin?

1 John 1:5-7

What does your 'Growth Graph' look like?

If you are not growing, it's worth asking: 'Am I really a Christian? Have I turned from sin and turned to Christ?'. If you haven't put your faith in Christ, that would explain why you aren't growing in Him. But, if you have turned from sin to Christ, and yet are not growing in Him, it's still worth asking some hard questions. If you are not growing, something is wrong.

Here are five graphs. The first graph shows a beautifully smooth growth-path. Your physical height would grow like this, increasing nicely, until it arrives at a mature level. Christian growth isn't like this. There are successes and there are setbacks. There are ups and there are downs. Real life is never so uniform.

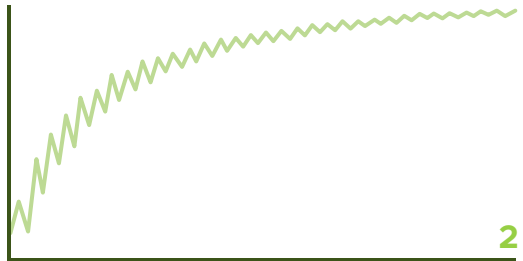


Should we expect the Christian life to be free of 'stumbles'? (Why?)

James 3:2

Even Graph 2 is unrealistically predictable. Its ups and downs are modest and neat. The 'setbacks' are almost elegant.

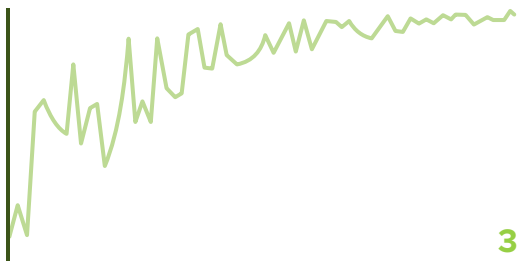
Real life is more disappointing and less predictable.



Why is it hard to grow in Christ?

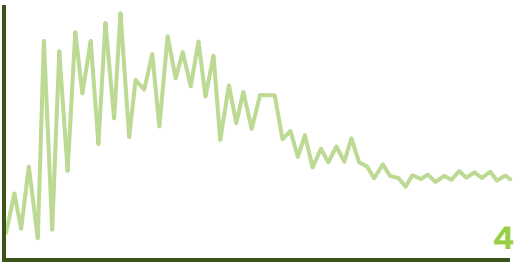
Romans 7:21-23

Graph 3 is closer to what might be a more 'normal' experience of Christian growth. There is growth, over time, but it is not smooth. There are advances and there are setbacks. On a short timescale, you can't always tell whether



things are improving or not. But over a longer timescale, you can see what the Holy Spirit has been doing in someone's life. This is normal and good.

But sometimes we end up with something more like Graph 4. For this person, there was spiritual growth for a while, but then something went wrong. Maybe they can identify the moment when it started to go wrong, or maybe they can't. But, looking back, it's obvious something has happened. Their growth has stalled.



Is it OK to settle for getting ‘stuck’ in the Christian life? (Why?)

Revelation 3:1-3

Maybe you can identify with Graph 3. If so, these studies will encourage you to keep going. But maybe you are closer to Graph 4 (or to something worse)! My prayer is that, as you read on, God will use these notes to give you a chance to change course. God wants all His children to grow in Jesus. He wants you to grow in Jesus. If you have stalled in your growth, it doesn't have to stay that way. Your growth can be restarted. And, if you fix your eyes again on Jesus Christ, it will be. Graph 4 can turn into Graph 5.



How does the Bible encourage us, that we can grow in Christ?

1 Corinthians 6:11

Philippians 1:6

Use the box below to draw a sketch of what your own ‘Growth Graph’ has been like. (Choose whether to cover the whole of your Christian life, or whether to zoom in on the last few years.)



My own growth graph

Questions for Personal Reflection

Has your spiritual growth ever felt stalled (like Graph 4)?
What factors do you think contributed to your growth stalling?

The Christian life begins and continues with repentance and faith.
How are you doing at living out both of those today?

Sin loves darkness. Can you think of any struggles with sin that
you have kept hidden? How has that allowed them to grow?

What might it mean for you in practice to fix your eyes on Jesus today?

2

Grow in Jesus

(part i)

"Holiness is not the way to Christ. Christ is the way to holiness."

Charles Spurgeon

*"God is more interested in your character than your comfort.
God is more interested in making your life holy than He is in
making your life happy."*

Rick Warren

What do you think of this quotation? (Do you like it or not, and why?)

Listen to Paul's story:

I was at school when I first put my faith in Jesus Christ. I was glad to be accepted and forgiven by Jesus. Life stopped being about obeying rules. The gospel was such good news that I wanted to make it known to others. I loved following Jesus. But then things started to cool down. After school I wanted a lucrative job. There were sins I struggled with. My growth as a Christian slowed down. I didn't know what had gone wrong, or how to put it right.

Paul's story is a common 'Graph 4' pattern. Jesus does not want that to be your experience, and it doesn't need to be.

Have you ever felt like Paul?
(If yes, when was that?)

Growth - and obedience to Jesus

Suppose your friend falls into a septic tank. He calls out, 'Help! Help! Save me!' so you pull him out. He says, 'Thank you very much,' recovers his breath, and jumps back in. Then the whole thing repeats: he calls for help, you pull him out, he recovers and then jumps back in again. How many times are you going to pull him out?

How many times can you pull him out before you decide he isn't serious about being 'saved' from the tank? If he wants to be in the tank, he can't be saved from the tank. It's like that with us, Jesus and sin. Jesus calls us to come to Him to be saved from sin, guilt, shame, wrath, and judgement. But, until we do want to be saved from what holds us captive, Jesus does not save us. That's why salvation and discipleship must go together.

The Great Commission* is not about 'conversion'. (1) What is it about? (2) What exactly are Jesus' disciples commanded to obey?

Matthew 28:19-20

*Matthew 28:19-20 is often referred to as 'The Great Commission'

Just before His crucifixion, Jesus explains what it means to love Him and to be His friend. Friendship with Jesus is unique. Why?

John 15:12-15

Growing in obedience is not the only aspect of growing in Jesus. What does Peter say we are to grow in? (He mentions two things.)

2 Peter 3:18

Growing in grace includes growing in understanding that you are accepted by God. His love doesn't depend on your performance. Obedience has a place, but it is not the foundation. God won't stop loving you. He loves you not because of what you do, but because of what Jesus has already done.

What had we done / what were we like, when Christ died for us?

Romans 5:6-8

That timing is important. Christ didn't save us because we learned to obey Him! He has already come to save us, and because of that we learn to obey Him. We love, because He first loved us. We serve, because He first served.

Why can we be confident that our salvation is already secure?

