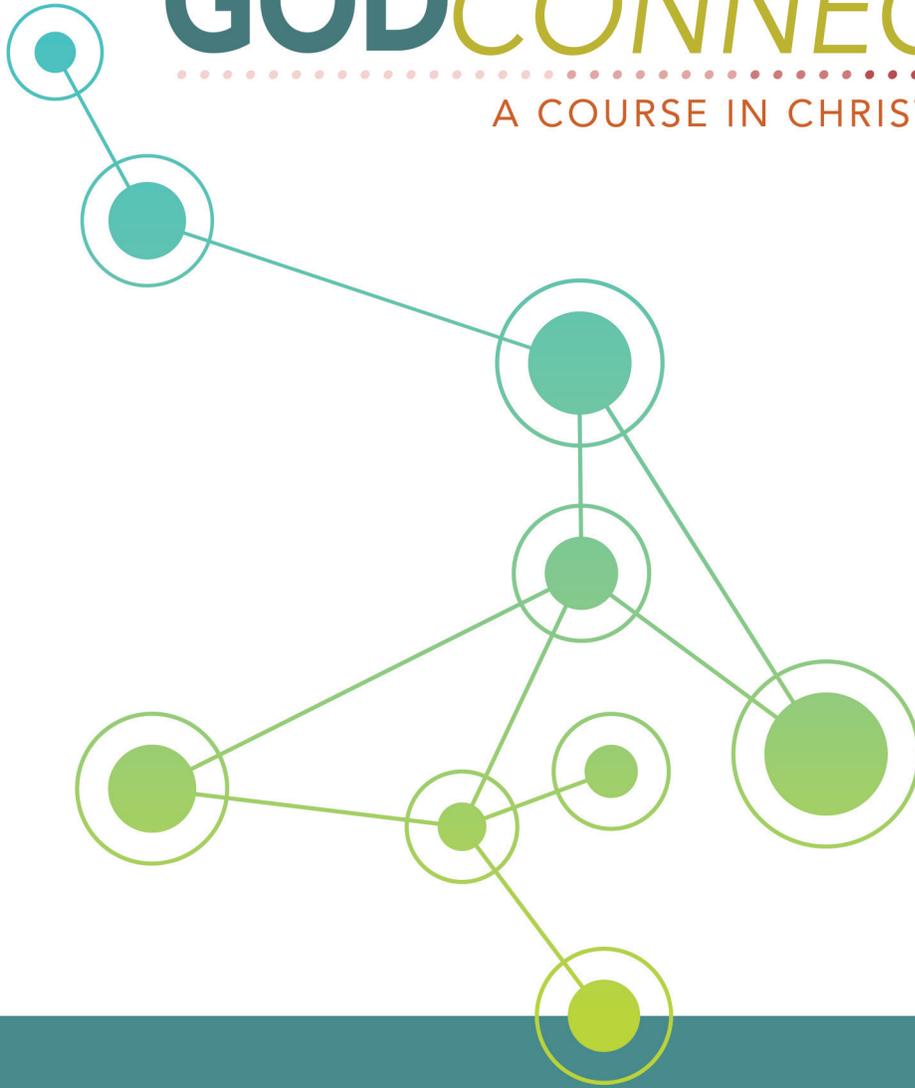


GODCONNECTS™

A COURSE IN CHRISTIANITY



LUTHERAN
HOUR
MINISTRIES

LHM.ORG/GODCONNECTS

DISCUSSION GUIDE - SESSION 1

USING THE DISCUSSION GUIDE

This is an interactive study guide. We designed it to be flexible so it will fit both group and personal use. It includes links, which provide extra information on Internet sites where you can browse and dig as deep as you want.

A PDF discussion guide containing all 12 sessions, as well as single session guides, are available at www.lhm.org/godconnects.

To find the discussion guide on the DVD, load it into your computer (not your DVD player). You can right click the menu. Push "Open" instead of "Play" and you will pull up a list of files, which includes the discussion guide.



ABOUT US

God Connects is a ministry of Lutheran Hour Ministries (LHM). As a Christian outreach ministry, LHM supports churches worldwide, producing Christian radio and TV programming for broadcast, Internet and print communications, dramas, music, and outreach materials—all designed to reach unchurched people in the United States and more than 30 countries around the world. Lutheran Hour Ministries' flagship program, **The Lutheran Hour**, airs weekly on more than 1,400 stations and the American Forces Network. To learn more about this long-running Gospel program and LHM's other ministry resources, go to www.lhm.org.

CONTACT US

We would love to connect to you. Call us at **1-855-JOHN316 (1-855-564-6316)** E-mail to lhmresponse@lhm.org.

INTRODUCTION

GodConnects: In a difficult and confusing world, God is connecting to you!

God, are You there?

