

HEAVEN SENT

LEADER'S GUIDE



Welcome to the *Heaven Sent* Discussion Group Leader's Guide. This guide is designed to be used with the *Heaven Sent* book. The idea is that group members read the story, then discuss the issues and implications.

Why the story?

Being able to discuss a story will allow young people to talk about important issues that, because they can be uncomfortable, might otherwise go unaddressed. The story allows young people to share opinions on characters, ask questions and reflect on situations that, because it's a story, are not as threatening as asking in reference to themselves or friends.

Why These Issues?

If you live in a Western culture, the members of your group live in a highly consumeristic, sexualised world. Every day advertising, magazine and friends are delivering a commodified view of life, including sex. Often the voice of the church is silent on these issues or gives a list of rules without explaining the reasoning. This can leave young people wondering if God and the church really are connected with—or have anything to say about—the everyday issues of life.

The issues raised in *Heaven Sent* include:

- Pictures of God
- Parents
- Peers
- Alcohol
- Sex
- Abortion
- Forgiveness

These issues can be complex and will require prayer and wisdom in the way they are worked through. The ground work is laid for exploring other issues later or as an extension to the study.

What Age?

While the book is targeted at late teens, many young people are dealing with issues of sex and alcohol at younger ages. Use your discernment and seek input from parents and other leaders to determine what age group should be part of these discussions.

Worldviews:

You will soon discover that these guides are all about shaping a biblical worldview. It sets about establishing a healthy biblical worldview and explores

the implications of this worldview for areas of life, including sex, alcohol and health. The early guides focus on establishing this worldview. The later studies apply a biblical worldview to everyday life. For this reason it would be useful to work through the topics in order. When we look at issues such as sex and alcohol without addressing the worldview, we can end up addressing behaviour without working through the thinking patterns that shape this behaviour.

Using The Guide:

The leader's guide includes material not in the participant's guide. This material is in the shaded boxes. Depending on your personal style, you can simply read the material, summarise it or find other material that makes the point. Maybe you can find current news stories that also help make the point.

Encourage your group members to read the story as there are a lot of thought-provoking issues raised that are not necessarily addressed in the guides. However, even if a group member has not read the book, they will still be able to participate in the discussion. Obviously, some members of your group will read the whole book within days—that's OK. However, they may need some refreshing on aspects of the story when they join together for group time.

Some of the guides contain larger sections of text that have been left in the participant's guides. You will probably not read this in the small group but rather summarise the idea. The material has been included in the participant's guide for later reading or for individual reflection.

Ideally, participants will have read the guides and thought through their answers before discussion time.

There are 13 guides, which provides for a whole quarter. If your group only plans to meet for a 10-week period, to match school terms, some of the later guides may be left out. Shape the process to fit your needs.

Each guide starts out with quotes from the story. This is to refresh group members about the issues Heaven is working through and set the context for the discussion. You don't have to read these in your group time; rather they will serve as a reminder of the story, if needed.

Big Idea:

The main point for each guide is the Big Idea. Underneath which there is a box for leaders that explains why this idea is important.

Group Activity:

This section includes some ice-breaker style activities to get the group interacting. They are designed to require no previous group or biblical knowledge. You might adapt these activities or think up new ones depending on your context.

Story:

This section briefly overviews the points of the story being addressed in that particular lesson. It usually includes questions relating to events in the story to open up discussion. Those who have not read the book will get an overview by listening to these answers allowing them to join in the discussion of the issues in the Explore section.

Explore:

This section includes facts, questions and illustrations to guide discussion on the topic.

There are quite a few questions provided. Don't feel that you have to get through all of them. The aim is to have young people understand the main idea and think through the implications for themselves. You may have just a few questions that stimulate discussion in your group. Don't end a good discussion in order to get through all the questions. Rather think through how your group is going in relationship to connecting with the big idea for that guide. You may wish to skip some questions or even add some of your own if you feel that will work better with your group.

Look:

This section of the guide explores a Bible passage/s that highlights aspects of the main idea. You will need to adapt how you work this section in relation to the biblical literacy of your group.

What Now:

This is the application section that explores the implications of what has been discussed for everyday life.

Go Deeper:

If group members would like to explore a topic a little more deeply, some useful resources are listed. These resources are mostly not written purposely for young people but are a useful starting point for those wanting to explore the concept more.

Enjoy coordinating your group. Pray lots for each member of your group, prepare well and ask God to work in and through you as you explore these important topics with your group.

HEAVEN SENT

Discussion Guide 1

“What Shapes You?”

Heaven is in control. She is intelligent, popular, keeps fit and has a clear plan for her next step. However, behind the seemingly perfect veneer, all is not as it seems. Heaven's dad is into keeping up appearances and covering over some very big cracks. Heaven's mum disengages out to her studio. She is being pressured by a boyfriend and continually questioned by friends. In frustration, Heaven resorts to another playlist.

What really drives Heaven? What factors have shaped her to make the choices she makes?

What about you? What makes you the person you are? What are the major influences—for good or bad—in your life? How have your parents shaped you? What about your friends and the media? How do you see the world?

Big Idea:

Everyone is shaped to some extent by their family and culture. We all have a worldview. What are the factors that shape you to be who you are?

This Guide is designed to get group participants thinking about the cultural environment they live in. Explore with the group the factors that shape them. The questions will give you a chance to establish where the members of your group are coming from, in terms of worldviews, before you head into some tricky topics.

Group Activity:

What Drives You?

Before your group arrives, write the names of three well-known but diverse celebrities on cards and attach them to hats. Have three people then wear the hats with the person underneath each name not knowing who they are. In turn, they are able to ask questions of the group. The first question must start with “Am I driven by . . . ?” (Options might include looks, power, fame, money, revenge, etc.) If the answer is yes, they get to ask another question. If no, the next person gets to ask until someone works out whose name is on their head. Then spend some time talking about what factors drive celebrity culture.

The Story:

“They were at it again. I turned up my iPod to drown out their voices. Unfortunately nothing could mask the slamming doors. How could two people who once loved each other enough to get married and have kids feel so much hate now?” (page 1).

- **Who do you think has the biggest impact on Heaven—her mum or her dad?**
- **What do you think Heaven’s parents taught her about relationships?**
- **Do you think Heaven’s view of the world is shaped more by her parents or by her friends?**
- **What would you say are the three main factors that shape Heaven’s picture of the world?**

Explore:

What is a Worldview?

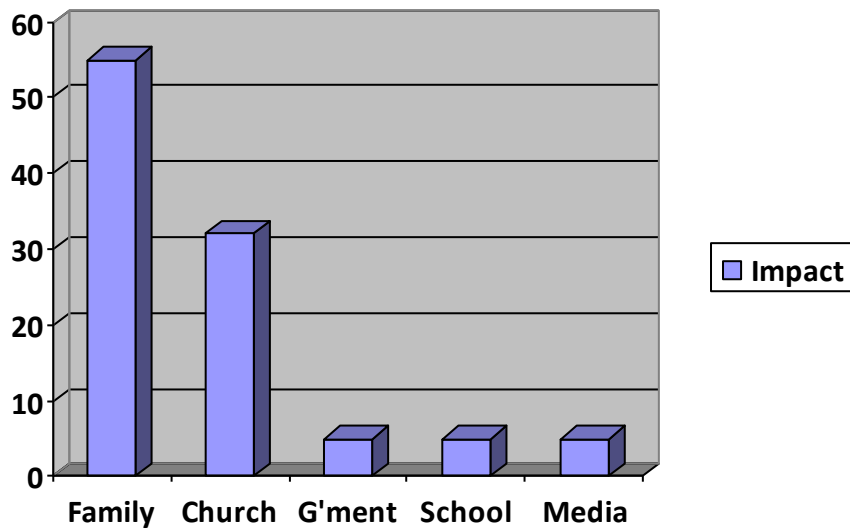
Did you know that everyone has a worldview? Your worldview is simply the grid you use to make decisions and work out what you will give your time and energy to. It is the ideas and beliefs you use to understand the world and go about life. Do you ever stop to think about your worldview and how it is shaped?

Your worldview is shaped by many things including:

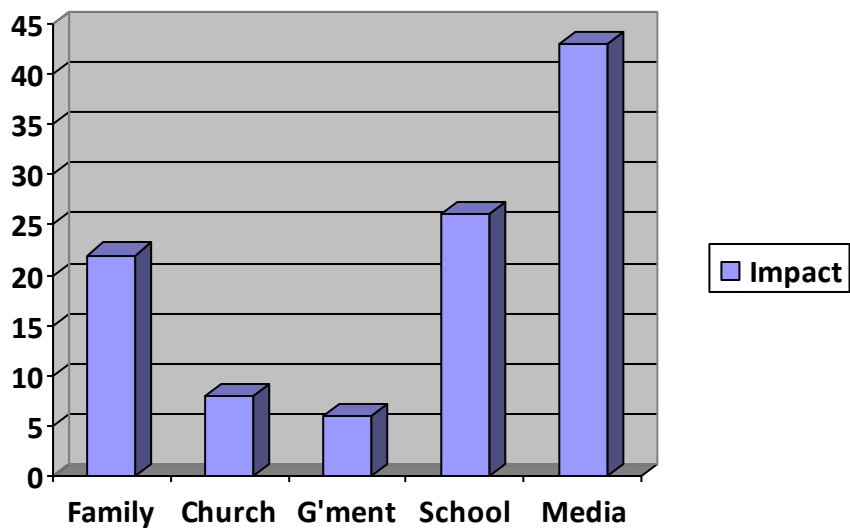
- Family
 - Friends
 - Church family—if you are part of one
 - Culture—especially through the media
 - Education
-
- **If you were writing a magazine article about the top 5 things that influence the attitudes of young people in your community (at your school, uni or workplace) what would you list as the top 5 starting with the factor you think has the most influence?**

The book *Consuming Youth* explains how, over time, the factors in Western culture that influence the worldview of church-attending teens have changed.

1900



2000



- Do you agree with what these graphs show?
- Do you think media is more powerful than church in shaping a teen's worldview?
- Why do you think family is not as important now as it used to be?

Heaven has not grown up as a Christian, even though she believes in a picture of God (we will discuss her picture of God in our next study).

- **What percentages would you give the factors that shape Heaven in the first few chapters of the book?**
 - **Family**
 - **Friends**
 - **Education (School)**
 - **Media (including iPod, movies, etc)**

Friends:

The people who researched the information shown in these graphs looked at how various social groups impact our worldviews. They didn't put friends in as a separate group. However friends can play a major part in shaping our worldviews.

- **How do you choose who your best friends will be?**
- **Do you think the opinions of your friends influence how you think?**
- **How much do you think Heaven is influenced by Kelly in the first few chapters?**
- **How much do you think she is influenced by Jarrod in the first few chapters?**
- **Do you think some people are more influenced by their friends than other people are? What do you think makes the difference?**

Building Blocks of a Worldview

Even if not a Christian, there are some common questions that shape a worldview. These questions include:

- Does God exist?
- If He does exist, what is He like?
- How and why was the world created? (How did I come about?)
- What is the nature and purpose of humanity? (What am I on this planet for?)
- What happens after we die?
- What is truth?
- If God exists, can I know Him?

Even if it doesn't seem you've thought too much about it, you have decided an answer to each of these questions—even if your answer is unsure. The answers you have for these questions have a lot to do with how you see the world and shape your worldview. The answers to these questions form building blocks for other questions that shape how you understand the world and act.