Romans 5:10

What is the connection between grace and godliness?

Titus 2:12

Growth - and knowledge of Christ

Spiritual growth involves more than just knowledge, but it doesn't involve less. You cannot know someone if you don't know about them.

Why does Paul himself want to grow in knowing Christ?

Philippians 3:8-11

Why does Paul want others to grow in knowing Christ?

Ephesians 4:13

If we are serious about knowing Jesus, we need to know *about* Him. We learn that through His Word. We also need to know *Him*. We need to follow Him, trust His lordship, and depend on Him. We grow as we put our knowledge about Christ into practice, and as we trust Him because we know Him.

Tick the relevant boxes	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Compared to five years ago, my current spiritual health is much stronger					
2. Compared to one year ago, my current spiritual health is much stronger					
3. Right now, I am really growing spiritually					
4. I need to put some sinful attitude(s) / action(s) in my life to death					
5. I don't know if I can put these sinful attitude(s) / action(s) to death					
6. If other people knew my deepest secrets, I could not face them anymore.					
7. I regularly spend time with God (in prayer, Bible reading, etc.)					
8. I strongly desire to grow in spiritual maturity					

Questions for Personal Reflection

As you think back over your Christian life, who are some of the people who have most helped you to grow in Jesus?

As you think back over your Christian life, what are some of the experiences that have most helped you to grow in Jesus?

What does growing in obedience to Jesus look like in your daily life?

God's love for you doesn't depend on your obedience. How does knowing that help you to live a godly life?

3

Grow in Jesus

(part ii)

"People who would be happy in heaven if Christ were not there, will not be there."

John Owen

What do you think of this quotation? (Do you like it or not, and why?)

Growth - and ageing and maturity

Growth is about more than just allowing time to pass. Ageing is automatic; growing is not, and maturing is not. You can get older without growing in maturity or wisdom or godliness. Some of us get stuck as baby Christians. That is not what Jesus wants for us, and it is not what God intends for us.

What does Paul see as the end goal of all His teaching and preaching?

Colossians 1:28

We will not be fully mature in Christ until we reach the New Creation. But already, here and now, we are to be growing in maturity. This is not easy, but it is not hopeless either. There can be discouragements and obstacles along the way. But we are more likely to overcome those obstacles if we are following the right path towards maturity.

What is the route to maturity in Christ?

Colossians 2:6-7

Why is it important to have our spiritual 'roots' in the right place?

Mark 4:3-9

Psalms 1:1-6

Why is it dangerous to move away from our foundation in Christ?

Revelation 2:4-5

God does not want us to be 'removed'. He has a better destiny in mind for us. What is it?

Philippians 3:20-21

This is an amazing destiny - being raised to new life, in a new body just like Jesus was, and being conformed to the image of God's own Son! It is not about gaining Bible knowledge or ticking years off the calendar. It is about our character becoming more like Jesus' character. We take on more of a family resemblance as we grow into our identity as God's children in Christ.

If we have the right 'roots', we will grow the right 'fruit'.
What characteristics should we be growing in?

Colossians 3:12-14

2 Peter 1:5-7

Areas for Growth

God wants us to grow in Jesus. If we fix our eyes on Jesus, we will grow in Him. Think of an area of your life where you need to grow. It might be:

A missing virtue?

Which fruit of the Spirit are you most in need of growing in (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control)?

A sinful emotion, or attitude, or type of thinking?

Which emotion do you most need to work on (e.g. anger/temper, lust, greed, jealousy)?

A sinful behaviour?

Which sinful behaviour do you most need to work on (e.g. gossip, lying, stealing, sexual immorality, misusing money)?

An addictive behaviour?

Which sinful behaviour do you most need to work on (e.g. gambling, substance abuse, pornography, comfort eating, doom-scrolling, thrill-seeking)?

Begin a personal 'Gospel-Growth Plan'

Don't choose something general:



'Growing as a Christian' is admirable in principle, but vague in practice.



'Growing in purity and self-control by reducing sexual immorality' is better, but still vague.



'Growing in purity and self-control by no longer watching pornography' is much better.

Choose something that is about growing in Christ:



'Growing in your maths ability' is a worthy aim, but it is not what we are talking about here.

And make sure it is personal to you:



'Growing in my marriage' isn't just about you - that's a two-person job. Choose an individual growth plan.



'Becoming a more patient husband and father' would be better.

Choose a specific growth area, personal to yourself, and write it down.

My personal Gospel-growth area:

Questions for Personal Reflection

How does the area where you need growth prevent you from being more like Jesus?

What would maturity in this area look like?

How does knowing that you are loved by God encourage you to work on growing?

Can you think of anything Jesus did or said that is relevant to this?

4

Sin holds us back

(part i)

"Be killing sin or it will be killing you."

John Owen

What do you think of this quotation? (Do you like it or not, and why?)

John Owen's quote (above) is short and sharp, but very true. If we nurture sins - even little sins - we give them time to grow into killers. This chapter is titled 'Sin holds us back', but Owen might say that's too weak. Sin doesn't just hold us back; it destroys us, it kills us, it ruins us. God agrees. In Genesis 4:7 God pictures sin as a predator - like a lion crouching at our door, ready to spring, pounce, and devour. Will we let it? Will we 'master' this predator - or will we become prey?

John learned the danger of sin the hard way. He grew up in church, heavily involved in the choir, and was well respected. Others his age looked up to him as a model Christian. But he had a secret. He had fallen into sexual immorality and abortion. Repeatedly. He felt like a fraud, like his Christian life was over, like his faith was destroyed. Sin had pounced on him, like a predator, and he did not see any way back.

We will look carefully at this predator, so that we are ready to escape it, master it, and kill it - so that it is not killing us.

“Be killing sin or it will be killing you.”

In your life, who is doing better at killing who?

The first sin

Sin loves deception. The serpent appears unannounced in Genesis 3, and he quickly demonstrates that he is a master of deception. But he doesn't use outright, 100% falsehood. He is more subtle than that.

What tactics does the serpent use to mislead and deceive?

Genesis 3:1-8

What mistakes does Eve make in how she responds to the serpent?

Genesis 3:1-8

Superficially, the serpent's claims turn out to be 'true'. By the end of the chapter, Adam and Eve: (i) are still alive (not 'surely dead'), (ii) the 'eyes of both of them were opened' (they become ashamed of their nakedness), and (iii) God declares, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil'. But the thrust of the serpent's temptation implied that, if they seized control of their destiny, things would become much better. However, it does not turn out

that way. Things become so much worse: they move from being at home in the garden to exile; from fellowship with God to exclusion; from honour to shame; from innocence to guilt; from security to fear; from blessing to curse; and from the sphere of life to the sphere of death.