Everyone, at some point, asks this question. It can come at moments of sterile reflection or in times of deep despair. "God, if You are there, why don't You show Yourself to me?" In this confusing world where authenticity is so elusive, it seems like we cannot connect to God.

We could not connect to God, but the good news is that God connects with us. He has been doing this from the beginning in amazing ways. The most direct way God connected to us is when He became one of us in Jesus Christ. When Jesus was on this earth, He was the very revelation of God as He taught and healed and loved.

Then to restore our connection to God which had been shattered because of sin, on the cross, Jesus willingly paid the penalty for our sins—in His own death! This is the most authentic, startling and determined love the world could have ever imagined.

Now God connects to us by revealing Himself in the Bible. This God-given book has an amazing story. It tells of God's constant and compassionate work to restore our relationship with Him.

GodConnects wants to share that story with you. *GodConnects* is a course that tells this unique, unequalled story. Whether you do not believe in Christ as Savior or want to deepen your faith in Him, as you delve into *GodConnects* you will explore what the Bible says about this remarkably loving God, and how this love gives direction and meaning to your life today and forever.

On this website, you can explore these questions of faith. You will find videos and other up-to-date media that take advantage of today's technology.

So let's get started

WHY JESUS?

Session 1: A Course on Christianity

Opening Prayer: Lord God, there are a lot of ideas floating around about who You are and what we have to do to be right with You. Lead me to Your truth. I pray in Jesus' Name. Amen.

Normally, life is pretty routine and ordinary. Distractions, aggravations and problems come along, but most times we can handle them on our own. But every so often we come across a problem too big to handle by ourselves. Questions arise. How do we fit into the universe? What does eternity look like for me?

We all get very busy with our lives. Still, in the back of our minds, when this life is over we want to know what happens in the next life—if *there is one!* On their own, people have come up with two basic ways to deal with their eternal fate: they either deny there is life after death, or they do their best to earn it on their own.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- List some life events you find too big to handle by yourself.
- Which of these events could you handle with some earthly help, and which are too big even for earthly help?

1.1. HOW DO PEOPLE DENY THE REALITY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF LIFE AFTER DEATH?

One solution is to deny the issue's significance. We are told death is a natural part of life, and we should embrace it. When we draw our last breath we will cease to exist. That's it. But at least we can take comfort knowing the cycle of life continues after us.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- What aspects of this idea could people find appealing?
- What is unsatisfying about it?

1.2. HOW DO SOME MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS DEAL WITH THE ISSUE OF LIFE AFTER DEATH?

Practically all faiths believe something awaits us on the other side of this life. Here are examples from three major world religions:

ISLAM - For Muslims, the purpose of life is to live in a way that pleases Allah—the Arabic word for God. This is done so they may gain paradise. In the end, a person's eternal fate is determined according to an accounting of his or his good deeds outweighing the bad. The name of this religion is rooted in the word "aslama" which means submission. The prophet Muhammad taught that peace can be achieved by submitting one's life to Allah. Muhammad (born in 570 A.D.) started the religion when he was angered by idolatry and immorality in Arabia. Using his foundational phrase, "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet," he waged "holy war," conquering most of Arabia, and purging it of other deities.

Islam's holy book, The Qur'an, contains Muhammad's teachings. It was written by Muhammad's followers after his death. The Qur'an elevates Muhammad, and it claims Jesus was his forerunner. It portrays Allah as a deity high above and detached from his material creation. The five pillars of Islam are the following:

- The Creed: "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet";
- Prayer, to be performed five times each day at appointed times;
- Almsgiving—2 ½ percent of all personal possessions;
- Fasting during Ramadan;
- Pilgrimage to Mecca.

These are the five mandatory practices of the Muslim life. Islam claims Allah is a God of reward and punishment, asserting that it is foolish to believe in a God of love or grace like Christians do.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- What is the appeal of Islam's insistence on moral living?
- Consider Islam's five pillars. How hard would it be for a Muslim to accomplish these each day?

HINDUISM - This is the world's third largest religion after Christianity and Islam. Hinduism teaches that the soul never dies, but is reborn in human or animal form each time the body dies. This cycle of death and rebirth is called reincarnation. Hindus may expect up to 10,000 reincarnations before spiritual perfection is attained. Hinduism grew out of the tribal cultures of India. It has many practices, philosophies and laws and does not have a single God. Hinduism believes when a person worships any god that praise is being received by the supreme God named Brahman. Deities are present in sculpted images; therefore, food and physical care is offered to these idols. You've probably heard of "karma" before. This rule states that our good and bad actions have consequences in this life and the next, affecting how our soul will be reborn at our next reincarnation. Once spiritual perfection is attained, the soul is united with the Supreme Being in total enlightenment and peace. Getting multiple chances at earthly life may sound wonderful at first, but Hindus see the downside of living in this ruined world. The goal of their faith is to live a life so exemplary you finally break free from the cycle of repeated reincarnations and become united with the Supreme Being forever.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- What appeal does reincarnation offer someone who is contemplating their own death?
- What would be the downside if we found ourselves reincarnated into this world over and over again?
- What is attractive about being united with the Supreme Being?