Heaven changes her picture of God and with it her worldview as the story goes on. It is possible to change your worldview and most times that starts with changing your answers to the worldview questions outlined above.

What Drives You?

Reality is you're going to give your energy to something or somebody, even if not by conscious choice. Your worldview helps you decide what you will give your life to. Maybe it's your studies, shopping, friends or body image. All sorts of motivations drive people to go about life like they do. Many people are driven by materialism, guilt, anger or the need to please people. Deep down, we are all driven by something. Mostly it has to do with what we think life is all about, why we are here and who we think we are.

- **What would you say are the top three factors that drive people in our society?**
- **What do you think your friends would say are the top three factors that drive you?**
- **If in the future an archaeologist were to study your social media sites, text messages, credit card statements and diary what would they conclude your priorities were?**

Today's Most Common Worldview:

The most common worldview in Western society is consumerism. Consumerism tells us that happiness comes in things and experiences. In consumerism, people look for meaning in products.

- **Would you agree that most people today have a consumer worldview?**
- **Why do you think our society is so driven by image?**
- **Do you think the consumer worldview impacts how we treat other people?**
- **Do you think the consumer worldview impacts what we think about God?**

Introduce what a consumeristic worldview is. This is an important concept to work through as our later discussions on sex highlight how society's attitudes towards sex reflect consumer values.

The most common worldview in western society today is "Consumerism." Consumerism says that we are on this planet for ourselves and that meaning comes in things. Consumerism basically says that Time=Money=Things=Happiness. In this grid whatever takes my time takes my happiness. We end up trusting in money and things to deliver meaning.

In consumerism, we make everyone and everything a product to be used. The way most people think about sex these days is a product of the consumer worldview—we consume other people. The guys on the football team at Heaven's school see the girls as a physical product to be consumed rather than as whole people (we'll talk about this more later).

Advertising keeps reminding us that we need more things to make us happy and that we are not good enough with what we have or who we are now. Each day the media will give you more than 3000 messages that tell you to get more things if you want to be happy.

It is a framework, a formation system, an entire worldview. It tells us how to live and how to act. It speaks to our sense of identity, it shapes our personality. It tells us what to love, what to commit to, and what to have hope in. It is a virus that eats our faith from the inside out. This virus is the allure of the hyper-real world (Mark Sayers, *The Trouble With Paris*, Thomas Nelson, 2008, 5).

In the consumer worldview, even God—if someone believes in Him—is there to be consumed and to give us more things. Consumerism puts us at the centre.

Look:

In Romans 12, Paul talks about worldviews.

At the end of Romans 11, Paul describes how great God is. The right response, he says, is to make God the centre of everything.

Read Romans 12:1-2.

The Message says:

“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work and walking around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for Him. Don’t become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognise what He wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you” (*Romans 12:1-2, The Message*).

- **What do you think it means to be conformed to the patterns of this world?**
- **What do you think it means to be changed from the inside out?**

In the rest of Romans 12, Paul talks about worshipping, serving with what you’ve been made good at, making space to connect with God, connecting with other people in your church family and even sharing with your enemies. The worldview Paul explains makes no sense to the consumer worldview most people have today.

- **What do you think stops people “fixing their attention on Jesus”?**

What Now?

The challenge Jesus gives us is to be in the world but not of it. In Luke 12, Jesus reminds us that He knows we need clothes and have bills to pay. However these things should not be the goal of our life. Life is really about “being rich toward God” (Luke 12:21). When we start with knowing that we exist for

God's glory, that He made us to live life with Him, we see life and the world differently. This is the starting point of a biblical worldview.

Reflection:

- **What do you think it means to love God with all your heart?**

Go Deeper:

Some good books on consumerism are:

Mark Sayers, *The Trouble with Paris*, Thomas Nelson, 2008.

John Berard, James Penner and Rick Bartlett, *Consuming Youth, Leading Teens Through Consumer Culture*, Zondervan, 2010.

To learn more about worldviews see:

Ty Gibson's "Worldviews" digma clip at www.digma.com

George Barna, *Think Like Jesus*, Thomas Nelson, 2003.

A Spectator's Guide to Worldviews: Ten Ways of Understanding Life. Blue Bottle Books, 2007.

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Discussion Guide 2

“Pictures of God”

“Living with a mother like mine, you got a fair exposure to various belief systems. She’d made us go to Sunday school for a few years when we were younger. She told us it was good to be open-minded and learn about all the different religions” (page 158).

“I knew about Christians . . . I didn’t need that kind of Christian ‘love’ right now. The whole ‘I love you but I want to kill you’-thing God had going on was rather unappealing” (page 160).

Although not a churchgoer, like most people, Heaven already has a picture of God. This guide looks at how we shape our pictures of God and then explores the possibilities of a loving God.

Big Idea:

God is in love with you and wants to live life with you.

The aim of this guide is to have group members think through their picture of God and how that picture came about. The guide then moves on to paint a picture of God’s love. Many people have pictures of God that portray Him as harsh and judgmental. This guide moves people from a harsh picture to one of a God who seeks a unique loving relationship.

Group Activity:

Have each person in the group write down their definition of the word love. Put all the definitions in a bowl and choose one person who reads the definitions and tries to match them to who he/she thinks wrote that definition.

The Story:

Heaven does not give God much consideration until she shifts to New Zealand. She had learnt some things about God in her time in Sunday school and as her mum exposed her to various worldviews. However, her overall picture of God is of a distant judge, summed up strangely as “God loves

you—He wants to kill you." Unfortunately many people picture God as harsh, angry or disinterested, if they believe He exists at all. As Heaven gets to know her relatives in New Zealand, Brad and a church family, she gets a different picture of God.

- **If you had to choose an animal to represent an aspect of God's character, what would you choose and why?**
- **Why do you think so many people are scared of God?**
- **How do you think God is generally portrayed in the media?**

Explore:

Developing a Picture of God:

Sometimes people do not think having a dynamic relationship with God is possible because, like Heaven, they have a scary picture of who God is. Satan wants us to have the wrong picture of God and see Him as a "severe judge" rather than a loving father (see Ellen White, *Steps To Christ*, page 11). Your picture of God is usually shaped by your relationship with your father here on earth. For some people, this is helpful in growing a relationship with God. In Heaven's case, this made things difficult. Heaven's dad was largely uninvolved and seemingly cared only about outward appearances and performance. For Heaven, growing a relationship with God would mean rethinking her whole picture.

Some people do not think a "relationship" with God is a good idea as most relationships they have seen have been hurtful or controlling. Our ability to view a relationship with God in a positive way is closely connected to the quality of our parents' marriage. In Heaven's case, her parents' marriage was not healthy and didn't seem to have a lot of love. This type of marriage can leave children distrustful of any relationship, including one with God. In this case, we need to rethink our picture of God and give Him a go to see that He can be trusted and that we can grow an enjoyable, close, dynamic relationship with Him.

- **What pictures of God do you think you have received from your parents? What parts do you think are valuable and what might you need to re-shape?**
- **What other factors do you think have shaped your picture of God?**

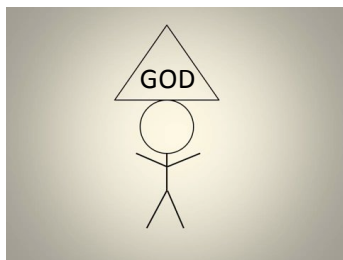
- **If Heaven asked you what God was like, how would you reply?**

Common Picture of God

In his book *With*, Skye Jethani describes some common pictures of God:

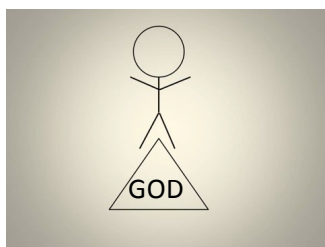
1. Under God

People who live life under God have a picture of God as just having lots of rules. They think that to get God's blessing, you need to do all the right things. It's a way of trying to control God. Sadly, when things go wrong, as they do, they blame God for not doing His part.



2. Over God

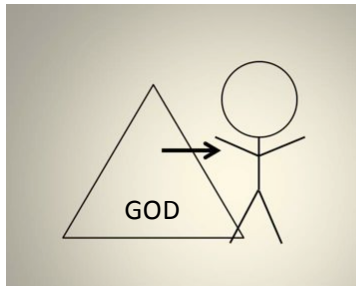
These people have a picture of God based on principles rather than a relationship. God gets taken out of the picture. The extreme of this is atheism. Christians with an "over" picture might believe God exists but they do not think He is interested in them. They might read the Bible and Christian books but they are looking for principles rather than a relationship. Principles are important but should not be our primary picture of God.



3. From God

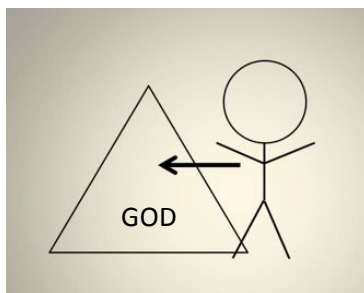
Some people treat God as a big cosmic Santa Claus who they don't really know or really care to know but from whom they want good things. This is the consumer picture of God where God exists to give us things. Sure, God does bless us and every good thing does come from Him, but this is not the Bible's main picture of God. In the "from" God picture, you don't have to change

your dreams—you just get a version of God who will make that happen for you. This picture ends up with God existing to make us better consumers.



4. For God

This picture is all about serving God. Serving God is important but, if serving Him becomes more important than being with Him, the picture gets muddled. Some people get more excited about God's mission than about God.

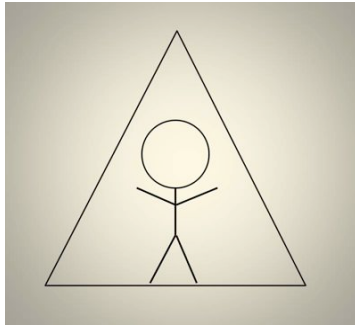


- **Which picture of God do you think is the most common?**
- **Which picture do you think Heaven has of God at the start of the book?**

Other people see God as the big policeman who is watching everything they do to see if He can catch them doing something wrong. Some people feel that God is too “holy” for them and that they are not good enough for Him. Sadly, many people think they are leaving God but really they are leaving a bad picture of Him. God chooses to love us as we are and wants to have a relationship with us where He can work in and through us.

The Answer = With

The Bible paints a picture of a God who wants to be “with” His people. Isaiah 43:1-5 and Psalm 23:1-4 are some of the many passages in the Bible that describe God wanting to be with you.



Think about the two brothers in the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-31. *If you are in a group that is unfamiliar with the Bible, you may need to summarise this story.* In this story, the father represents a picture of God. What picture did the younger son have? What picture did the older son have? Both sons had missed the idea in verse 31. For the father, the big deal was being with his boys. He appreciated the older son's obedience but being with his boy was more important. His younger son's disobedience would have disappointed him but, once again, the big deal was being with his boy.

God Is In Love With You

God is head over heels in love with you. Over and over again, in the Bible, God reminds you that you're His child and that makes you incredibly valuable. The DVD Heaven watched at her auntie's home reminded her that we are His children and that He wants to hold us close as we go through life. A dynamic relationship with God starts with knowing that God—for reasons we will never fully understand—loves you and desperately wants a relationship with you.