Many of the 'best' lies are half-truths (or partial-truths or distorted-truths). It is hard to poison someone by getting them to eat 100% pure poison. It is much easier to give them tasty food with a percentage of poison mixed in. Deception is the same. It is easier to get someone to believe a lie if you mix it with some truth. That gives the lie a ring of truth it would otherwise lack. That's the serpent's strategy here, and, tragically, it works. Our world goes from being under blessing, to being under God's curse. The curses of Genesis 3:14-19 do not undo the blessings of creation, they are layered on top of them. But God has not given up on His purposes of blessing.

God banishes Adam and Eve from the Garden, but, before He banishes them, there are some hints of hope. What are they?

Genesis 3:21

Genesis 3:15

Sin spreads

Sin doesn't sit still. It spreads from Adam and Eve to their children, and from the eating of the fruit (which is seemingly minor, but profoundly rebellious) to other sins, all within a single generation.

Adam eats the fruit and is ashamed, but it doesn't end there. How does sin spread?

Genesis 4:4-8

Genesis 4:23-24

Even a 'little' sin (like eating the fruit) is far from harmless, because it spreads and grows. Suppose you are a farmer, and someone sows a few 'tiny' seeds in your farm, but they are seeds of a vigorous weed. They are tiny, but they grow into something that causes great harm. Sin is like that - an evil seed that grows and spreads and poisons and corrupts. Sometimes we think we can play with sin and get away with it. We think we can touch the darkness and then let go. But it swallows us whole.

What sins have you fallen into recently that you should repent of?

What would repentance in this area of your life look like?

A ‘Sin check-up’ questionnaire

Tick the relevant boxes	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Any time I sin, I always feel really guilty					
2. My sin has a significantly negative effect on my relationship with other people					
3. I try to recognise and confront my sin					
4. I prefer not to think about my sin					
5. I don't confess my sins to other people					
6. I don't think I can change my sinful behaviour					
7. God is still punishing me because of past sins					
8. Admitting my sin, and making restitution, is an important part of my spiritual growth					
9. My main reason to avoid sin is fear of punishment					
10. I hate myself because of my sin					
11. I have become desensitised to some of my sins					
12. My sin has a significantly negative effect on my relationship with God					

Questions for Personal Reflection

In your own life right now, which seems to be winning the battle: Are you actively killing sin, or is sin gaining ground and 'killing' aspects of your life?

Sin is like 'a predator crouching at your door'. What areas of life feel most like the 'door' where this predator is waiting?

Have you experienced sin using half-truths to mislead you? (In what way?)

Even 'little' sins can spread like a weed. Can you think of a sin that you thought was 'little' but which has grown in your life?

5

Sin holds us back

(part ii)

"Sin is [our] refusal to admit our creatureliness. We pretend to be more than we are."

Reinhold Niebuhr

What do you think of this quotation? (Do you like it or not, and why?)

Sin as refusal

The Bible has many ways of describing sin, including as types of refusal.

What do we learn about how sin can lead to a refusal of knowledge?

Romans 1:18-23

continued...

What do we learn about how sin can lead to a refusal of knowledge?

Hebrews 2:2-3

1 John 3:7

In what way(s) is God's authority refused in these verses?

Romans 5:14

Ezekiel 2:3-5

Sin can also involve being ungrateful. What is refused in this verse?

Romans 1:21b

How did the Israelites refuse to be in relationship with God?

Leviticus 26:40

Ultimately, sin is a refusal of God himself. How do we see that?

Romans 1:25

What is the opposite of refusing God?

Mark 12:30

We refuse God, or we love Him with everything we've got. Sin is refusing the good that God wants for us, and trying to grasp our own 'good' instead. There are many opportunities for refusal: we can refuse knowledge of God, His authority, His goodness. We can even refuse God Himself.

Which of these types of refusals are you most at risk of falling into?

The effects of sin

What effects does sin have on our relationship with God?

Romans 1:18

Acts 17:31

Colossians 1:21

How does sin affect our relationship with other people, and creation?

Titus 3:3b

Micah 7:5

continued...

How does sin affect our relationship with other people, and creation?

James 3:16, 4:1-2

Proverbs 22:22

What effects does sin have on our self?

Titus 3:3a

2 Timothy 3:13

Christians can create hierarchies of sin, which are based more on what is respectable within their culture than on the Bible's values. External and blatant sins are bad, but 'invisible' sins are overlooked. For example, sexual sin (adultery, homosexuality, etc.) is 'bad,' but pride, greed, and jealousy are tolerated and/or excused. Jesus did not conform to respectable hierarchies of sin.

That's why the Pharisees kept coming into conflict with Him, and why the 'sinners' were open to His message (Mark 2:15-17). Don't line yourself up with the Pharisees in that argument! You won't grow if you don't repent of your sin. Repentance is how you master the predator crouching at your door, that desires to have you. Turn from sin, and turn to Christ - that is how to kill sin before it kills you.

Questions for Personal Reflection

What sins have you fallen into today, that you could repent of?

What would repentance/restitution in this area of your life look like?

Are there ongoing sins that are currently mastering your life?

If so, you may need help to master them. Who could help you?

6

Grow in the Father's love

(part i)

*"God is a good Father. He doesn't make us earn His love.
He gives it freely and asks us to receive it."*

Anon.

What do you think of this quotation? (Do you like it or not, and why?)

Your understanding of how God sees you

On the opposite page are 7 pairs of statements. Each pair defines opposite ends of a scale describing your view of God's attitude towards you.

On each line, circle a dot that best represents your idea of how God sees you. The closer the dot is to the statement, the more you think it's like that.

* Much of this chapter, and the next, were adapted from notes taken at a sermon given by Vaughan Roberts at St. Ebbe's Church, Oxford, UK, in the 1990s.

God's attitude towards me						God's attitude towards me					
He accepts me despite my faults						.	.	.	.	.	He rejects me because of my faults
He loves me						.	.	.	.	.	He doesn't care about me
He has forgiven me for everything						.	.	.	.	.	He has not forgiven some things
He frees me to flourish						.	.	.	.	.	He restricts me from flourishing
He directs my life						.	.	.	.	.	He ignores where my life is going
He is passionately interested in me						.	.	.	.	.	He is not interested in me at all
He looks at me with joy						.	.	.	.	.	He looks at me with disappointment

The Bible often describes God as our Father. Sometimes we turn to our own (earthly) fathers to understand what this means. Some will have done a better job than others. But the Bible is the right place to look to understand what sort of Father God is. It shows us where we stand before Him, and how He sees us. A big factor in that, is the question of whether we have come home to God.

The lost son (Luke 15:11-32)

Read through the parable of the lost son, and then answer these questions.

