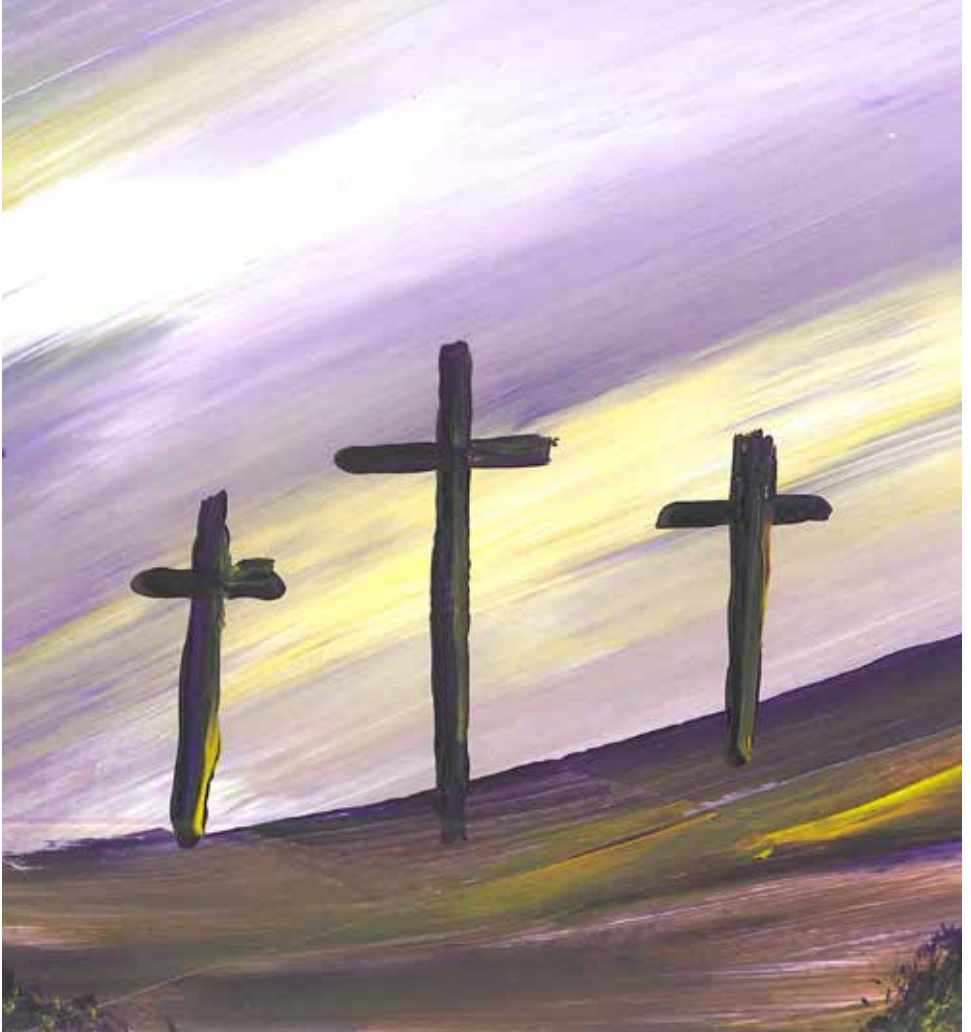


THE THREE BIG QUESTIONS



Cover artwork by Johnny S., Crossroads student



CROSSROADS

INTRODUCTION

The Three Big Questions explores the questions we all have about life: **Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?** We all look for answers to these questions. We search for them in many places.

The Bible offers answers to these questions. It also offers hope for a new and better life. And it tells us that the first step toward discovering that life is knowing God.

We pray that this Bible study will help you begin the journey of discovering the life that God promises to those who follow Him. If you have already begun that journey, we pray that this study will encourage and energize you in your faith and relationship with God.

Once you have completed this lesson booklet, mail it back to the Crossroads office. It is very important that you complete the information section on the back cover so that we know where you will be when we receive your lesson. If you think you will be at your present facility for at least three months, you can continue with the second Crossroads course there.

Whether or not you continue with the Crossroads program, we hope that *The Three Big Questions* will help you experience the grace of God and set the course for the next season of your life.