God uses His powers to love you. He knows everything about you. He knows you better than you know yourself. God can be wherever you are and loves it when you invite Him to be with you in what you do. He can spend the day with you in your classroom, on the sports field or on the computer.

It's incredible but true that God—the most powerful force in the universe—didn't just make you, He wants to spend time with you. God loves you so much that He wants to be with you in everything that you do. He is with you in all the good times and feels sad with you when things don't work out right. Always remember that God is in love with you.

“God is on bended knee before you. His arms are outstretched, right palm open to invite movement toward Him, left hand tightly clinched with hopeful passion.” (Ty Gibson, *An Endless Falling In Love*, Pacific Press, 2003, page 129).

Jesus Shows Us God:

Our clearest picture of God is seen in Jesus. Through Jesus, we can know what God is like. Jesus says, “I loved you enough to become one of you.”

- **How does it make you feel when you remember that God is in love with you?**
- **What is your favourite story about Jesus and what does it tell you about God?**

Changing Your Picture of God

“Like a father, God takes us in his arms, holds us close and stays with us. I thought of my father—clearly he wasn't anything like God! Anyway, the guy talking said God says he doesn't expect us to be perfect and he is close to the broken hearted. That he will be with us and show us the way home. *It was beautiful—if only it were true.* . . .

“*But if their God was truly like that . . . I pushed the thought aside and squared my shoulders*” (page 164).

“*Umm God, if you are there and you can fix this . . . will you?*” (page 221).

In the story, Heaven changed her picture of God. She learnt about God but, more importantly, saw a new picture of God modelled through people who loved Him.

Just because you might have a messed-up picture of God from your parents, teachers or church doesn't mean it has to be this way. It might take a little while to get a new picture from your head to your heart. Why not start

painting a picture of God in your mind that reflects God's love for you and His desire to be with you?

Look:

Psalm 139

If you are in a group, have each person choose one picture of God or idea about God that is expressed in Psalm 139.

- **Why did you choose that picture of God and how does it make you feel?**

What Now:

God Gives You The Choice

Too often, we can live life with no regard for God's perspective of us. Even sadder is that instead of looking to God for our meaning and fulfillment we chase the next thing that promises to fill the void. It might be a new body shape, car or relationship—each promising a sense of fulfillment but none delivering. There is nothing inherently wrong with these things, they are just not designed to give us ultimate meaning and purpose.

The same God who made the world offers to remake your life. He longs to share the everyday moments of life with you. God did not make you to be a puppet, with strings for Him to pull. That would make you His toy. Rather, He made you with reason and the power to choose so that He could have a relationship with you. He does not force a relationship. God's desire is to be invited into your everyday situations and do life deeply with you.

- **What do you think are the top three things that get in the way of growing in your relationship with God?**
- **What do you think it means to love God with all your heart?**
- **If you cut back using the internet or phone one hour a week, how could you use this time to connect with God?**
- **How do you feel when you read that God wants to work in and through your life?**

Go Deeper:

Watch Rob Bell, Nooma 01 "Rain"

Watch Ty Gibson, "Unforced" clip at digma.com

Ty Gibson, *A God Named Desire*, Pacific Press, 2010.

Skye Jethani, *With*, Thomas Nelson, 2011.

Ben Maxson, *Steps To Discipleship*, General Conference Stewardship Department, 2010.

Ellen White, *Steps To Christ—Youth Edition*.

HEAVEN SENT

Discussion Guide 3

“Is This Wise?”

“I glanced at my watch and sat back on the toilet to wait. Two minutes felt like forever. I thought of all the things that had led to this point. If only I’d just avoided one of them” (page 112).

“How could I have sabotaged my life like this?” (page 114).

Big Idea:

Life is full of decisions—ask “Is this wise?”

This guide looks at what it means to make “wise” decisions. Most poor decisions are preceded by seemingly smaller unwise choices. While there is no choice that ever justifies rape, Heaven still rethinks the “what ifs” of many choices she has made. This guide prompts people to ask the “Is this wise?” question rather than is this simply right or wrong.

Group Activity:

The wisdom radio show:

Choose one person in the group to play the role of a “life coach” on a pretend radio show. (Depending on the dynamics of the group, other people could take turns being the “life coach” but be careful that this activity does not get uncomfortable for more introverted personalities.) Other members in the group take turns to “call” in with scenarios. These may be made up on the spot or pre-written and handed out (keep things a little bit light). The “life coach” then has to give “wise” advice on the scenarios. Members in the “listening” group are asked to rate the advice on a scale of 1-10.

The Story:

Like any young person, Heaven has many decisions to make. She is planning to be a doctor; she studies hard and keeps fit. She is also making decisions about her relationship with Jarrod, alcohol and who she is.

While there is never an excuse for rape, Heaven does reflect on a bunch of decisions that, in hindsight, she may have made differently.

Explore:

We all have decisions to make—and we make thousands of them every day. Getting out of bed, eating, getting dressed, driving . . . Our life is full of decisions. Most decisions are no-brainers, but other decisions have much greater consequences.

What grid do you use to decide what is a good or bad decision?

- **What's the most important decision you've made today?**
- **What's the hardest decision you've made today?**
- **Can you think of any current news stories that highlight a poor decision?**
- **What decision could have made this story turn out differently?**

Every major poor decision usually has a bunch of smaller unwise decisions leading up to it.

A person who cheats on their partner has usually made a bunch of unwise choices leading up to the cheating.

A person who ends up going to gaol for stealing has usually made a whole bunch of unwise choices leading up to the poor decision that results in punishment.

At any point, a wise decision in one of the seemingly smaller choices may have changed the direction things were headed.

- **If you were writing the dictionary, how would you define "wisdom"?**
- **Do you think there is a difference between being knowledgeable and being wise?**
- **Would you say Heaven is a wise or unwise person? Why or why not?**

Is This Wise?—The Wisdom Grid

There is a difference between being clever and wise. Clever people can get out of spots that wisdom would not have got them into in the first place. Wisdom is making good choices in the little decisions before things get too complicated.

Wisdom provides a decision-making filter for all areas of your life—your love life, your career, your finances, your driving, everything. Rather than ask is a particular action right or wrong, ask “Is this wise?”

While nobody plans to mess up their lives, the problem is few people have a plan not to. That is, we don’t put the necessary safeguards in place to ensure a good ending.

Fooling Ourselves

You and I are good at self-deception and justifying why a little decision doesn’t matter: “This won’t hurt anyone”; “I’ll only do it once”; “I’ll be careful”; “I can handle it.” We can justify decisions and make reasons to explain to ourselves why it’s not really wrong—even though deep down we already know it’s unwise. If it wasn’t technically “wrong,” then it must be “right,” right?

Some things might not be necessarily wrong but they might not be wise. How close can I get to the line between right and wrong, without actually doing something wrong? How far over the line between right and wrong can I go without experiencing consequences? How close can I get to sin without actually sinning? We think we can dance on the edge of disaster and beat the odds.

Why are people prone to making poor moral decisions? Because something always whispers to us that our situation is unique: “Nobody has ever felt this way before”; “I can handle it, I’m not like everyone else”; “That statistic doesn’t apply to me”; or “I know what’s best for me.”

All along wise people are asking, “Is this wise?” As the consequences of a decision get larger, the wise person still asks the same question—“Is this wise?”

- **Who is someone who comes to mind when you think of a wise person? What about them makes you think they are wise?**

Look:

The Bible's book of Proverbs is a collection of sayings about what it means to be wise or foolish.

"Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding. For she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you can desire compares to her" (Proverbs 2:13-15).

Choose a chapter of Proverbs and read some of the wise sayings:

- **What did you learn about wisdom from the chapter?**
- **Why do you think the Bible includes this book of wise sayings?**

Look at what Paul writes about wisdom in Ephesians 5:15-17:

*"Therefore be careful how you walk, **not as unwise men but as wise**, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is."*

- **What do you think is the biggest difference between an unwise and wise person?**

Jesus tells a story about a wise man and a foolish man building their houses. The wise built on the rock, while the foolish built on the sand. Both ended up with houses, but when the storms came the foolish man's house fell down.

- **Why do you think Jesus told this story?**
- **What do you think the rock represents?**
- **What do you think the storms represent?**
- **How would you describe your foundations?**

What Now:

Wisdom starts with God.

"For the Lord gives wisdom, and from His mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Proverbs 2:6).

“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him” (James 1:5).

- **What do you think stops people asking God for wisdom?**
- **If you were all of a sudden able to choose anything you wanted what would you choose?**

Solomon was given that very choice and chose wisdom (see 1 Kings 3:5).

Wisdom begins when we recognise that God is God—and we're not—and then we respond by asking Him for wisdom.

God desires that your life be a masterpiece that reflects His greatness and your uniqueness.

- **What's stopping you asking God for wisdom now?**

Go Deeper:

Andy Stanley, *The Best Question Ever*, Multnomah, 2004.

Bill Hybels, *Making Life Work*, IVP, 1998.

HEAVEN SENT

Discussion Guide 4

“Keeping In Shape”

“The alarm seemed to go off as soon as I closed my eyes. I pulled on my running clothes, dragged my hair back into a rough ponytail and grabbed a banana. Slipping silently out the front door, I did some stretching while waiting for Jarrod to arrive” (pages 29-30).

Big Idea:

People look after their bodies for a whole lot of reasons. The way and why we look after our bodies says a lot about who we are.

While this guide focuses on health, it is an important step in establishing the fact that we belong to God. The principles outlined in this guide establish some foundations for coming guides that address sexuality.

Group Activity:

Save up a range of sports store catalogues, advertisements for gyms or newspaper health sections. Have people cut out pictures of “health” and make a collage on a sheet, or sheets of paper.

- **What do you notice about the age of people in the collage and why do you think this is?**
- **Why do you think the people in the collage are into fitness?**

The Story:

Heaven runs most mornings and is one of the best athletes at her school. As things get increasingly complicated for Heaven she still “escapes” for her run.

- **What do you think motivates Heaven to run early in the morning?**
- **Why do you think exercise gear has become one of the fastest growing fashion categories in Australia?**

Explore:

People exercise for many reasons.

For some it is to get the right body so they can be sexually attractive. Magazines like *Men's Health* focus on biceps, chests and abdominals so as to be more able to "get girls." In fact a lot of guys go to the extremes of supplements—even illegal steroids—to get the right body. The ironic thing is they become extremely unhealthy by taking the drugs.

Other people are worshipping their own body image. Mark Sayers points out that once people used to get up early in the morning to do a daily devotional time with God. Today, people still get up early to do devotions but are worshipping themselves (see *The Trouble With Paris*, pages 38-39). Our western society worships 25 year olds. Old people remind us of how shallow the consumer worldview is. Ageing and death threaten the consumer worldview but showing how much stuff you accumulate is still not able to stop death. Sadly, it is only as some people get old that they realise the game they have been playing for all their life really does not matter. Twenty-five year olds are young and usually have spending money. We try to develop little girls early to be 25 and once they go past 25, we provide operations and all sorts of products to try to keep them young. Often exercise is a part of trying to keep the look our society worships.

Others are trying hard to fit in and be accepted, while still others have bought into the reality TV message that transformation is about a new body shape. Don't worry about sorting through your hurts, problems and worldview—simply get a new body.