Character 1: The younger son

What is unusual, or even rude, about the younger son's behaviour? And what is surprising about the father's response?

Luke 15:12

How does the son use his freedom?

Luke 15:13

He gets to do everything he wants, but how does it end up?

Luke 15:14-15

What is tragic about this, especially for a Jewish boy?

Luke 15:16

Perhaps you can identify with this young man. It's been many people's story. God made us, and loves us, but we take it all for granted. God gets in our way. So, in our different ways, we leave home. We turn our backs on the God who loves us. Some of us march out of God's front door: 'I'll be my own boss. I'll do what I want, when I want.'

Others leave quietly through the back door. If that's you, then you probably still believe in God, and go to church. But when it comes to important things, you do what you want; not what God wants. You have not made a fuss about it, but you are still far away from God - doing your own thing without reference to Him. That is what sin is - doing your own thing, forgetting about God, ignoring His standards, and living in His world without paying Him any real attention.

Overall, how do you feel in your relationship with God?
Do you mostly feel 'at home' with Him, or do you feel more distant?

What sort of reception does the son expect to get from his father?

Luke 15:19-20a

There's a question that must have troubled him: 'Will my father have me back, after all I have done?'

Character 2: The loving father

Do you think the father has given up on his son?
Why / Why not?

Luke 15:20b

We only get to know people on the outside. We worry that if other people knew all that we have thought, said, and done, then they would wish they didn't! And if we are worried about what other people might think, then we certainly don't want God to know what we are really like. But this story tells us that even though God knows everything about us, He still loves us and wants us back. There has never been a day when God has not thought of us; looking for some sign that we will come home.

Sum up the father's response, when he realises his son has come home

Luke 15:20b

Luke 15:22-3

Luke 15:24

God wants us back, and, to show His love for us, He sent us His Son to take our place. That's God's great declaration to the world - He loves us and wants us home. Jesus didn't deserve to die. We do; for all the wrong that we have done and the hurt that we have caused. But He died in our place so that we could come home to God, freely forgiven. That's God's offer of love to each of us. A new life that starts with Jesus.

Questions for Personal Reflection

How can you relate to the younger son in your own life journey?

Sin can be fun, yet it is a hollow pleasure that brings destruction. How have you personally experienced this truth about sin?

What have you learned about God from the parable?

What does 'coming home to God' mean practically for you?
What would it look like in an area of life you are struggling with?

7

Grow in the Father's love

(part ii)

"God loves each of us as if there were only one of us."

Augustine of Hippo

What do you think of this quotation? (Do you like it or not, and why?)

The parable of the prodigal son is a story with an aim.

Who was Jesus originally aiming this story at?

Luke 15:1-2

Character 3: The listening audience

For religious people, this parable's punch comes with the older son.

How does the older son respond when he hears of his brother's return?

Luke 15:28a

How does his father respond to the older son?

Luke 15:28b

How does the older son respond to his father's initiative?

Luke 15:29-30

What is the key point that his father makes in reply?

Luke 15:31-32

The older son doesn't understand his father. He thinks he has to earn his love. He has done a far better job than his brother, and he can't understand why his father wants anything to do with him. He thinks his relationship with his father is based on reward, not love. He is miles from his father, just as lost as his brother ever was. That's the shock. If you only knew the start of the story, you would have expected the older son to be in the party and the younger one to be outside. The original audience would have got the message loud and clear: 'be careful you don't spend big effort on religion, yet without ever knowing God at all'. Jesus has another listening audience in mind. Us! It forces each of us to ask, 'Where am I in this story?'

Am I more like the younger son or the older one?

Am I 'inside the party' or 'outside'? Have I come home to God?

People often think Christianity is a reward system. Imagine a multi-story building. At the top you have the 'holy' people (saints, pastors and so on). After that come all the good people (nurses, doctors and so on). Then you get normal people. And right at the bottom you have the murderers, thieves, rapists, and terrorists. The idea is that, at the end of time, God will draw a horizontal line somewhere; probably a little bit below where we are. If you are above the line, you go to heaven; if you are below the line, you go to hell. That's a common idea, but it doesn't work like that at all.

How does the Bible contradict that 'tower block' analogy?

Titus 3:5

Galatians 2:16

God doesn't draw a horizontal line. He cuts the tower block vertically, down the middle. There are people at the bottom who spend eternity with God, and people at the top who get shut outside the party. Christianity isn't about religion or rules or respectability. It's about relationship. The question is whether you know God through Jesus. If it was about rules, we would all be shut out. God's standards are far above the top of our multi-story building. None of us get in on our own. God offers to take us back anyway.

God calls us home to Himself

In Luke 15 God paints us a picture of His love. His message to us is one of massive welcome: 'Wherever you are, whatever you've done, come home.'

How can we know for sure that God loves us?

1 John 4:9-10

Micah 7:18-19

How can we know that God will accept us back, no matter what?

Isaiah 1:18

1 John 1:9

Your understanding of how God sees you

Fill in the table again, reflecting on what Jesus taught you in His parable.

God's attitude towards me						God's attitude towards me					
He accepts me despite my faults						.	.	.	.	.	He rejects me because of my faults
He loves me						.	.	.	.	.	He doesn't care about me
He has forgiven me for everything						.	.	.	.	.	He has not forgiven some things
He frees me to flourish						.	.	.	.	.	He restricts me from flourishing
He directs my life						.	.	.	.	.	He ignores where my life is going
He is passionately interested in me						.	.	.	.	.	He is not interested in me at all
He looks at me with joy						.	.	.	.	.	He looks at me with disappointment

Questions for personal reflection

Where are you in this parable?

Have you ever felt like you've squandered something valuable in your life? How did you handle it?

How much do you think of God as being like the father? And how much do you think of Him as being like the older brother?

When God looks at you, what does He see?
How do you think He feels? What do you imagine He is thinking?

8

Shame holds us back

(part i)

"Guilt says you have done wrong; shame says you are wrong."

Anon.

What do you think of this quotation? (Do you like it or not, and why?)

Have you ever felt so ashamed about something that you never wanted anyone to know? Luka felt like that. He had secretly struggled with porn since his teens. He had never spoken to anyone, and felt he never could. He had tried to stop, he could manage for a week. But he always fell back into the trap. No matter how hard he tried, fasted or prayed, the problem wouldn't go away. He needed help, but he was too ashamed to ask for help.

What would you tell Luka? What advice would you give him?

There are two problems in giving Luka advice. The easier problem is what to say. The harder problem is that you don't know about it in the first place, because he is too ashamed to ask. You may know what this feels like from the

inside, because of being in a similar situation in the past (or even currently). Shame holds us back, but it can be overcome. Humans were designed for honour, but sin twists that. Sin brings us dishonour, and it deceives us into seeking honour in the wrong places.