DIGGING DEEPER

- "The Quest for Experiencing the Divine: The Rise and Effect of Eastern Religions"
<http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/TheQuestforExperiencingtheDivingMasaki.pdf>

BUDDHISM - The focus in Buddhism is not about a relationship with a God; instead, it's about achieving freedom by totally letting go of all feelings and passions. That freedom is known as Nirvana. Zen is Japanese Buddhism. "Buddha" means "awakened one." Have you seen a statue of a heavy-set Buddha with a peaceful, satisfied look on his face? You are looking at Buddhism's founder, Siddhartha Gautama. Buddhism teaches an eight-fold path to this freedom: Right understanding, Right-directed thought, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness, and Right concentration. Does that sound like a lot of things to keep right?

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- Describe some of the strong feelings and passions that fill our lives with too much drama.
- Why would some people be drawn to the peace and freedom Buddhism features?
- What would be the downside of an eternity cut off from emotion and passion?

1.3. IS THE BAR SET TOO LOW?

One common trend in all religions, except Christianity, is the requirement of personal achievement—we must do something to reach perfect peace or attain God's favor. But this has some major problems. How do I know when I have been good enough? Since I am imperfect, why must the holy, sinless God lower His standards to accept the imperfect and sinful behavior of His followers? Let's read what the Bible says.

For You are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with You. The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes; You hate all evildoers. (Psalm 5:4-5)

Whoever keeps the whole Law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. (James 2:10)

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- According to the Bible, how far has God lowered the bar regarding what we must do if we are to earn our way to heaven?

1.4. WHAT ARE WE REALLY CAPABLE OF??

All religions, except Christianity, are based on humans accomplishing some requirement of God. However, the Bible tells us the truth about human capabilities in the third chapter of Romans.

As it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Now we know that whatever the Law says it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the Law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the Law comes knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:10-20)

Human beings are capable of doing things that seem wonderful and noble to us, but it is God alone who is perfectly holy and just. His absolute purity demands our absolutely purity if we are to live with Him in paradise after this life. Each of us is weighed down by sins that deserve God’s punishment.

1.5. WHAT IS GOD WILLING TO DO ABOUT IT?

Well, *everything!* Knowing we are powerless to save ourselves. He sent His Son Jesus to do something completely revolutionary. God’s eternal Son took our human nature upon Himself and—as our Substitute—kept God’s Law perfectly throughout His life. Then He made a great exchange by giving us His perfect life of obedience and taking from us every sin and failure. He carried them to the cross where He suffered their consequences in our place.

For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (Romans 3:21-24)

When Jesus rose from the dead after His death on the cross, He defeated death—the enemy we could never conquer—so that we could receive the gift of eternal life. Jesus said,

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die. (John 11:25b–26a)

While every other world religion, ideology and philosophy requires God lower His standards so people can measure up to go to heaven, Christianity maintains God’s perfect standards. It does this while offering a perfect Savior who rescued humanity from brokenness, pain, imperfection, failure and sin.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- How does it change your thoughts about God when you realize He kept the bar high on His perfect moral standards and still provided a way for us to be saved by what Jesus did on the cross for you?
- What does it mean to you to realize you don’t have to do anything to win God’s approval—that Jesus Christ your Savior has done it all for you?

1.6. WHAT IS GOD'S ULTIMATE PLAN?

We could not connect to God, but the good news is that God connects with us. He has been doing this from the beginning in amazing ways. To restore our connection to God which had been shattered because of sin, on the cross Jesus willingly pays the penalty for our sin—with His own death! This is the most authentic, startling and reckless love that could ever be imagined.

Compare the eternal life in paradise Jesus promises to the highest aspirations of other religions. We will live in perfect peace and harmony with all, while still enjoying the emotions and holy passions God created us to enjoy. We will live in a perfectly moral world where everyone loves and cares for one another. But, best of all, we will be forever connected to our God, without having to live thousands of lives to get there.

DIGGING DEEPER

- *How Can God Forgive Me?*, audio: (<http://media.lhm.org/lutheranhour/mp3s/QA8113PD.mp3>)
- *Reasons to Believe*, booklet: (<http://www.lhm.org/godconnects/diggingdeeper.asp#1.6>)
- *Forgiveness is a Choice*, booklet: (<http://www.lhm.org/godconnects/diggingdeeper.asp#1.6>)

Closing Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for being holy and perfect and providing a way through Your Son Jesus for me to be perfect too. Forgive me all my wrongs and give me peace now and always. In Jesus' Name I pray. Amen.