For some people exercise is a stress release and for others it is a place to be in control when everything else seems out of control.

- **Can you think of any other reasons why people get obsessed by fitness?**
- **Do you think it's important to stay fit? If so, why?**

For Heaven, staying fit is about being in control but also it seems about staying sharp so she can get the best marks possible academically and win athletically.

This does not mean we should stop exercise! It is important to be healthy. However, it is worth thinking about why we do it.

What does it mean to keep fit?

Looking after our bodies is more than just exercise. Des Cummings has written a book that explains how health is about a whole lot of factors (*Creation Health Discovery*, Review and Herald, 2003). His acronym is CREATION. Here's what CREATION stands for:

C = Choice

Making healthy choices is the key to lifestyle improvement. This step includes forming healthy habits, setting meaningful goals and choosing better life balance.

R = Rest

The stress and pressures of life can accumulate over time and create a generalised "dis-ease" with life. Rest includes good sleep, taking time to relax during the day and experiencing Sabbath rest for a day each week.

E = Environment

Everything that affects the senses—sight, smell, sound, touch and taste—influences health either positively or negatively. Environment is what lies outside our bodies yet affects what takes place inside us.

A = Activity

Activity should be enjoyable and an integral part of your lifelong health. Activity includes stretching, muscle development and aerobic activity.

T = Trust

Our faith, beliefs and hopes affect our health. Trust is about living life around the biblical purposes of growing in understanding and applying God's word, connecting with God and others, serving, sharing and worshipping.

I = Interpersonal Relationships

Knowing you have the support of others can fortify your resolve and contribute to improved health. Conversely, loneliness or toxic relationships can contribute to a downward spiral in overall health.

O = Outlook

A positive mental attitude colours our life perspective and influences how we view our world and the people in it. It also affects the amount of hope and joy we experience.

N = Nutrition

Nutrition is the fuel that drives our bodies. A balanced diet produces energy and overall health. Take time to evaluate your food intake and remember even small improvements, done on a regular basis, can multiply the health benefits many times over.

In *The Ministry of Healing*, Ellen White outlines the importance of pure air, sunlight, rest, exercise, water, hygiene and trust in God as the key components for being healthy. While balance is the key, too often the key goes out the window and our bodies suffer the consequences.

Bellock and Breslow's well-known research highlights seven healthy lifestyle habits (see "Relationship of Physical Health Status and Health Practices," *Preventive Medicine* 1, 1972, page 419):

- Breakfast
- Minimal snacking
- Six to eight hours sleep
- No smoking
- Alcohol avoidance
- Regular exercise
- Healthy weight

They claim that at age 40 we can have a health age of only 27 if we follow all seven habits. If we follow two habits or less, our health age will be 59 when we are only 40.

Like many aspects of life, we can abuse, neglect and ignore aspects of our health and forget the price we pay. We might say, "I'm in a hurry, its too much trouble, I'll just get something quick from the take-away" or say yes to "Can I offer you more cream with that dessert?"

- **What areas of Bellock and Breslow's list do you think are most ignored by teenagers?**
- **Why do you think so many people smoke when they know it is destroying their health?**
- **Why do you think studies show that trusting in God is linked to being healthier?**

Look:

"Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well" (3 John 2).

The Bible gives us a different reason for looking after our health. God has given you an incredible body so you can use it to honour Him.

1 Corinthians 6:19, 20 says, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?"

Similarly, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:20, "You were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body."

We are infinitely valuable, yet often are more concerned with how well our computer is performing than we are with the health of our body.

What Now:

Being physically healthy is part of being spiritually healthy. The way we treat our bodies impacts our moods, energy and mental sharpness. We allow God to work in and through us more effectively when we are looking after our bodies.

Sure you will get older, sin ensures we are going to look older, get unwell and die (unless Jesus comes first). However at each point in life we can be as healthy as we can for that stage and allow God to use us to our best potential at that time.

Being healthy is a part of worshipping God. When we forget God, we end up worshipping what He has created—and often that is ourselves. God wants to work in and through you and staying healthy is a part of that plan.

- **What do you think it means to honour God with your body?**
- **Does seeing your body as God's dwelling place change the way you treat it?**
- **What is one step you can take in the next 24 hours toward being a healthier version of you?**

Why not make a plan now to improve your health? For extra support, why not make a deal with someone else and hold each other accountable?

Go Deeper:

Des Cummings, *CREATION Health Discovery*, Review and Herald, 2003.

Dan Buettner, *The Blue Zones*, National Geographic Society, 2010.

Gary Thomas, *Every Body Matters*, Zondervan, 2012.

HEAVEN SENT

Discussion Guide 5

“Why and Why Not”

Jarrood to Heaven: “And now . . . you are mine!” (page 7).

“My parents are going away for the weekend. Would you like to come over and spend the night?” . . . “What, don’t you love me?” . . . “Everyone else is doing it!” . . . “The guys are laughing at me ‘cause I’m the only one not getting any” (page 7).

Kelly: “Now tell me again why you don’t want to sleep with that gorgeous boy?” (page 10).

Kelly: “Besides, I’m sure you’ll have lots of guys before you decide to settle down.”

Heaven: “I’m not sure I want lots of guys. ”

Kelly: “What?” (page 11).

“I remember nothing of it—nothing! My first time will forever be lost in a haze of alcoholic stupor taken by a boy who just couldn’t wait . . . wouldn’t wait. Didn’t care enough about me to wait. Too busy thinking about himself and the opinion of his teammates to wait” (page 85).

“It was clear to me now. He never really loved me at all. He just loved what he could get from me. I felt the tears bubble over and run down my cheeks. Angrily, I tore the locket from my neck and threw it in the top draw. Then I fell on my bed, sobbing with empty disappointment” (page 86).

Big Idea:

God created sex for a reason—sadly, our society sells a cheap version of sex that falls short of God’s design.

This guide looks at how worldviews are expressed through sex. The consumer worldview treats people as products to be used. A biblical worldview sees sex as a spiritual expression of God’s oneness. This concept might sound strange to young people at first. Too often sex has been seen as “worldly” rather than God’s invention. The guide then looks at God’s purpose for sex.

Group Activity:

Provide recent copies of girls/women's magazines. Make a list of the key messages the magazines give about sex.

The Story:

"The pressure for sex seemed to be everywhere. People were either having it when they shouldn't—like my Dad—or feeling entitled to it—like Gavin and Jarrod. The question I had to answer was, Would I? And if so, when? I didn't know how much longer Jarrod would be willing to wait. How would I feel if he dumped me for Cathy Davis? It was clear she was willing" (page 57).

Heaven lives in a sex-charged society. It seems odd not to be "doing it." While Heaven is not a Christian, she still has her reasons for not being sexually active. However, it seems her reasons are being questioned and torn down at every turn.

- **Why do you think there is so much pressure on young people today to be sexually active?**
- **Why do you think our society has become so obsessed with sex?**
- **What impact do you think movies, magazines and easy access to pornography have on our society when it comes to the messages they give about sex?**

Explore:**Soaked With Sex**

In *What's Happening To Our Girls*, Maggie Hamilton describes how teenagers now live in a "sex-saturated world." "Peers expect girls to be sexually knowledgeable and experienced. Those who aren't are seen as 'uncool,' 'repressed,' out of the loop. From my research, I have no doubt that peer pressure is one of the reasons why more girls are pushing the sexual boundaries. As one school counsellor pointed out: 'To be called a virgin is now a disparaging term'" (page 138).

- **Would you agree with Maggie Hamilton when she says our teenagers are being "overstimulated, oversold and oversexed"?**

We live in a world soaked with sex. It seems that, in place of God, our society instead worships sex. Our newsagents, internet and advertising are full of opportunities to worship sex. The message is: "Do whatever feels good now." However, sex is way more important than 'in the moment' feelings. The way in which your sexuality is managed will have a huge impact on the way life unfolds—it is one of the biggest issues you will face in life.

Worldviews:

The way we treat sex has a lot to do with our worldview. In a consumer worldview where life is all about me, we end up making everything and everyone a commodity. Other people are things to be used for my good. Sadly, most people treat sex this way. People treat each other as a commodity to be used for their own gratification. Most sex today is selfish—and this is the exact opposite of God's plan.

Consumerism is about instant gratification, about feeling good now—credit cards often work like this. Why worry about the other person, why worry about the implications for the future when you can "meet your needs" now? Sadly, the long-term value of sex can be robbed by short-term gratification. A girl or guy gets treated as a thing for short-term enjoyment that can be discarded when it is not meeting my needs anymore or when I feel like moving on to another "commodity" that might meet my needs better. Advertising reminds you that there will always be another product to meet your needs better than the last one—sadly, we do the same with people. The truth is people are incredibly valuable—every person is created by God, they are not just a face and a figure.

As God has been removed from our worldview—whether through atheism or still believing in Him but putting Him aside—people have started worshipping themselves. Sex has become one way of doing that. When we believe things just come about without God and humans are simply complicated animals, we treat sex as a merely physical need and miss the whole spiritual meaning that God created in sex.

When we have a worldview that puts others first, thinks about life in view of eternity, sees value in looking out for each other and building other people up, we will have a different view of sex.

Our society claims it is sexually liberated. However, in pursuit of having "more fun," people are left feeling confused, hurt, hollow and used—and sex is left as merely physical.

- **Why do you think Heaven's friend Kelly is so keen for Heaven to have sex?**
- **Why do you think Jarrod is constantly pressuring Heaven for sex?**
- **Do you think Jarrod is thinking about Heaven's wellbeing when he pressures her? What does this say about their relationship?**
- **Do you think it can ever be "just sex"?**

Why Not?

Most sex education classes remind us about the dangers of sex, such as sexually transmitted disease and pregnancy—and, yes, girls can get pregnant the first time. However, while these consequences are real and serious, this still misses the bigger implications.

Sex outside of marriage can rob people of full sexual enjoyment later in marriage. It can lead to unwanted comparisons and flashbacks and a diminished picture of the value of sex. But even this is not the main reason why God calls us to guard our sexual boundaries carefully.

Sex Is Spiritual

The Playboy philosophy has led millions to believe that God is anti-sex and that the Bible is negative about sexual enjoyment. Nothing could be further from the truth. God is not against sex, He is so *for it* that he wants every man and woman to understand how to get the most out of it. We forget that God invented it for a reason.

God designed sex to create an intense unity. Sex is designed to give "oneness." It is to unite two people and God in a deep spiritual way that models how God works in the trinity. Unlike anything else, sex bonds people together.

God made it that way so that, in sex, human beings can leave a deep imprint on each other's hearts and experience deep connection. Chemicals are released into our bodies during sex that bond people together. This is one of the reasons why people who have had sex can find it hard to break up, even when they know it is wise to. Sadly, today many people have sex without the long-term bonds or, in many cases, without any relational bond at all. Over time, as sexual bonds are broken, the body learns not to produce that bonding.

Illustration:

Like most ways our body works, this is different for everyone. Some people might only have a little bit of “unbonding” sex and lose their ability to bond deeply. Other people may be able to have more “unbonding” sex and still seemingly be OK. It’s like the masking tape on a cardboard box. You can peel it back over and over again but each time it sticks less. (see J McIlhaney & Bush McKissic, *Hooked—New Science on How Casual Sex is Affecting Our Children*, Northfield, 2008).