What glimpse do we get of how life without shame might have been?

Genesis 2:25

Humans were designed for honour, but sin distorts that. In what ways does sin bring shame?

Genesis 3:1-8

How did Adam and Eve try to escape from shame?

Genesis 3:8-13

After the Fall, we easily experience shame. And we do not like it. We want some 'fig leaves' to cover our shame. But fig leaves are full of gaps - they don't make good coverings - which leads to trouble. We distract from our own shame by shaming someone else, or we raise ourselves by lowering others. But this goes against everything Jesus wants for us. Sin dishonours God. It shames us before God and leaves us feeling ashamed. It spawns new sin.

The younger son in Luke 15 brings shame upon his family. Asking for the inheritance is shameful. Wasting his money in the foreign land is shameful.

When it runs out, he ends up in a shameful condition: moneyless, tending unclean animals, and longing to eat their food! But to go back home and beg for mercy is also shameful - perhaps even more so. His shame is 'shallower' in the distant land because it happens among strangers. If he returns home, the shame will be 'deep'. He will be shamed before his family, his friends, and everyone who has known him from childhood.

How does the younger son respond to his shameful situation?

Luke 15:18-19

You cannot lift yourself out of shame. Someone honourable must reach down and lift you up. How does the father do this?

Luke 15:20-24

The father is a picture of God's grace to us in Christ, and a picture of the same grace that Jesus wants us to show one another. Grace is a gamble. To follow Jesus often means going against the 'proper' ways of behaving that our world teaches us. Our world is more like the older brother.

How does the older brother respond to his father's celebration?

Luke 15:28-30

The older brother understands the 'normal' rules of honour and shame. His brother has acted shamefully, and so has forfeited his honour. He must live with his shame. Indeed, he ought to live with his shame. He should be shamed, and it is his family's duty to shame him. In the older son's eyes, the father is short-circuiting the world's 'natural justice'.

Ironically, in his anger, the older son also behaves shamefully to his father. How does he dishonour him and/or fail to show him honour?

Luke 15:28-30

We don't know the older son's final response to his father's grace. That leaves us to choose for ourselves:

- Will we follow the world's code of shaming the shameful, and honouring the outwardly-honourable, or agreeing with God's radical reversal?
- Will we openly acknowledge our own shame (whether hidden or not), humble ourselves before God, and allow ourselves to be welcomed by Him?

How does Jesus encourage us to break the cycles of 'natural justice', violence, shame and honour?

Matthew 5:38-39

Matthew 5:40-42

continued...

How does Jesus encourage us to break the cycles of ‘natural justice’, violence, shame and honour?

Matthew 5:43-45

Matthew 5:46-48

God’s way of dealing with honour and shame is almost the exact opposite of the world’s way: the first will be last, and the last will be first; God will lift up the lowly, but bring down the proud.



If your sense of who you are is not built securely on the fact that you are precious to God and loved by Him: if you are not confident that you are honoured by God and treasured by Him; then (like the older son) you will look for honour and security through worldly shortcuts. And those shortcuts will be at other people’s expense. You will build yourself up at the cost of pulling others down.

Questions for Personal Reflection

How much is your sense of personal value built on the fact that you are precious to God, and how much is it built on other things?

What are some of those 'other things'?

Have you ever felt too ashamed to ask for help regarding a struggle or secret sin?

What makes shame such a powerful barrier?

What is your default: Are you more likely to follow the world's code of shaming the shameful, or God's radical reversal?

Why?

What is one practical step you can take this week to challenge a pattern of hiding, or of seeking honour in the wrong places?
How can you move towards God's acceptance instead?



Shame holds us back

(part ii)

"Shame is basically the fear of being unlovable."

Brené Brown

What do you think of this quotation? (Do you like it or not, and why?)

To deal rightly with shame, we need to know how God himself sees us.

God and His children

How does God feel about us, His children?

Zephaniah 3:17

How should we feel about others?

Philippians 2:3-5

Our world builds communities based on competition; sometimes churches do so too. We create artificial versions of ourselves - photoshopped to be as 'glorious' as possible - and we hide our true selves behind this mask. We exchange true community - where our true selves know one another and are known - for an artificial 'masked-community.'

Being confident in God's love for you will give you the confidence to know that you cannot win your own honour. You have forfeited your own honour through your sin, and yet you are honoured anyway! God has chosen you to be His child, adopted into His family. You are a co-heir with Christ, and precious to the Almighty God of all the universe. If you are confident in His love, you can be confident in this. If, however, you forget about His love for you, you may also forget about how honoured you are in Him, and then you may start looking for substitutes in all the wrong places.

Gaining confidence that our honour is found in God

Meditate on each verse for at least 30 seconds. Do you 'own' the truth it expresses? Does it shape your thinking? Ask God to help you to 'own' it.

Jot down something you want to remember from each verse.

Psalms 62:7

continued...

Jot down something you want to remember from each verse.

1 Samuel 2:8

Isaiah 54:4

Hebrews 12:2

Romans 10:11

Can shame be positive, discouraging us from doing wrong, so that we won't feel ashamed afterwards? Perhaps, in advance, but it changes after the sin has happened. The right response to sin is confession, repentance and forgiveness; to humble yourself (like the prodigal son) and receive God's grace. He lifts up the lowly.

But the world's view is that the lowly should be kept low. The best outcome may well be to avoid wrong. But if you have already done the wrong thing, then the world's next-best outcome is to cover it up, and maybe blame someone else. The world's worst option is to confess. They say that if you confess, you lose face, you lose status, you lose honour and gain shame.

Human culture

God's Kingdom

Rejection,
Blame,
Shame



Confess your sin;
Repent;
Seek forgiveness



**Acceptance,
Forgiveness,
Honour**

**Acceptance,
Status,
Honour**



Deny your sin,
Cover it up
Blame someone else



Rejection,
Blame,
Shame

When you have done wrong, you cannot impress both the world and God.

Why does that choice (of who to impress) matter so much?

Daniel 12:2

For someone who is trapped in shame, what is the way out?

Psalm 32:3-5

What other advice does God's word give us?

James 5:16

Instead of carrying our (shame) burdens alone, what should we do?

Galatians 6:2

Choose a right person to talk to. The prodigal confessed to his father. If he had chosen his brother, things might have turned out differently!