Copyright © 2022 by Crossroads Prison Ministries. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

Scriptures taken from the Holy Bible, New International Reader's Version®, Nlrv® Copyright © 1995, 1996, 1998, 2014 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. www.zondervan.com. The "Nlrv" and "New International Reader's Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Some content and ideas within this course have been excerpted from Ray Pritchard's book *An Anchor for the Soul*. Copyright © 2001, 2011 by Moody Publishers. Used by permission of Moody. www.moodypublishers.com. Crossroads is deeply thankful to Dr. Pritchard for his generosity in granting Crossroads permission to use his materials for this course and to use his book *An Anchor for the Soul* as a source of inspiration for the course itself.

v.0223

International Office:

Crossroads | PO Box 900 | Grand Rapids, MI 49509-0900

Glossary of Terms

This lesson contains Bible names, terms and ideas that may be new to you. We will do our best to provide definitions that are easy to understand. You will see an asterisk (*) the first time each term appears in the lesson.

Contentment — A feeling of being happy and satisfied. In the Bible, it is a supernatural peace that comes from knowing and obeying God.

Ecclesiastes — A book in the Bible. It was likely written by Solomon (see “**Solomon**”).

Forgiven — A word used to describe a person after God has removed the sin from their life (see “**sin**”). When God forgives us, He no longer blames us for our past, and He cancels any debt we owed Him for sins we committed.

God-Shaped Hole — A concept talked about by theologians (see “**theologian**”). It is a sense that you lack something meaningful in your life. It refers to a deep longing for God.

Gospel — The good news about Jesus Christ found in the Bible. The word can also be used to describe the first four books of the New Testament in the Bible, which are written about Jesus’ life and ministry.

Israel — The name of the kingdom that God established for His people. It was located approximately where the nation of Israel is located today in the Middle East region of Asia.

Prodigal — Someone who wastes a lot of money and time and does not value what they have.

Scripture — Another way to refer to the words in the Bible. All Scripture was given to us by God and written down by men.

Shame — A result of sin (see “**sin**”); closely related to guilt. It is an awareness that we will never live up to God’s expectations.

Sin — An action, thought or spoken word that goes against God’s divine plan. When we commit sins, we do things that are wrong and break God’s laws. Sins are the things that we do—or fail to do—that make us less than perfect. Sins keep us from growing closer to Jesus.

Solomon — A king of Israel (see “**Israel**”). He was the most powerful king in the Bible. He had great riches. God gave him the gift of wisdom.

Theologian — Someone who studies who God is. They study the Bible, the nature of God and other elements of Christianity. Theologians often write books about God and faith.

CHAPTER 1: The **BIG** Questions

Chapter Focus: God wants us to know Him.

Humans, by nature, have a desire to find purpose for their lives. They are looking for direction. They are looking for meaning. They want to know why they are here. They want to know who they are supposed to be.

We can't find answers to these questions by buying more, doing more or learning more. Knowledge, possessions and experiences do not make us feel whole. The richest people in the world keep trying to earn more money because it does not satisfy them. The smartest people in the world admit there is so much that they do not know or understand.

When we search for meaning, we are often limited by our past experiences. We think about who we want to be based on ideas about ourselves that may not be true. This may cause us to miss out on the real meaning of life. This course has been created to help you think about these things in a different way.

1. What are some of the ways you've seen people look for meaning and purpose in the past?

- | | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Education | <input type="checkbox"/> Strength | <input type="checkbox"/> Science |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Relationships | <input type="checkbox"/> Body Image | <input type="checkbox"/> Success |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Status | <input type="checkbox"/> Approval | <input type="checkbox"/> Money |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drugs/Alcohol | <input type="checkbox"/> Fame | <input type="checkbox"/> Sex |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: | | |

2. How do people look for meaning and purpose inside prison or jail?

We're All Looking for the Same Thing

We all want to know the answers to the three big questions in life: **Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?**

In his book *An Anchor for the Soul*, Ray Pritchard said it this way:

It is the same in every country and every culture. On the surface we are very different in our appearance, background, language and customs. But dig a little deeper and you discover that basically, we are all the same. . . . Everywhere we are the same—with the same longings, regrets, dreams and hopes; with the same need to love and be loved; with the same desire to be remembered after we die. ¹

Everyone you'll ever meet has the same desire to know the answers to these big questions.