Missing The Steps

Sex can mask what is really happening in a relationship. When relationships move too quickly to sex, important intimacy-building blocks are skipped. Young people are often left dealing with complicated issues due to them acting married in a context that does not equal marriage.

To keep sex as merely physical, which our society says it is, misses the real intensity of sex and sadly most people go through life without experiencing the power of deeply connected spiritual sex. Marriage provides the unselfish commitment that deep sex requires. God intends marriage to be a sign of the kind of relationship He wants with us.

Sex is fragile. It’s a complete sharing of ourselves, a complete vulnerability, a complete giving—no matter how pleasurable, anything short of this complete sharing is not the maximum sexual experience God created.

- **Do you see any connection between the sexual revolution and our society’s high level of divorce?**
- **Why do you think most sex education classes do not include the bonding power of sex?**
- **Do you think God wants to limit fun by putting in place sexual boundaries?**

God’s Way Brings Freedom

The Bible is not full of rules to spoil our sexual adventures but rather aims to protect something of great value. God’s intention is not to spoil your fun but to help you grow into all He intends for you to be. His commands concerning sexuality always serve your best interests. God is against adultery and sexual promiscuity because these behaviours are destructive to your life. It

diminishes the ability to deeply bond sexually when you do enter into the commitment that marriage brings.

Mind you, just because you follow God's rules regarding sex doesn't guarantee a happy marriage. A successful marriage has many aspects to it—sex being one. Following God's way in this area does lift the likelihood of long-term sexual enjoyment but doesn't guarantee it. At the same time, God works to restore people and make things new. People who have already been sexually active, while still working through the implications, can have God-honouring, successful relationships.

Boundaries bring freedom. This is how life works. By limiting what junk food I put into my body now, I have the freedom to run around when I am older. By limiting the sun burning my skin now, I have the freedom of healthier skin and less chance of melanoma later. By limiting the amount of TV I watch now and using the time to study, I am increasing the freedom of career choices for later. By limiting the extent of my physical connection with other people now, I have the freedom to enjoy more-meaningful sex later.

Real freedom always puts us in a place of responsibility. If I want the freedom to play Mozart, I will have to abide by the laws of music. If I want the freedom to drive safely on the road, I need to abide by road rules. If I want to experience the real deep connection of sex, it is best to abide by the Maker's design for it.

- **Can you think of other examples where boundaries bring freedom?**
- **Why do you think our society emphasises short-term gratification over long-term connectedness?**

Look:

Read 1 Corinthians 6:13-20:

- **What are the three points that Paul makes about sex?**

The Greek word that we translate as “flee” in verse 18 actually means to run like you were a fugitive about to be taken captive.

- **How do you think sex can hold people captive?**

“Therefore honour God with your body.”

Paul explains that sex is a model for us to experience in the physical realm something of the intensity of the spiritual relationship a person has with God when he or she is reborn through Jesus Christ.

Read Proverbs 6:32:

Sex is powerful and can be used for great good or great destruction. Proverbs also reminds us that your brain is your most important sex organ, so guard it.

- **What ideas do you have for guarding your mind against the messages our culture gives us about sex?**

What Now:

How might you go about honouring God with your sexuality? What boundaries do you think it would be wise to put in place?

A God of Fresh Starts

Read 1 John 1:9:

Jesus cleanses us from all unrighteousness. The truth is every one of us needs this cleansing. Jesus explains in Matthew 5:27-30 that even looking at another person lustfully shows our sinful nature.

Read Hebrews 9:13-14:

- **How does it feel to know that your most embarrassing or shameful moments can be washed clean?**

Read Romans 8:28:

- **How does it feel to know that God works all things for good?**

A fresh start begins here—with Jesus Christ. Jesus sets the example by responding with great tenderness to those who had crossed sexual boundaries. When invited, Jesus can take our life to this point and set about making the best version of it from here on. In fact, He often uses our most hurtful and difficult experiences in shaping us to help other people. God's heart is to restore and only God has the power to heal the inner scars of life.

No matter what your past has been, the possibility of purity is always an option. It is won with every decision you make to honour your body and the bodies of others.

Go Deeper:

Hayley and Michael Dimarco, *B4UD8*, Revell, 2009.

Maggie Hamilton, *What's Happening to our Girls*. Penguin, 2008.

Maggie Hamilton, *What's Happening to our Boys*. Penguin, 2010.

Stacy Hord, *A New Vision for Dating*. Bridge-Logos, 2009.

McIlhane, J & McKissic Bush. *Hooked, New Science on How Casual Sex is Affecting Our Children*, Northfield, 2008.

Minday Meier, *Sex and Dating*. IVP, 2007.

Ginny Olson, *Teenage Girls*. Zondervan, 2006.

HEAVEN SENT

Discussion Guide 6

“Self-Medication”

“I knew Jarrod drank when I wasn’t around. It had never really bothered me as I figured boys would be boys. I didn’t though. I couldn’t bear the idea of not being in control of myself. I’d heard so many stories of people doing really dumb stuff while under the influence” (page 53).

“Should I? I wondered. I glanced across. Jarrod was on his way with the punch. It was now or never. I reached out and took the colourful bottle. He’d already unscrewed the cap for me. I put the bottle to my lips and took a sip. . . . ‘Heaven, do you know what you’re drinking?’ Jarrod queried” (page 75).

“He went to take the bottle from my hand. ‘I think you’ve had enough of those now, Heaven,’ he began” (page 76).

“It was something else. Something I didn’t understand. I’d given it up during a night of drinking while in an alcoholic stupor. I would never truly remember my first time. I felt I had lost something I could never get back” (page 79).

Big Idea:

Wise people are not fooled by the alcohol myths.

Heaven’s “self-medication” has some drastic, but not uncommon, consequences. This guide looks at alcohol and how “just a few” drinks can turn your life upside down.

Many young people today regularly binge drink and think this is normal or that alcohol is just a part of having fun. This guide outlines the dangers of alcohol and why abstinence is a wise choice.

Group Activity:

If possible, look at some recent alcohol advertisements including sponsorships of sporting teams. Analyse the messages the ads are trying to convey. Who are the ads targeting?

The Story:

Heaven finds herself in a situation thousands of teenagers will face this weekend. She is at a party and offered alcohol. Advertisers want us to believe that alcohol is fun, that it's just a part of having a good time, that it's part of being "mature," that it allows us to escape and just a few drinks won't matter. Heaven drinks alcohol to escape from the pressure she is feeling at home.

Far from "escape," alcohol has robbed many teenagers of the enjoyment of life and in place of "fun" delivered a nightmare.

- **How do you think you would react under similar pressure to what Heaven had going on in her life?**
- **Do you think Heaven expected the night to turn out like it did?**
- **Do you think alcohol adds to or takes away from the fun at a party?**
- **If you were able to give Heaven some advice as she headed to the party, what would it be?**
- **Why do you think alcohol is Australia's most popular teenage drug?**
- **What would you say are the top three reasons teenagers decide to drink alcohol?**

Explore:

Poison:

"From the evidence, it is clear alcohol is an insidious poison that affects virtually the whole body" (Ashton and Laura, *Uncorked*, page 19).

Alcohol is a poison. It is strongly linked to heart disease, cancer (particularly breast cancer), male sexual disorders, short-term and long-term brain damage and liver disease. It has also been shown to damage male sperm and cause testicular atrophy, along with an array of other health problems.

For pregnant women, alcohol can harm the foetus irreparably, causing foetal brain damage and sexual feminisation of the male child, along with a range of other harmful effects.

Violence:

Alcohol-generated problems now account for 80 per cent of police work. It is at the heart of most domestic violence and anti-social behaviour.

Poor Choices:

Alcohol impairs the mind and leads to a serious loss of judgment and coordination. This includes poor choices about driving, general safety and sex.

The first one or two drinks generally produce feelings of optimism and wellbeing, making many people want to prolong the feeling. But with each subsequent drink, the desire to limit one's drinking is reduced. Add to this the problem that while the initial effects of drinking can be felt within minutes, the full effects are not felt until after 45 minutes (Ashton and Laura, *Uncorked*, pages 3-4). By the time the effects of the first few drinks are fully felt, many teenagers have gone well beyond the initial feelings and end up being "smashed" in so many ways.

Teenage drinkers are also more likely to engage in early and unprotected sex. "Casual" sex becomes more common under the influence of alcohol. A Norwegian study found that early intercourse was strongly associated with early alcohol intoxication (see Ashton and Laura, *Uncorked*, page 41). A New Zealand report highlighted the link between alcohol consumption and "unsafe or unintended sex leading to unplanned pregnancies and the spreading of sexually transmitted infections." The study outlined how many teenagers have unsafe sex after the consumption of alcohol and that those who usually practise safe sex do not if they have consumed too much alcohol. Others, who have no intention of having sexual intercourse, have sex when they are drunk.

A survey carried out by *Girlfriend* magazine found nearly one-quarter of readers who responded to the magazine's questionnaire said they first had sex because they were drunk and either didn't know what they were doing, or felt they had to satisfy their boyfriends. Similarly, a La Trobe University study found that when drunk a large number of teenage girls feel that they have no choice but to participate in permissive behaviour.

Teenagers are the most frequent users of emergency contraception at Australian family planning clinics. "It is not unusual for clients to tell of going to a party, getting drunk and having sexual intercourse without using contraception. Sometimes the clients were so drunk at the time, they did not know if they had had sexual intercourse or not. Medical staff report some young women coming to the clinic the next day still suffering from hangover and so nauseated that taking the medication without vomiting is extremely difficult" (see Ashton and Laura, *Uncorked*, page 42). A night of "fun" becomes a "nightmare."

The World's Most Common Date Rape Drug:

Alcohol is involved in an overwhelming number of rapes, especially date rape. Heaven's story is repeated around Australia every weekend. Alcohol diminishes cognitive processing in both women and men—especially if several drinks have been consumed. A girl may miss or ignore cues that would otherwise have warned her of danger (Ashton and Laura, page 52). Many girls are unaware that some guys think that getting a girl drunk is simply part of the process of getting sex. This idea is even encouraged in alcohol advertising.

Alcohol reduces a person's capacity to analyse what is happening around them. Alcohol may keep a girl from realising that her behaviour is being interpreted incorrectly. She may not notice or see any significance in her date's persistent attempt to get her to consume more alcohol. Unfortunately, alcohol often causes boys to over-read a girl's friendliness. Male tertiary students who have been drinking perceive women as more seductive, more promiscuous and more interested in having sex than women perceive themselves to be. Add to this the problem that alcohol causes a slow and ineffective response to an unwanted sexual attack and you have a recipe for disaster (see Ashton and Laura, *Uncorked*, page 55). These facts do not suggest that a drunk woman "deserves" date rape—no-one ever deserves that! However, the danger of date rape is much higher when alcohol is involved.

- **What are some of the negative impacts of alcohol you are aware of?**
- **How does the reality differ from the picture presented in alcohol advertising?**

- **Do you think alcohol should come with health warnings similar to cigarettes and do you think such a warning would make any difference?**

Look:

As we discussed in Discussion Guide 5, the Bible deals a lot with being wise and foolish. Proverbs includes drinking alcohol as being something a fool does”

“Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? Those who linger over wine, who go to sample bowls of mixed wine. Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper. Your eyes will see strange sights and your mind imagine confusing things” (Proverbs 23:29-33).