Guilt and Shame Experience Scale (GSES)

Circle the answer that best indicates how much you disagree or agree with each statement	not at all	a little bit	some what	lots
1. I feel guilty, even though I don't know exactly where it comes from.	0	1	2	3
2. If I do something wrong, I have to think about it all the time.	0	1	2	3
3. There are moments when I would rather sink without trace.	0	1	2	3
4. When I do something wrong, I feel an exaggerated feeling of guilt.	0	1	2	3
5. I am losing hope that I will ever be a good person.	0	1	2	3
6. I blame myself, even for things that other people do not think of.	0	1	2	3
7. I experience moments when I cannot even look at myself.	0	1	2	3
8. I feel the need to explain, or apologise for, the reasons behind my actions.	0	1	2	3

Questions for Personal Reflection

Which *should* you give more importance to: being honoured in the sight of God, or being honoured in the sight of the world?

Which *do* you give more importance to in practice: being honoured in the sight of God, or being honoured in the sight of the world?

(Why is it hard to make what you do match what you should do?)

Guilt says we have *done* something bad. Shame says we *are* bad. Are there things in your life that you are ashamed of, and need to confess?

It is good to confess to God, and it is good to confess to one another. Do you have someone you can confess your sins and problems to?

Grow in the gospel

(part i)

"God is the gospel. [His love is] the gift of Himself."

John Piper

What do you think of this quotation? (Do you like it or not, and why?)

Peter mistakenly thought he'd been a Christian for years. He'd been going to church for years, and thought that Christianity was about living a good life so that God would be pleased and let him into heaven. Then, for the first time, he understood the gospel - the good news about Jesus. He realised that he could never earn his way into God's favour, that he needed to be forgiven, and that God was offering to do just that. So he prayed, asking God to rescue him.

Now that Peter has understood the gospel, what is the next thing that he needs to know?

God and His children

Titus 3 will help us to answer that question from the Bible's perspective:

This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. (Titus 3:8a)

Paul tells Titus to stress 'these things', as they will encourage Christians 'to devote themselves to doing what is good' - a big step forward in godliness. The context will tell us what the 'things' are:

Read Titus 3:3-7. Jot down the key points being made in each verse.

Titus 3:3

Titus 3:4

Titus 3:5

Titus 3:6

Titus 3:7

On one level, this might be a surprise, because the whole paragraph is simply a basic summary of the gospel. But that is crucial to grasp. Certainly, believing the gospel turns non-Christians into Christians. That is true, but not complete. Believing the gospel doesn't just turn non-Christians into Christians, the gospel also enables Christians to grow.

This is different from other areas in life. In maths, pupils do repetitive exercises, to drill the basic concepts. Later, they leave those behind and move on to more advanced work. It is not like that with Christianity. Paul tells Titus to keep on stressing the basics of Christianity. They are excellent and profitable for everybody. No matter how long we have been Christians or how well we know our Bibles, we don't move on from the gospel. We come back to it again and again. The gospel saves you but the gospel also makes you grow. We will look at three examples of how this works.

Remember that sin destroys you

What do you learn about the destructive nature of sin?
What do you learn about how sin damages the person sinning?

Titus 3:3

Proverbs 5:22-23

Romans 6:16

continued...

What do you learn about the destructive nature of sin?
What do you learn about how sin damages the person sinning?

Proverbs 11:6

Galatians 5:16-17

1 Corinthians 6:18-20

Isaiah 59:2

The Bible's picture of sin is similar to what it is like to take drugs. It can be great fun at first - that is why people do it - but it is an empty sort of fun. You need more and more to satisfy you, and in the end it never does satisfy. Sin entraps you, and makes you its slave, in much the same way that people get enslaved and addicted to drugs. Sin destroys you.

The world thinks that, by sinning, it is throwing off bonds and liberating itself. But that is not true. Sin dehumanises you. The more it works on you, the more it corrodes your humanity, and the more it turns you into a spiritual drug addict. It happens quickly with some people, and slowly with others. But it still happens. You become more and more self-centred, and it alienates you from other people and from God. It will eventually destroy all your relationships with everybody, which is one of the most terrifying things about hell. If we really understand that sin destroys us, then we have a huge motive to devote

ourselves to doing what is good. The next time you are tempted to do wrong - pause. Remember the whole picture: sure, sin can be pleasurable (if it wasn't, then we wouldn't be tempted). But it is an empty pleasure which does us serious harm. Think twice.

Where does sin eventually lead us?

Proverbs 13:6

Numbers 32:23

James 1:15

Galatians 6:7-8

Romans 6:23

Questions for Personal Reflection

Sometimes sin initially brings pleasure, only to lead to pain, or some enslavement later. Can you think of a sin or struggle you have faced where you felt this way?

This chapter encouraged you to reflect on how sin damages and enslaves you. How does that help you want to live a godly life?

The gospel is 'excellent and profitable for everybody'. In what area of life do you most need the gospel to make you grow?

Think about a sin that you could be tempted by, and imagine that you embraced that sin wholeheartedly.
List some of the ways that sin could begin to destroy you.

11

Grow in the gospel

(part ii)

"Trust the past to God's mercy, the present to His love, the future to His providence."

Charles Spurgeon

What do you think of this quotation? (Do you like it or not, and why?)

Titus 3 has more lessons to teach us.

Remember the mercy we don't deserve

In these verses, what do you learn about God's mercy to us?

Titus 3:4-6

Ephesians 2:4-5

continued...

In these verses, what do you learn about God's mercy to us?

Micah 7:18-19

Lamentations 3:22-23

Hebrews 4:16

We know we didn't deserve to have God rescue us. But we can think we have to reach a certain level of goodness to stay in God's good books. That is a dangerous lie, and like all the best lies, it takes something true and twists it out of shape. Because it *is* true that if we are not living a Christian life (if we are not growing in godliness), then that strongly suggests that we don't understand the gospel and that we may not really be Christians.

What does Paul expect a knowledge of the truth to lead to?

Titus 1:1

Truth leads to godliness. If we understand the gospel, then it changes our lives. It's not that we earn the right to stay saved - we deserve condemnation for the lives we lived before we came to Christ - and we still deserve condemnation for the lives we have lived since. We will never *deserve* God's mercy. If we want our lives changed, we need to understand more of the gospel.

Remember the whole New Creation

What do you learn about the New Creation we are heading for?

Titus 3:7

Titus 2:13-14

Revelation 21:1-5

Revelation 22:1-5

The goal of Jesus' rescue mission was to purify a people for His very own, free from sin, who will be with Him forever, and who will worship Him forever in His New Creation. That is the ultimate goal. There are benefits to being a Christian now, but the best is still to come. The process of freeing us from the nightmare of sin has begun, but it is not finished yet. The reason that the New Creation is so good, is that we will be fully with God, and fully without sin. We, ourselves, will be the opposite of the description in Titus 3:3. Holiness is not boring or bland. The New Creation will be tremendous because God will be there, and all the other people there will be godly. Instead of living in malice, envy, and hate, we will be living in kindness and peace; loving and caring for one another.