3. What are some things you think everyone might have in common?

The Three Big Questions

Our answers to the three big questions reveal what we think about ourselves. We often respond to the question “Who are you?” by sharing facts about ourselves: what our job is, whether we are married or divorced or single, our favorite hobbies, etc. We might answer the question “Why are you here?” by telling people about our past or about events that led to our current situation. We may respond to the question “Where are you going?” by mentioning a jail or prison sentence, a place we will go after we are released or nowhere at all.

1. Ray Pritchard, *An Anchor for the Soul*, 19

4. How would you answer the three big questions? Take a few minutes to think about the questions below before you answer them.

a. Who am I?

b. Why am I here?

c. Where am I going?

Our answers to these questions can also have a deeper meaning. They can reflect who we want to be. They can reveal who we really are when no one is looking. They can define our purpose—why we are alive or here on the earth.

5. Which of the big questions seems most important for you to answer right now? Why?

A King's Answer

King Solomon* was one of the richest and most powerful kings of Israel.* He is believed to be the writer of Ecclesiastes,* one of the wisdom books in the Bible. In Ecclesiastes, he wrote about

* An asterisk after a word or phrase indicates that it is defined in the Glossary of Terms on pages 3–4.

where he looked for answers to the big questions. He tried relationships. He tried parties. He tried wealth and power. He tried everything there was to try. None of those things answered the questions for him. He still felt empty. It was all meaningless. Solomon reported what he found in three short words: "I hated life" (Ecclesiastes 2:17).

6. What do you think Solomon meant when he said he "hated life"?

Solomon was tired of trying to find things that would give his life meaning. What can you do when you've truly tried it all, but you have not found any answers? This is the way Solomon felt.

7. Have you ever felt that way? What brought you to that point?

Solomon felt empty, even though he had tried almost everything in his search for meaning. He decided that there had to be something more to life: knowing God and following Him (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

8. How would you describe yourself when it comes to knowing God? Are you skeptical? Are you a believer? Are you still trying to find the truth?

- I'm searching for answers
- I believe in God
- I used to believe in God
- I feel lost and confused
- I have a lot of doubts
- I'm skeptical about God
- I'm not sure about religion
- Other:

Knowing God

Like Solomon, most of us long for something more from life. We want to be loved. We want our life to have meaning and purpose. And, like Solomon, we have the same sense that there must be a God of some kind who made us.

There is a phrase that describes that longing inside us for something more: a “God-shaped hole.”* Theologians* like St. Augustine, C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton all wrote about this “hole” in each of us. It is not a literal hole. The “God-shaped hole” is a longing for a perfect connection to God.

That longing drives us to seek meaning outside ourselves. It makes us feel like things will never get any better. It makes us afraid that we will never be good enough. It makes us feel abandoned, forgotten and alone.

God is the answer to that longing inside us. The longing causes us to keep looking for more until we come home to Him. St. Augustine said it this way: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you” (*The Confessions*).

God created us to have a relationship with Him. He designed us to want to know Him. We will not find true happiness and contentment* until we find Him. God fills the “hole” in us.

9. Have you ever felt a longing for something that was missing from your life? If so, what did you do to try to fulfill that longing? Did it work?

The whole Bible shows us that God wants us to know Him—in a sense, that is the theme of the Bible. God loves us, we rebel against Him and He comes to our rescue. The God of the Bible

is interested in our lives and cares deeply about us. God cares deeply about *you*.

10. What do you think of the idea of a God who cares deeply about you? Do you believe it?

In the Beginning

The very first story in the Bible about God and humanity tells us that God created a perfect world. God created humans “in his own image . . . male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). We are made in God’s image, which means there is something in us that reflects who God is. We are designed to know God and take care of the world in which God placed us.

But something went terribly wrong.

God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It was a perfect place. The garden provided shelter, food and a purpose for them. They knew God and they knew who God created them to be. God made just one thing off-limits. He told them not to eat the fruit of one specific tree: the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

A serpent deceived Eve, who ate some of the fruit and then offered some to Adam. Even though Adam had not been deceived, he ate the fruit anyway. This was the “fall” of humankind. It was through this one simple act, this deliberate choice, that sin* entered the world.

Sin is anything we say, do, plan, think or imagine that does not meet God’s standard of perfection. It is something we do that we know is wrong. After we’ve done it, that voice in the back of our heads asks, “Why did I do that?” Adam and Eve sinned. They did what God asked them not to do. Then they experienced guilt and fear. They sinned against God—and they *knew* they sinned.