The Bible says drinking alcohol is unwise because it brings violence, misery and destruction (see Proverbs 4:17; 23:29-35). Alcohol is also often associated with poor judgment in the Bible (see Isaiah 28:7, Samuel 5:1-30).

Some people think the Bible endorses drinking some alcohol, such as in the communion service. While there is debate over just how alcoholic this grape juice would be, if at all, what is clear is that when it comes to being wise and putting in place safe “guard rails,” no alcohol is the wisest idea.

What Now:

A Living Sacrifice:

Remember that in Romans 12:1-3 Paul reminds us to offer all our lives to God as a “living sacrifice.” God wants to be part of your “ordinary, everyday life.” This includes on Saturday night at a party and with your friends at school.

Paul reminds us to do everything in Jesus’ name for God’s glory: “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17).

- **Do you think what happens at most teenage parties would be giving glory to God?**
- **Do you think that drinking a substance that clouds your mind and impairs your judgment impacts God’s ability to communicate with you?**

Most likely you will—if you haven't already—be in a place where you have to choose how you will respond to alcohol. It's at this moment wise thinking really makes a difference. Maybe alcohol has already hurt you or caused you to end up in situations you would now rather not have been in. While you're alive, it's never too late to make a new start and be wise. Grace and forgiveness is Jesus' amazing gift to us and we honour him each time we choose to receive the grace He offers. Because of God's forgiveness and mercy, we can refuse to allow the past to rob us of the present.

- **How would you go about encouraging a friend to make wise choices in regard to alcohol?**
- **What ideas do you have for making an alcohol-free party fun?**
- **What “guard rails” will you put in place to protect yourself from the dangers of alcohol?**

Go Deeper:

An excellent book that looks at the impact of alcohol in Australian society is: John F Ashton and Ronald S Laura, *Uncorked: The Hidden Hazards of Alcohol*, Signs Publishing, 2009.

Dr Aric Sigman, *Alcohol Nation: How To Protect Our Children From Today's Drinking Culture*, Piatkus, 2011.

HEAVEN SENT

Discussion Guide 7

“Selfish Sex and Date-Rape”

“‘Selfish! Selfish? You wanna call me selfish?’ I shrieked. I lunged forward and jammed my forefinger into his chest. ‘Selfish is when you pester and pester someone for sex, even when they’ve told you time and time again they are not ready. Selfish is when you administer the guilt treatment when they put the brakes on and you still think you are entitled. Selfish is when you wait for your girlfriend—who you are supposed to love and care about—to be too drunk to think clearly. Jarrod, don’t you see! My virginity was my gift to give—not your right to take!’” (page 97).

“‘Heaven,’ he said, pushing up his glasses and his eyes softening, ‘is there something else you should be telling me? Was this . . . consensual?’ I didn’t know where to look. Of course it wasn’t consensual. But I would never be able to prove it. After all, who would believe me?” (page 116).

“‘Heaven,’ she said, ‘that’s . . .’ I leapt to my feet. ‘Look, can we not have this conversation’” (page 118).

Big Idea:

God gives us freedom of choice. When it comes to sex, overpowering or taking advantage of someone else who cannot consent is never right. We are to honour one another above ourselves in all areas.

This guide builds on the foundations that have been established in the earlier study on sex to address issues of selfishness in sexuality and particularly date rape.

As discussion leader, you will need to be extra sensitive in working through this topic. If your group is representative of national statistics, there is a reasonable chance someone in your group may have had this experience.

The Story:

Heaven "loses" her virginity and doesn't even remember it. What starts out as a night of "fun" to escape the pressure of home turns into a nightmare that Heaven cannot fully remember and has consequences she will never forget.

For many women this story will ring familiar. One in five Australian women are sexually assaulted at some point in their life, often as teenagers (see Craig Henderson, "His Words Will Never Hurt Me," *Marie Claire*, May 2012, pages 78-82). One in six girls share a similar story to Heaven's. They are either overpowered physically or too incapacitated to make a choice about sex and then assaulted by someone they know.

From fun to a nightmare—how does it end up like this? What are some of the attitudes that need to be addressed to ensure young people are not left without a choice? What are some of the warning signs that might have helped Heaven make wiser choices? What are some steps to recovery?

Heaven intended to enjoy the party; she wanted to take her mind off home. She drank alcohol, flirted with Jarrod then . . . she knew nothing about what happened after that. She is unsure how to respond, what it all means and how to move forward.

- **Do you think Heaven expected the night to turn out like it did?**
- **Did you guess what was going to happen next? If so, what were the warning signs?**
- **Would you classify what happened to Heaven as rape? Why or why not?**
- **If you were able to give Heaven some advice as she headed to the party what would it be?**

Explore:

Was Heaven Raped?

Often people think that rape is about a stranger attacking an unsuspecting victim in a dark alley. While this can be the case, acquaintance or date rape is far more common. According to research, 84 per cent of girls raped knew their attacker and 57 per cent of those rapes happened while on dates. While guys can also be raped, this outline is predominately addressing the issues from a young girl's perspective.

Cosmopolitan magazine created a controversy in 2007 by publishing an article that termed what happened to Heaven as “grey rape.” What they called “grey rape” was when the girl never intended to have sex but emerges out of an alcohol-induced fog (after willingly participating in some kissing or other pre-sexual activity) to find her male companion having sex with her. In shock, she realises she does not want this to happen and “is left feeling violated, confused and angry” (*Cosmopolitan* August 30, 2007).

According to law in most Australian states, a person is unable to give consent when drunk. So, even if there is no fight and regardless of what else happens, if the victim is drunk, a rape has occurred. In Australia, simply having sex with an intoxicated female is grounds for charges against the male, even if he was also intoxicated. The excuse, “I was drunk” cannot be used to justify sex crimes.

So was Heaven raped?

Date rape can be just as devastating as stranger rape, if not more so. “The victim trusts her date and so her trust as well as her body are violated and that’s devastating” (McDowell, *It Can Happen to You*, page 12.)

Somewhere in Australia a woman is raped—most times by a “friend”—every two hours. In the United States, it’s every two minutes (see Fanflik, *Victim Responses to Sexual Assault*, page 1).

- **Why do you think 90 per cent of date rapes go unreported?**
- **Should intoxication be a factor in reducing a rape charge?**
- **Why do you think states have put in place laws to say that an intoxicated person cannot give consent?**

Consequences:

“Sexual assault by an acquaintance, such as date rape, can be just as traumatic as sexual assault by a stranger, and may be more traumatic because it also involves a breach of trust” (Laura Russo, *Date Rape: A Hidden Crime*, Australian Institute of Criminology, June 2000.)

Research indicates that the survivors of date/acquaintance rape report similar levels of depression, anxiety, complications in subsequent relationships, and difficulty attaining pre-rape levels of sexual satisfaction to what survivors of stranger rape report. Furthermore, they are even less trusting of people in the future and have a more negative view of themselves and the world.

People who have been the victims of date/acquaintance rape cope in various ways. Common responses include:

- Feeling dirty and unable to get “clean” even though they scrub themselves vigorously.
- Losing trust in people and becoming emotionally withdrawn. According to Dr Joyce Brothers, "psychologically, date rape is the most trust-deadening thing that can happen to you."
- Experiencing difficulty with flashbacks or feelings associated with the rape.
- Acting out sexually in an attempt to gain back control. This can even include a sexual relationship with the rapist, which may seem odd but is an attempt to make sense of what happened to them.
- Depression.
- Thirty per cent of the women identified as rape victims contemplated suicide after the incident.

Like Heaven, between 4 and 10 per cent of rape victims conceive, which brings with it a whole new set of issues and questions to deal with (we will look at these issues more in our next discussion guide).

- **Why do you think rape has such devastating consequences?**

Attitudes:

Although it may be difficult—if not impossible—to detect someone who will commit date/acquaintance rape, there are some characteristics that can signal trouble. If a guy treats a girl as if she is a possession; if he continually pressures her for sex even after her intentions are clear; or if he intimidates in the form of belittling comments, ignoring, sulking, dictating friends or style of dress: this may indicate attitudes that are associated with those who date rape. Various studies have shown that date rapists act in response to three main identifiable attitudes.

- The “I am king” attitude: his passion is to “own,” control and conquer women—especially one who may have previously “turned him down.”

- The “act now, think later” attitude: they have a low sense of personal responsibility and think only about what they want in the moment.
- The “who cares about you?” attitude: men who are prone to rape usually lack a social conscience. They act for themselves with little regard for the feelings and wellbeing of others.
- **Do you think there were any behaviours Jarrod showed that may have alerted Heaven to one or more of the above attitudes?**
- **Why do you think so many guys think short-term about themselves and not about the long-term implications?**
- **How would you describe the opposite attitudes to those of the date rapist descriptions above?**

Myths that shape rape:

Sadly, there are some common myths that people in our culture use to justify or downplay the significance of date/acquaintance rape:

<u>Myth</u>	<u>Reality</u>
A woman who gets raped usually deserves it, especially if she has agreed to go to a man's house or get in a car alone with him.	No one deserves to be raped. Being in a man's house or car does not mean a woman has agreed to have sex with him.
If a woman agrees to allow a man to pay for dinner, drinks, etc, it means she owes him sex.	Sex is not an implied payback for dinner or other expense, no matter how much money has been spent.
Women who don't fight back haven't been raped.	Rape occurs when someone is forced to have sex against their will, whether they fight back or not.
Kissing or certain kinds of touching mean that intercourse is inevitable.	Everyone's right to say "no" should be honoured, regardless of the activity that preceded it.
Once a man reaches a certain point of arousal, sex is inevitable and they can't help forcing themselves on a woman.	Men are capable of exercising restraint in acting upon sexual urges.

Most women lie about acquaintance rape because they have regrets after consensual sex.

Certain behaviours such as drinking or dressing in an overtly sexual way makes rape a woman's responsibility.

If the woman is not a virgin, it is not rape. Nearly one-third of junior high students in an American study saw nothing wrong with raping a woman who was already sexually active (Mcdowell, 21).

Acquaintance rape really happens—to people you know, by people you know.

Drinking or dressing in an overtly sexual way, while not wise, are not invitations for sex.

Regardless of how sexually active someone might be date rape is always wrong, it's a crime and has consequences.

Prevention:

Listed below are some suggestions from the Sydney Rape Crisis Centre: "The list is in no way intended to put, or even imply that, the responsibility for rape rests with the victims" (Rosemary Barry and David Brennan, *Surviving Rape*, NSW Rape Crisis Centre, 2002).

- People need to be taught to respect one another and treat each other with value and dignity.
- Date rape always involves some degree of selfishness. Keep your antenna up for the warning signs that show date rape attitudes.
- Socialise in groups whenever possible and always leave an event as a group.
- Look out for your friends and remind them of any pre-commitments you made before going out, regarding how you will get home. Creatively remove friends from situations that could be heading toward danger.
- See danger if someone is encouraging you to consume and keep consuming alcohol.
- If dating, set clear boundaries for what is not going to happen before the date progresses.
- Be cautious about going to a date's home or having him to yours, particularly if alcohol has been consumed.

The World's Most Common Date Rape Drug:

By far, the number-one date rape drug is alcohol! In fact, alcohol is almost the ideal rape drug because it attacks the area of the brain that governs judgment and lowers inhibition. Often, date rape victims say afterwards that they drank too much to realise what was going on, it caused a slow and

ineffective response and by the time they realised the predicament they were in it was too late. (For more information on the dangers of alcohol, see Discussion Guide 6.)