To get a feel for the contrast between sin and hell, versus godliness and the New Creation, think of some of the key words Paul used in Titus 3 to contrast our two situations:

Pick out the words that describe our wretched situation in sin.

Titus 3:3

Pick out the words that describe God's great rescue.

Titus 3:4

Titus 3:5

Titus 3:6

Titus 3:7

Real life means living a godly life; becoming more like Jesus, and more ready for that New Creation.

A ‘Gospel Check-up’ questionnaire

Tick the relevant boxes	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. My life is a life of repentance and faith					
2. I love Jesus and I obey His teaching					
3. I love God with all my heart, mind, soul and strength					
4. I frequently remind myself of how destructive sin is					
5. Thinking of sin's destructiveness helps me live faithfully					
6. I'm learning to deny myself, take up my cross, and follow Jesus					
7. Every day I am grateful for God's mercy towards me					
8. Thinking of God's mercy helps me live faithfully					
9. I know that I will inherit eternal life					
10. I think about my hope of the New Creation most days					
11. Thinking of the New Creation helps me live faithfully					
12. I am learning to walk as Jesus walked					

Questions for personal reflection

How well do you feel you are doing at trusting 'the past to God's mercy, the present to His love, the future to His providence'?

How often do you think about and find motivation in the hope of the New Creation?

If you were to die tonight, are you confident you would go to heaven?

(Why/why not?)

Suppose that you did die tonight, and you appear before God, and He asks you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?'
What would you say?

12

Idols hold us back

(part i)

"Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God."

Martin Luther

What do you think of this quotation? (Do you like it or not, and why?)

Physical idols were once common all over the world. In some places, they still are common. When we hear the word 'idol', the picture that springs to mind is often a physical statue or image. The Bible certainly does use the word 'idol' that way, but it uses 'idol' in other ways too:

What do we learn about idols and idolatry from these verses?

Exodus 20:4

Colossians 3:5

continued...

What do we learn about idols and idolatry from these verses?

Psalms 115:4-8

Jeremiah 2:27-28

Ezekiel 14:3-4

Romans 1:21-25

Romans takes us to the core meaning of idolatry - worship and/or service of some created thing, instead of God the Creator. We centre our lives on something God has made, instead of on God. We take a good thing and turn it into a 'god-thing'. Most idols start off as good things, not bad things. Idols are created things, and originally, God's creation was good. When we try to turn created things into 'god-things', that is when they get twisted and become bad.

Imagine you are Abraham, waiting decades for the child of promise to arrive. How would you feel when the child is finally born?

Now how would you feel when this happens?

Genesis 22:2

God calls Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Why? Because idolatry is so dangerous. For Abraham, Isaac is certainly a 'good thing'. He has waited his whole life for Isaac; all his dreams and hopes for blessing are tied up with Isaac. If you asked Abraham, 'What is the greatest thing in your life?' he might easily say, 'Isaac!' But he should say, 'God is the greatest thing in my life! And the biggest blessing He has given me is Isaac.' The best things can become the greatest idols. God makes Abraham face this through a stark choice: God, or Isaac. Abraham chooses God, and so it is safe for him to enjoy the blessing of his son, without the blessing becoming an idol.

Why did Israel choose a golden 'calf'?

Exodus 32 also tells a story of serious idolatry. God has redeemed Israel from slavery, they are at Mount Sinai, and God speaks to them in the thunder. They agree that Moses should go up the mountain alone to receive the Law while they wait below. But then Moses is away a long time ...

How do the people respond when Moses is slow to return?

Exodus 32:1

Aaron thinks it best to take control of this outburst of idol-making, and so he asks them for gold, which he fashioned into the shape of a 'calf' (probably not a 'baby bull' but rather a 'young bull' or a 'youthful bull'). This idol doesn't represent infancy, weakness, or vulnerability. It represents youthfulness, strength, and vigour. This makes sense in the context of their deliverance from Egypt -

defeating a superpower, ten plagues, parting the Red Sea; all of which are acts of strength, vigour, and power.

When they see the 'calf' (or 'young bull') what do the people say?

Exodus 32:4b

They focus on divine strength and power. But why do they say 'gods' and not 'god'? (Of course, they don't say it in English at all!) What they originally say is 'Elohim' - the Hebrew word for 'God' - or it can mean 'gods'. It's like the word 'sheep' in English: the singular and the plural are the same (so we say both 'one sheep' and 'two sheep'). The NIV puts one option ('gods') in the main text, and the other ('god') in the footnote.

How does Aaron try to present this idolatry as worship of the Lord?

Exodus 32:5-6

Aaron still hopes to salvage something from this idolatry. He thinks he can turn it into a festival to 'the Lord' (Yahweh) with all the normal Old Testament burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Aaron is thinking something like: 'We can work with this. Yahweh is strong; He rescued us from Egypt. A 'calf-idol' is also strong, and so it can represent Yahweh.' But idol-worship is false worship.

What is God's verdict on this 'festival to the Lord'?

Exodus 32:7-8

Words are important, but actions can be even more important. What we say we are doing matters, but what we are actually doing matters even more. Aaron said this was a festival 'to Yahweh' - but it was not; it was idolatry. Aaron didn't realise that 'half-true/half-false' worship of the true God, in fact, is false worship of God; it is worship of a false god. The Israelites probably said something like:

'God is strong! God is mighty, powerful, and virile! Our 'bull-calf' expresses His strength. We serve the Almighty, and this image helps us focus on that truth. It strengthens our worship of the Almighty God; the one whose arm is stronger than the might of Egypt.'

The true bits of this are not the problem. It's the false and/or twisted bits that sit alongside them. It's the missing bits of truth that have been left out. It is not enough for something to have some truth ('half-truths' are true, as far as they go, but they are not the whole truth). The great thing about the Bible is that it does give us the whole truth - if we pay attention.

How should we respond to idols?

1 John 5:21

1 Corinthians 10:14

Questions for personal reflection

What are some good things in your life that you might turn into 'god-things'?

'Half-true' worship is ultimately false worship.
What truths about God that you are tempted to forget or 'half-forget'?

The core of idolatry is centring our lives on something God has made, instead of on God. Where you are primarily seeking security, identity, or satisfaction?

What is one practical step you can take this week to make sure God remains the supreme object of your worship?

13

Idols hold us back

(part ii)

"The opposite of Christianity is not atheism, but idolatry."

Peter Kreeft

What do you think of this quotation? (Do you like it or not, and why?)

Solomon's story shows how idolatry can turn good things into 'god-things'.

Blessings can hold you back! - Solomon

His story starts well. God appears, and asks him to choose a blessing.

What blessings does Solomon choose?

1 Kings 3:7-9

God is pleased, and promises further blessings. What are they?