The Bible tells us that, in their shame,* they tried to cover themselves and they hid from God. They were terrified of God's reaction.

Then the man and his wife heard the LORD God walking in the garden. It was during the coolest time of the day. They hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called out to the man. "Where are you?" he asked. (Genesis 3:8–9)

You might think that God would have destroyed Adam and Eve and started over. But He didn't.

God went looking for them.

He simply walked through the garden and called out to them. God knew where they were. God knew what they had done. But He came with a question, not an accusation. "Where are you?"

11. How would you expect God to have reacted when Adam and Eve did the one thing He asked them not to do?

12. Based on what you have read, how did God show His love to Adam and Eve despite what they did?

What Happens Next

God looked for Adam and Eve. He wanted them to talk to Him. He still wanted a relationship with them.

However, there were consequences for what Adam and Eve did. Eve felt pain when having children. Her relationship with Adam was damaged. Adam had to work hard to find food. Both of them experienced death. We have inherited all of those things. We still feel those consequences today. Sin is now in the world.

Because of Adam and Eve's sin, we do not know God the way we should. We continually do things we know we should not do. We see the pain, death and violence in the world—some of it that we create ourselves—and we feel powerless to fight it. We feel the result of other people's sins when they hurt us. We commit sins in response. We hurt others. We hurt ourselves. But God tells us things do not need to stay that way. We are sinners, but God is still looking for each of us. The Bible tells us:

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. Anyone who believes in him will not die but will have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world. He sent his Son to save the world through him. (John 3:16–17)

He knows what has happened to us. He knows what we have done. But despite all of that, He still sent His Son, Jesus, to the earth to die for our sins so that we may have a relationship with Him. He still loves us. He still asks each of us, "Where are you?"

13. Read John 3:16–17 again. What do these verses say about God?

14. According to John 3:16–17, how does God feel about you?

Would it surprise you to hear that you are more than the list of things you just wrote down? The Bible tells us that we are made in God's image. That means we are capable of creating things. We are capable of giving and receiving love. God made us to take care of His creation, to take care of each other and to have an impact on the future. God loves us. He wants to welcome us home as part of His family. He sees value in us, regardless of how we feel about ourselves.

Jesus told a story that explains God's love for us. It also describes God's desire to be back in a relationship with us, despite what we've done. The story is called "The Parable of the Prodigal* Son" (found in Luke 15:11–24). It goes like this:

There was a man who had two sons. The younger son spoke to his father. He said, "Father, give me my share of the family property." So the father divided his property between his two sons.

Not long after that, the younger son packed up all he had. Then he left for a country far away. There he wasted his money on wild living. He spent everything he had. Then the whole country ran low on food. So the son didn't have what he needed. He went to work for someone who lived in that country. That person sent the son to the fields to feed the pigs. The son wanted to fill his stomach with the food the pigs were eating. But no one gave him anything.

Then he began to think clearly again. He said, "How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough food! But here I am dying from hunger! I will get up and go back to my father. I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven. And I have sinned against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'" So he got up and went to his father.

While the son was still a long way off, his father saw him. He was filled with tender love for his son. He ran to him. He threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son."

But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattest calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. This son of mine was dead. And now he is alive again. He was lost. And now he is found."

4. How did the young man describe himself as he prepared to go back home?

5. How did the father describe the son when he came home? Write down the father's words at the end of the story:

The father in the story gives us a picture of God waiting for us to come home. God is the father scanning the horizon, looking for us. He is ready to run to meet us and tell the world that we are home. God is waiting for us to realize that there is more to life than pain. He is waiting for us to know that there is more to life than money, power and popularity. He is waiting for us to see that we can finally stop being tired of being tired all the time. God is the father running to greet us and throwing a party because we have come home.

6. Based on this story, how do you think God would describe you? Circle all that apply:

Useless Loved Child Lost Found Alive Important

Why Am I Here?

The second of the three big questions is “Why am I here?” This question can have two different meanings. It can mean “How did I get here?” But it can also mean “Why is it important that I exist?” Think about both of these meanings as you read this story about a Crossroads student:

Tairone’s grandparents raised him to go to church every Sunday. But the other six days of the week, he ran the streets. While his grandparents taught him Scripture,* his uncles taught him the drug game. It didn’t take long for Tairone to choose who he wanted to be. It started with selling marijuana in junior high. It grew into a career of selling crack cocaine as a young man.