What To Do If You or Someone You Know is Raped

Those survivors who tend to deal most effectively with their experiences take an active role in acknowledging the rape, disclosing the incident to appropriate others and finding the right help.

- The first thing the victim of any rape should do is tell someone they trust. One of the biggest problems in date rape is often the victim is too ashamed to talk about it, feels they are in some way responsible for what happened or feels that telling will destroy their social group.
- The person told should stress that what happened was not the girl's fault and offer support. The way the first person told reacts is significant in setting the path for the healing process. If a person tells you that they have been raped, do not dismiss it.
- A medical check-up is needed even if there appear to be no physical injuries. Diseases that require treatment may have been passed on during the rape.
- Any person who has been raped should talk to a counsellor who can work through the implications of reporting or not reporting the rape to the police and can put in place a process that involves people who can help.
- Many people who have been raped blame God in some part for "letting" this happen to them. Remember we are in a sinful world that is far from what God originally created. In God's plan—and in the world He makes new—there will be no pain, tears or suffering.

If You Have Been Raped

If you have been raped, make sure you tell someone you trust and seek professional help.

- Remember God, who makes all things new, can work in and through you taking even the bad things that have happened and use them for His glory.

There is hope for recovery as you allow God to walk with you through the healing process. (It might be useful to jump ahead to Discussion Guides 11-13 on forgiveness and starting new).

Look:

Where was God in Heaven's rape? Although she didn't really acknowledge God at that point of her life, God was there in the tears she cried, the feelings she tried to scrub away and the helpful conversations she had following "that night."

Date rape is against God's plan. God clearly designed sex to be enjoyed in a loving, committed relationship (see Exodus 20:14, Matthew 5:27-28, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 18, Colossians 3:5). In addition, rape violates God's law of love by taking away someone's freedom of choice.

- **If you're in a group, choose a verse below and write down the attitudes the verse highlights. What do you think these verses imply about date/acquaintance rape?**
1. "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves" (Romans 12:9, 10).
 2. "The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (1 Corinthians 6:13).
 3. "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20).
 4. "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered . . . It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).
 5. "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery . . . But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:19, 22, 23).
 6. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3, 4).

7. "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him" (Colossians 3:17).
8. "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong one another or take advantage of one another" (1 Thessalonians 4:3-6).

What Now:

All of us are called to treasure what God treasures—and that's people. If we are His followers, our hearts will break for the same things that break His heart. How do you think God feels when He sees one of His children selfishly being taken advantage of by another, especially sexually?

It was true when Ghandi said that "all it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."

- **How will you contribute dignity and respect in a selfish world?**
- **If you're a guy, how might you be able to stand up for the dignity of girls in otherwise degrading conversations?**
- **What steps might you be able to take in your youth group to look out for one another?**

Go Deeper:

David G Curtis, *Perspectives on Acquaintance Rape*, The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress, 2006.

Kay Kuzma, *She Said No*. Pacific Press, 1994.

Josh McDowell, *It Can Happen to You: What you need to know about preventing and recovering from date rape*, Word, 1991.

Rosemary Barry and David Brennan, *Surviving Rape*, NSW Rape Crisis Centre, 2002.

Patricia L Fanflik, *Victim Responses to Sexual Assault: Counterintuitive or Simply Adaptive*, NDAA Research and Development, Alexandria: VA, 2007.

HEAVEN SENT

Discussion Guide 8

“The Value of Life”

“‘I’d like a referral for an abortion, please.’ As I spoke I forced myself to make eye contact. If I sounded reasonably confident, perhaps he’d just do what I asked and let me go” (page 115).

“‘Will you come with me when, you know, when I get the . . . termination?’ My voice cracked on the word, but termination was still easier than abortion” (page 118).

“‘Is it too late to get rid of it?’ Dad asked my mother” (page 137).

Big Idea:

Life is a valuable gift from God.

This guide looks at the value of human life, moving on to discuss some implications of abortion. Once again, this topic requires extra sensitivity as there is a reasonable chance that a member of the group has had an abortion. The main point is that God inherently makes people valuable and so they need to be treated with dignity and respect—this is especially important for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Group Activity:

Search out some incredible facts about the human body. Put these facts among some made-up facts and play a game of true and false. If someone gets an answer wrong they drop out until there is one person left. The main point is how incredibly intricate and wonderfully made our bodies are.

- The lungs contain over 300,000 million capillaries (tiny blood vessels). If they were laid end to end, they would stretch 2400 kilometres.
- Human bone is as strong as granite in supporting weight. A block of bone the size of a matchbox can support 9 tonnes—that is four times as much as concrete can support.
- Nerve impulses to and from the brain travel as fast as 273 kilometres per hour.
- Every day the average person loses 60 to 100 strands of hair.
- The human body is estimated to have 96,560 kilometres of blood vessels. To put that in perspective, the distance around the earth is about 40,000 kilometres, making the distance your blood vessels could travel if laid end to end more than two times around the earth.

- The surface area of a human lung is equal to a tennis court.
- Sneezes regularly exceed 160 km/hr.
- During your lifetime, you will produce enough saliva to fill two Olympic swimming pools.
- A foetus acquires fingerprints at the age of three months.
- Every human spent about half an hour as a single cell.
- Women are born better smellers than men.
- You use 200 muscles to take one step.
- About 32 million bacteria call every inch of your skin home.
- Three hundred million cells die in the human body every minute (the body has 10-50 trillion cells).

The Story:

Although not Christian at this point of the story, Heaven still has an internal battle regarding the sanctity of life. Her dad sees her pregnancy as “something to get rid of.” Jarrod sees her pregnancy as just a simple matter of “sorting it out.” Kelly sees the next natural step as an abortion. Why can’t Heaven just get the job done, put the sorry saga behind her and move on?

Explore:

A Christian View of Life: People are the Treasure

Christians believe that life is a valuable gift from God. Humans are not simply the next step in an evolutionary chain but are created, treasured and sustained by God. Human life has unique value because, though fallen, human beings are created in the image of God.

Our value does not depend on how good we are at something or how much we own but simply that we are God’s creation and the object of His love. Life is valuable to God and therefore He calls for the protection of life (see Exodus 20:13; Revelation 21:8; Proverbs 6:16,17). Over and over again in the Bible, we find that God is especially concerned for the protection of the weak, the defenceless, and the oppressed (see Psalm 82:3,4; James 1:27; Micah 6:8; Acts 20:35; Proverbs 24:11,12; Luke 1:52-54). God calls us to value what He values—and that’s people. Every person you lock eyes with is valued by God beyond our imaginations.

- **What groups of people do you think get treated with the least dignity in our society?**

- **What might you be able to do to give dignity to a downtrodden group in your community?**
- **How do you feel when you remember that even the person you like the least is incredibly valuable to God?**
- **Which do you think our society values more, people or things?**

When Does Life Begin?

While at the abortion clinic, Heaven is overcome by a sense that this is more than a “termination.” For Heaven, this was a life. Abortion is arguably the most controversial, complex, emotional and divisive subject involving children. Many people have strong opinions on the topic. You can find all sorts of websites with very different opinions on abortion. Those for abortion claim the mother's right to choose is most important. Those against claim all life is valuable and that abortion is murder. Unfortunately, some very unchristian attitudes get traded by both groups at one another. Misinformation and confusion abound.

What about cases that are not so simple—perhaps where women, like Heaven, have been raped or where medical complications threaten the life of the mother or wellbeing of another developing baby? While only .01 per cent of abortions in Australia are performed for these reasons, we live in a fallen world where people are forced to make complicated decisions.

- **Why do you think the rate of abortions has grown so fast in Australia over the past 20 years?**
- **If you were one of Heaven's friends, what would you have advised her to do and why?**
- **In what cases do you think abortion is appropriate?**

A lot of the arguments around abortion grow out of when we think life begins.

When do you think life begins?

- At conception?
- At 18 days after conception, when the heart is forming and the eyes start to develop?
- At 28 days, when arms and legs are growing?
- At 30 days, when they have a brain?
- At 6-13 weeks, when they have a fingerprint?
- When they are able to survive outside of the mother (around 24 weeks)?
- When they are wanted?
- When they are delivered?
- In some cases, with very late-term abortions, there really is just a few centimetres between abortion and murder. The baby is partially delivered before being aborted.

- **Do you think girls should have counselling before having an abortion? If so, what sort of information do you think should be included in the counselling?**

Abortion in Australia

Did you know that this year in Australia more than 90,000 babies will be aborted? This is almost one in every three pregnancies. Dr Wess Stafford claims that "the womb is the most unsafe place in the world for a child." (in O'Rourke, page 33.) Heaven is an exception when it comes to carrying the baby until delivery, despite of the people around her wanting her to abort. Some 97 per cent of girls who are pushed by their partners to have an abortion do so.

In 2004/05, 11,270 Australian teens had abortions. Dr Bronwyn Harman, a Psychology Lecturer at Edith Cowan University, who is researching teenage motherhood said: "Girls are being pressured to adopt adult behaviour at an earlier age than previous generations. That pressure can come from boys their own age or in a lot of cases, from older men who are predators and bullying them into sex. It can also come from the premature sexualisation of girls in the media and marketing gone mad."

- **Why do you think Australia has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the developed world?**

- **Why do you think so many women choose abortion over carrying the baby to full term and adopting like Heaven did?**

If You've Had An Abortion

About one in three Australian woman has had an abortion, including many teenagers. Abortion is not simply another procedure. For many women, it has long-term consequences. Often women are left dealing with grief, guilt and shame. "Abortion hurts most hearts in many unrecognized ways at some point in their live" (Sydna Masse, *Her Choice To Heal*, page 11).

Post-abortion syndrome is found to impact women who have had an abortion regardless of age, family size, race, marital status or number of abortions. Among many impacts:

- 61 per cent experience flashbacks
- 54 per cent have anniversary reactions
- 78 per cent have feelings of diminished control over their lives
- 49 per cent increase drug use (Heal, page 26).

Ironically, though women seek out abortion as a solution to stressful circumstances, abortion itself can become a contributor to long-lasting stress of a different kind.

If you know someone who has had an abortion, remember to support them with love and prayer. Listen without judging if they choose to talk with you and perhaps point them to some useful resources (some are listed in the Go Deeper section of this guide). If you have had an abortion, it might be wise to seek some professional help as you work through the implications.

Always remember that God is close to the broken hearted and is the only way to really deal with guilt. As Heaven points out, a beautiful mosaic is made up of lots of broken pieces. Regardless of what has led you to this point, God can take your life and shape it into the best possible version of you.

Look:

Read Psalm 139:13-16:

- **What do you think the Psalmist means when he claims God "knit him together in his mother's womb"?**

- **What do you think it means to have “all your days ordained before one of them came to be”?**
- **Take turns to read a verse from the list below. What do these verses say about the value of life?**

Genesis 1:27
 Genesis 30:23
 Exodus 20:13
 Exodus 21:22
 1 Samuel 2:6
 Hosea 13:16
 Amos 1:13

What Now:

- **Would your friends say that you care deeply about people?**
- **What do you think it would take to be a more loving and loveable person?**

Go Deeper:

Paul O'Rourke, *Why Satan Hates Our Kids*, Paul O'Rourke Ministries, 2011.