1 Kings 3:11-12

1 Kings 3:13

1 Kings 3:14

Soon, the blessings are fulfilled. Solomon rules wisely, he has peace, wealth, and fame - even the Queen of Sheba comes to see his court.

What are some of the main things that impress the Queen of Sheba?

1 Kings 10:6-9

The picture we are given of Solomon's court is bright and beautiful and glorious and good. And yet, we know that it all falls apart so quickly.

What goes wrong?

1 Kings 11:9-10

How did it all fall apart so quickly? The cracks were there much earlier.

What are the four things the king of Israel must avoid doing?

Deuteronomy 17:16-17

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Solomon does not do well on these four counts. Even in 1 Kings 10, where things are going so well, they are at the same time going very badly.

Let's consider those four requirements from Deuteronomy.

1 Kings 10:26 (*No stock-piling of horses.*) How does Solomon do?

1 Kings 10:28-29 (*No returning to Egypt to get the horses.*) How does Solomon do?

continued...

Let's consider those four requirements from Deuteronomy:

1 Kings 10:14-15, 23, 27 (*No accumulating of gold and silver.*) How does Solomon do?

1 Kings 11:1, 3-6 (*No taking of many wives.*) How does Solomon do?

Despite all the blessings Solomon receives, he goes astray. Sin twists the blessings into idols. Solomon delights in wealth, power, and status so much that he puts them ahead of God. He should have used his blessings in service to God, even when that meant putting God ahead of the blessings. Our hopes and dreams give clues about our idols. We think our idols will bring us satisfaction: 'If only I was wealthy (or married; or successful), everything would be alright!' It is not wrong to hope for blessings - they are good things! The problem is when we stop looking at them as blessings from the great Saviour, and start thinking of them as our salvation.

Our fears and worries also give clues to our idols. We look to them for security and meaning. That makes us vulnerable, because idols are only creatures - and can be destroyed. If we lose something good, we naturally mourn the loss. But if we lose an idol, our mourning can break all normal bounds. We no longer mourn a lost blessing; instead we have lost our purpose, our security, and our reason for living. Look to God for those things, and you will never lose them!

Idolatry Detection Quiz (answer honestly!)

Don't 'cheat' by answering 'God'. Choose the created things that could become your idols.

What thing(s) do I feel I must have, to be happy?		
What do I most fear losing?		
What am I most worried about never gaining in life?		
What made me most bitter in life? (What can I not forgive?)		
What do I spend the most time and/or money on?		
What am I willing to lie for?		
Where do I turn for comfort?		
Whose approval do I seek?		

If you turn your blessings into idols, the kindest thing God can do is to take them away. You have three paths when a blessing becomes an idol:

1. You repent. You turn from your 'blessing-idol', and refocus on God - even if that means neglecting your 'blessing-idol' for now.
2. You carry on worshipping your 'blessing-idol' until God forcibly removes it from you. Only then, do you repent and return to Him.
3. You carry on worshipping your 'blessing-idol', and God allows you to do so. It takes you from Him, bringing disaster to your soul.

The wise choice is Path 1 - identify and turn from your own 'blessing-idols'.

Questions for Personal Reflection

Can you think of any ways in which idols have held you back in the past?

What are some early warning signs you might look for in your own thoughts, feelings, or actions that could indicate a good thing is starting to function as an idol in your life?

Which of God's blessing are you most likely to turn into an idol?

(Remember: when blessings become idols, it is because they are good things becoming 'god-things' - things like family, health, wealth, success, status, strengths, skills, achievements, abilities, popularity, influence, acceptance, etc. Is any one of these becoming an idol for you?)

How do you want God to deal with that idol in your life?

Grow in wisdom

"Wisdom is the right use of knowledge. To know is not to be wise. Many men know a great deal, and are all the greater fools for it. There is no fool so great a fool as a knowing fool. But to know how to use knowledge is to have wisdom."

Charles Spurgeon

What do you think of this quotation? (Do you like it or not, and why?)

Wisdom is the ability to apply knowledge and understanding to life - at the right time, and in the right way.

The beginning of wisdom

Where does wisdom begin?

Proverbs 9:10

Wisdom starts with who you know (i.e. God), and not just what you know. Knowing God should shape our every thought, decision, and action. To be wise, we need to know God, the creator of the universe, we need to fear Him, and we need to learn His ways.

How important is it to gain and grow in wisdom?

Proverbs 1:7

Proverbs 16:16

You need (some) wisdom to use wisdom

An irony about growing in wisdom, is that you need to exercise (some) wisdom in order to develop more of it. Consider these two proverbs:

How should we respond to someone who is being foolish?

Proverbs 26:4

Proverbs 26:5

These two proverbs are placed right beside each other to get us thinking. There are times when you need to avoid getting dragged into foolish discussions, or else you will be sucked down to that foolish level. There are other times when the best way of pointing out some foolishness might be to play along with it and respond in kind. The proverbs are teaching us wisdom by identifying those two scenarios. But we still need wisdom to recognise which proverb fits the scenario in front of us. Wisdom is like a ladder; you use wisdom to learn (more) wisdom.

Christ, our wisdom

As Christians, our wisdom ought to be Christ-centred.

How does the Bible connect wisdom with Jesus?

Colossians 2:2-3

1 Corinthians 1:24

1 Corinthians 1:30

Jesus is the wisdom of God. As we grow in Him, we should be growing in wisdom and holiness and righteousness, as they are all united in Him.

Gaining wisdom

What should we do if we are lacking wisdom?

James 1:5

Psalms 119:97-98

Proverbs 13:20

Proverbs 11:12

Proverbs 15:31

Deuteronomy 4:5-6

God delights to help us grow in wisdom, and He has given us all the tools we need to do just that!

A ‘Wisdom Check-up’ questionnaire

There is no easy way to measure wisdom. But the following questions may help you start thinking about areas where you could grow in wisdom.

Tick the relevant boxes	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I have learned valuable life lessons from others					
2. I have overcome many painful events in my life					
3. I seem to be good at reading other people's emotions					
4. I am well 'tuned in' to my own emotions					
5. I can express emotions freely, without feeling I may lose control					
6. At this point in my life, I find it easy to laugh at my mistakes					
7. Thinking about my past helps me to gain perspective on the present					
8. I like to read books which challenge me to think differently					
9. My instincts on how to respond to things are shaped by Bible principles					
10. My thinking is increasingly shaped by Bible principles					

Questions for personal reflection

What are the areas of your life where you need to grow in wisdom?

Can you recall a recent situation where you encountered foolishness? Reflecting on it now, are you happy with how you responded? Did you respond with wisdom, or do you wish you had handled it differently?

What are the areas of your life where you need to grow in wisdom?

What resources, people, and/or practices do you have available to you, that can help you to grow in wisdom?



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