“With that lifestyle, I lied, cheated, gambled and had many women. This became a way of life that drove my ego,” Tairone said. But one day, Tairone was arrested. Then he was convicted and sentenced. Just like that, Tairone’s fast life of hustling, clubbing and running the streets was over.

November 18, 1998, is a date Tairone will never forget. It was the day he says he heard God’s voice more clearly than ever. He was lying on his bed in his cell. His mind was racing, thinking about the family and friends he had let down and the promises he had broken. Tairone tried to come to terms with his long prison sentence. Was life even worth living?

In the middle of the chaos, Tairone heard God say to him: “Tairone, I am a jealous God.” God wanted Tairone’s attention.

“I knew it was God,” Tairone said. “I knew I had to stop playing games. I surrendered my life to Him.”

Tairone was granted clemency and released in 2016. He has not taken his second chance lightly. He found a good job and a strong home church. He has a passion for reaching the youth of his community with the message of the Gospel.* Now he drives a van for his church on Sunday mornings, picking up teenagers

to bring them to the church service. On the way, he shares his story with them. He is changing lives for the better—helping kids avoid the mistakes he made.

7. When Tairone first went to prison, how do you think he may have answered the question “Why am I here?”

8. How do you think Tairone would answer the question “Why am I here?” now? (Think about the second meaning of the question: “Why is it important that I exist?”)

The story of the prodigal son hints at something we might miss when reading it. The son was fully restored when he came home. He had planned on taking care of his father’s animals. But he did not become a servant. He was not forced to work in the field. Instead, he was given a robe and a ring as a sign that he had a place of honor in the family. It was a sign that he could make decisions and help lead his household.

God does the same thing for us. God wants us to come home to Him and to be part of His family. And He also has a plan for each of us when we choose to follow Him. He does more than ask us, “Why are you here?” He already knows the answer to that, and He will use our past to shape a new future.

He helps us answer the question “Why am I here?” in ways we never would have thought possible.

CHAPTER 3: Where Am I GOING?

Chapter Focus: Jesus makes it possible for our lives to change completely.

The last of the three big questions is “Where am I going?” This question is connected to our goals and aspirations. It deals with what we really want from life.

We all hope for a better life. Nicer clothes. A cellmate who is easy to live with. Food that tastes amazing. The freedom to make our own decisions. Spending unlimited time with family or friends—or fixing broken relationships with them.

1. What are some of the things you want right now in your life?

The question “Where am I going?” also addresses something deeper—something beyond day-to-day life. It refers to more than our desire for physical things like a home or financial security. It refers to the type of goals that guide us. It speaks of a longing for hope and purpose. It points to a deeper desire for our lives—a desire to be worth something.

This question also deals with the changes we want to make in our lives. Our answers to this question reveal who we want to be and who we hope we can be. Going to jail or prison can be a sign that something needs to change. It can be a chance to stop and think about life. It can be a chance to start over and do things differently.

2. What things in your life do you wish you could change?

3. What have you tried to do to change your life in the past? Did it work? Why or why not?

The Bible tells us that we can change. It tells us that God wants to give us direction and a greater purpose for our lives. We have to begin by knowing who God is and who God wants us to be. We have to begin by following Jesus. If we choose to do those things, our lives can change, and we can make a positive difference in this world. Jesus said it this way:

A thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come so they may have life. I want them to have it in the fullest possible way. (John 10:10)

4. What do you think Jesus meant when He said that He wants those who follow Him to have life in the fullest possible way?

We don't have to wait until we are in heaven to have the life that God wants for us. It can start right here on earth. Jesus came to earth so we can have a meaningful and purpose-filled life. Despite everything we've ever done, we can have a brand-new life through Him. We see this over and over in the ways Jesus interacted with people in the Bible. He healed the blind man by the side of the road. He offered salvation to a woman others looked down on because of her race and her past. He invited a man who stole and cheated people to be one of His disciples. He changed their lives. He gave them new goals and a new direction.

Here is another example:

At sunrise he [Jesus] arrived again in the temple courtyard. All the people gathered around him there. He sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman. She had been caught committing adultery. They made her stand in front of the group. They said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught sleeping with a man who was not her husband. In the Law, Moses commanded us to kill such women by throwing stones at them. Now what do you say?" They were trying to trap Jesus with that question. They wanted to have a reason to bring charges against him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. They kept asking him questions. So he stood up and said to them, "Has any one of you not sinned? Then you be the first to throw a stone at her." He bent down again and wrote on the ground.

Those who heard what he had said began to go away. They left one at a time, the older ones first. Soon only Jesus was left. The woman was still standing there. Jesus stood up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Hasn't anyone found you guilty?"

"No one, sir," she said.

"Then I don't find you guilty either," Jesus said. "Go now and leave your life of sin." (John 8:2–11)

5. What do you think the woman thought was going to happen to her when the crowd grabbed her?

6. How would you have felt if you were the woman standing in front of Jesus? Circle the words that describe how you would have felt. Feel free to add your own words.

Scared	Angry	Frustrated	Shocked
Trapped	Hopeless	Ashamed	Surprised
Offended	Other:		

Jesus did not react to the woman in the way we might expect. He did not react the way the crowd expected, either. They were hoping that He would command them to stone her. Instead, He asked a question: "Has any one of you not sinned?"

7. How did the crowd react to that question? Why do you think they reacted that way?

Jesus asked the crowd if any of them had ever sinned. Remember the definition of sin we talked about in Chapter 1? We continually do things we should not do. We hurt others and we hurt ourselves. We act in ways we know are wrong. We do things that reflect the brokenness in the world. We do things that are the opposite of what God wants us to do. We do things that keep us from a real relationship with Him.

8. What would your answer be if Jesus asked you if you had never sinned? Could you have thrown a stone at the woman?

We learn from reading the Bible that Jesus Himself never sinned. He was the only person remaining with the woman at the end of the story. He could have thrown a stone at the woman. He could have given her the death sentence she deserved, according to the law.

But even though the woman was clearly guilty, Jesus forgave her. He told her that she was no longer guilty in God's eyes. He told her that she could have a different life. She did not have to keep living the life that brought her in front of Him. Her life did not have to continue to be one of judgment and shame. She could start again and do things differently.

9. How would you feel if someone told you that you were completely forgiven* for something serious that you did in your past?

10. If you were completely forgiven, would you think about yourself differently? Would you act differently? How would your life start to change?

The Bible tells us that a new life is possible. Christianity is built on one single radical idea: you don't have to stay the way you are.

You too can receive a verdict of "not guilty" from God and live a new life. In fact, that is the reason Jesus came to the earth. The Bible says, "God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world. He sent his Son to save the world through him" (John 3:17).

Sin is a part of our life, and it messes up every part of who we are and who we try to be. Jesus came to fix that.

But how does that happen? How does knowing Jesus and following Him change our lives? Think back to what we talked about in chapter 1. Adam and Eve sinned and brought pain, death and brokenness into the world, and that still affects the world today. But our lives don't have to stay that way. We can experience the life God wants for us now. We can begin to live the way God intended us to live when He created the Garden of Eden.

Jesus came to the earth to die on the cross and rise from the dead so that we can truly live (John 10:10). He can give us a life filled with freedom, hope and purpose, regardless of where we are or what we have done.

Remember the story of the prodigal son? God is waiting for you to come home. He is waiting to wrap you in His arms and call you His child.

When you choose to believe in God, admit you have sinned and accept what Jesus did for you on the cross, you become a member of God's family. You can be like the men and women who are part of God's story in the Bible. God can and will use you to change the world.

11. Have you accepted God's forgiveness and promise of a new life? If you have, how has it changed your life?

Please print your full name and address. (Please do not remove the covers. We need this information to give you credit for this course.)

 FIRST

 LAST

 ID#

INSTITUTION

 HOUSING

 STREET ADDRESS / PO BOX

CITY

STATE

 ZIP

WANT TO DO MORE?

Congratulations on completing this course! If you have at least three months left to serve in jail or prison, you may have time to do additional studies. We hope you will continue with Crossroads!

Please fill out the following information:

I expect to be released in:

0–3 months
 3–6 months
 6–12 months
 1–2 years
 More than 2 years

I will be transferred to another facility: Yes No

(If you are transferred, please send us the enclosed “I Have Moved” form with your new address.)

I will be going home: Yes No

(If you go home, please write to us from your home address. We can't send things to your home until you write to us from there.)

I would like Crossroads to send me a Bible: Yes No

(Crossroads provides free NIV Bibles to students who have at least three months left to serve in their sentence, if allowed by the student's facility.)