Sydna Masse, *Her Choice To Heal: Finding Spiritual and Emotional Peace After Abortion*, David Cook, 2009.

Guidelines on Abortion (Official statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church)

Many contemporary societies have faced conflict over the morality of abortion. Such conflict also has affected large numbers within Christianity who want to accept responsibility for the protection of prenatal human life while also preserving the personal liberty of women. The need for guidelines has become evident, as the Church attempts to follow scripture, and to provide moral guidance while respecting individual conscience. Seventh-day Adventists want to relate to the question of abortion in ways that reveal faith in God as the Creator and Sustainer of all life and in ways that reflect Christian responsibility and freedom. Though honest differences on the question of abortion exist among Seventh-day Adventists, the following represents an attempt to provide guidelines on a number of principles and issues. The guidelines are based on broad biblical principles.

1) Prenatal human life is a magnificent gift of God. God's ideal for human beings affirms the sanctity of human life, in God's image, and requires respect for prenatal life. However, decisions about life must be made in the context of a fallen world. Abortion is never an action of little moral consequence. Thus prenatal life must not be thoughtlessly destroyed. Abortion should be performed only for the most serious reasons.

2) Abortion is one of the tragic dilemmas of human fallenness. The Church should offer gracious support to those who personally face the decision concerning an abortion. Attitudes of condemnation are inappropriate in those who have accepted the gospel. Christians are commissioned to become a loving, caring community of faith that assists those in crisis as alternatives are considered.

3) In practical, tangible ways the Church as a supportive community should express its commitment to the value of human life. These ways should include:

- a. strengthening family relationships.
- b. educating both genders concerning Christian principles of human sexuality.
- c. emphasising responsibility of both male and female for family planning.
- d. calling both to be responsible for the consequences of behaviours that are inconsistent with Christian principles.
- e. creating a safe climate for ongoing discussion of the moral questions associated with abortion.
- f. offering support and assistance to women who choose to complete crisis pregnancies.
- g. encouraging and assisting fathers to participate responsibly in the parenting of their children.

The Church also should commit itself to assist in alleviating the unfortunate social, economic and psychological factors that add to abortion and to care redemptively for those suffering the consequences of individual decisions on this issue.

4) The Church does not serve as conscience for individuals; however, it should provide moral guidance. Abortions for reasons of birth control, gender selection or convenience are not condoned by the Church. Women, at times however, may face exceptional circumstances that present serious moral or medical dilemmas, such as significant threats to the pregnant woman's life, serious jeopardy to her health, severe congenital defects carefully diagnosed in the foetus, and pregnancy resulting from rape or incest. The final decision whether to terminate the pregnancy or not should be made by the pregnant woman after appropriate consultation. She should be aided in her decision by accurate information, biblical principles and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, these decisions are best made within the context of healthy family relationships.

5) Christians acknowledge as first and foremost their accountability to God. They seek balance between the exercise of individual liberty and their accountability to the faith community and the larger society and its laws. They make their choices according to scripture and the laws of God rather than the norms of society. Therefore, any attempts to coerce women either to remain pregnant or to terminate pregnancy should be rejected as infringements of personal freedom.

6) Church institutions should be provided with guidelines for developing their own institutional policies in harmony with this statement. Persons having a religious or ethical objection to abortion should not be required to participate in the performance of abortions.

7) Church members should be encouraged to participate in the ongoing consideration of their moral responsibilities with regard to abortion in light of the teaching of scripture.

These guidelines were approved and voted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Executive Committee at the Annual Council session in Silver Spring, Maryland, October 12, 1992.

HEAVEN SENT

Discussion Guide 9

“Sabbath—What For?”

“Ricky laughed and finished wet wiping his sticky son. ‘OK, I don’t think there’s enough wipes in here to get you clean. Let’s go have a shower before Sabbath school.’

‘Sabbath school? What’s Sabbath school?’ I asked sitting down at the table” (pages 159-60).

“‘Coming to church on Sabbath?’ he asked, absently glancing up at the front door. ‘Why, Brad, are you asking me to your church?’ I grinned” (page 175).

Big Idea:

God created the Sabbath to celebrate what life is all about.

Sabbath is a day to recalibrate around what really matters. This guide looks at Sabbath as a break from consumerism and a celebration of what really brings significance.

Group Activity:

Choose an exercise activity like push-ups, sit-ups or holding up a light weight and have members of the group do as many reps as they can continuously without a break. Talk about the feeling of fatigue and how our muscles need rest from activity. For body builders, rest is as important as activity, because that is when the muscle is actually growing following its tearing down in the gym.

The Story:

Heaven is staying with her relatives in New Zealand. At first, she finds it odd that Ricky, Jill, Aroha, Billy and even her new friend Brad celebrate Sabbath. Heaven attended Sunday school a little when she was younger but this “Sabbath” idea is new, apart from what she knows of Jewish people in her neighbourhood back in Sydney. The family “open” and “close” Sabbath,

attend church meetings and get together with friends. They even take a break from watching TV, shopping and doing extra work around the house. What's with this Sabbath idea?

- **Are you more like Brad, who has grown up with the idea of Sabbath, or more like Heaven wondering what is going on with this Sabbath thing?**
- **If you are more like Brad, describe your best Sabbath.**
- **Why do you think God invented the idea of Sabbath?**

Explore:

Heaven's relatives take a break one day a week from work. This day is free of homework and the usual routine of life and is used to recalibrate around some really important values.

Creation:

In the fourth commandment, Exodus 20:8-11, God asks that we remember the Sabbath is a celebration of creation. He also asks us to give even the animals a rest on the Sabbath. In today's world, creation is often seen as a resource to be used for our ends. As the planet groans under the strain of environmental disregard and over-production, the Sabbath should make people stop and think about our job of caring for creation. What if one day a week we didn't take from the environment? What would happen if people took some time to think about how we cared about creation? Maybe that would change how we treated the earth during the week.

- **Do you think it's important to remember that you were created by God?**
- **What do you think it means to "steward" our environment?**
- **Do you think creation needs a Sabbath?**

The Creation account, at the very start of the Bible, highlights the idea of Sabbath. In Genesis 2 we are told that God especially blessed the seventh day and made it holy. This means He highlighted this time as a special date every week between Himself and His creation. Even in a perfect world, without sin, God still put in place the idea of Sabbath. Did God need a rest? No, He made Sabbath as a special time for us to remember our relationship with Him, other people and creation. Sure, everyday God wants to do life with us, but amid the demands of life and the continual bombardment of culture, Sabbath stands as a break to remember what really matters.

Freedom:

The 10 commandments are recorded again in Deuteronomy 5. This second time, the reason given for remembering the Sabbath is not creation but rather that God brought the children of Israel out of slavery and into freedom.

The Sabbath is a weekly reminder that God has done everything He can to bring you from the slavery of sin and into the freedom of His forgiveness. In the story of Adam and Eve, they did not need to rest from what they had done but were resting in what God had already done. You and I can't do anything to earn God's love—it's about what God has already done.

Sabbath is a great day for getting together with other people to worship God and grow in understanding more about Him. Sure, God wants to do life with us every day, but Sabbath allows us to especially rethink who we are in relationship to God, which should shape the rest of our week.

- **When you think of the word “freedom,” what is the first picture that comes to your mind?**
- **What do you think people are slaves to today?**

A Break From Consumerism:

In the consumeristic worldview, people think that happiness comes in things. Society tells us that to get things we need money and that time equals money.

time = money = things = happiness

The problem is, we live in a culture that has more things than ever, yet is more discontent. The Sabbath is about reminding us that time does not equal

money and that meaning is not found in things. Instead, meaning is found in serving, growing in connection with God and people, sharing and worshipping. These purposes go against the values of society but are the things that bring significance.

With its command to rest from labour, Sabbath emphasises the point that we are more than just the sum of our occupation, our grades or our income. So often we are inclined to measure ourselves by our work. The Sabbath says, "Take a break from work." Work is good but it is not the ultimate good. God is the ultimate—and resting in Him and focusing on Him is of greater significance. I have value as I connect with Him. Sabbath gives us a break from TV advertisements, shopping and society's pressures that, left unchecked, shape us into a self-centred consumeristic way of thinking.

- **Do you think God got it right when He asked us to take a day off from earning more money or doing more study?**
- **Why do you think God wants us to take a break from consumerism?**

Community:

With the rest that comes from not working comes the opportunity for building community. Again, the idea is reinforced that *people are important*. With work, shopping or study all put aside for a day, space can be made for the real business of caring about people.

Heaven's relatives often spend Sabbath afternoon in unhurried time with other people at "3D." Sabbath is the perfect day to remember that people are way more important than things. In a world of individualism and the constant pursuit of more, community is often destroyed. The Sabbath is a reminder that relationships are what matter. The Sabbath is the perfect opportunity to celebrate the five reasons for which you are on this planet—Worshipping, Serving, Sharing, Growing and Connecting.

- **Why do you think our society is the loneliest society in the history of the planet?**
- **We have more ways to connect than ever; why do you think more people than ever feel disconnected?**

Rest:

Why do most sports have a half-time break? Why do cricket players have a tea break? Of course, it's for refreshment and reflection. For a sports team, time out provides an opportunity to have a drink and refocus on the team plan. We all need time out from the constant bombardment of our culture to recalibrate around who we really are and what the game really is.

- **If Heaven were to ask you what the Sabbath was all about, how would you answer?**

In Matthew 11, Jesus talks about what it means to find rest for your soul. In the next chapter of Matthew, we read about Jesus being Lord of the Sabbath. We were not designed to just cram in as much productivity as we can between now and the grave. Like a page needs white space around the edges, you need margins in your life.

Terry Paulsen describes our society as sipping through a straw at a fire hydrant. We have so many messages coming at us, so many supposed solutions that actually make us hurry even more. Jesus was concerned how we could be "consumed by the cares, riches and pleasures of life and prevent His way from taking root in our hearts" (Matthew 13:22).

God knew that by ourselves we would drift into society's self-oriented traps. We will only experience life to the full when we take the opportunity God created for us to revive, recalibrate and renew around God's purposes. That's what the Sabbath is about.

Jewish author Abraham Heschel writes: "You've got six days when you're wrestling with the world—Sabbath you remember what really matters, why you were made, what is your destiny, to whom do you belong, what's the real game. The Sabbath reminds you why you were put on this earth—remember compassion is more important than winning.'

Look:

Read Mark 2:23–3:6:

The Pharisees had made up lots of rules about what you could and could not do on the Sabbath.

Some people keep the Sabbath yet make it a “burden” rather than a “delight.” For them it’s all about watching what they do instead of being “with” God.

- **What do you think Jesus meant when He said that the Sabbath was made for man rather than man for the Sabbath?**
- **Why do you think Jesus chose the Sabbath day to do so many of His healings?**

What Now:

- **What are some ideas you have for making the Sabbath a celebration of life?**
- **If you were to make an advertisement for the Sabbath what would be your top three points?** (This question is a little ironic seeing the Sabbath is a break from consumerism, but try it anyway.)

Go Deeper:

Lynne M Baab, *Sabbath Keeping: Finding Freedom in The Rhythms of Rest*, IVP, 2005 .

Marva Dawn, *Keeping The Sabbath Wholly*, Eerdmans, 1989.

Mark Buchanon, *The Rest of God*, Word, 2006.

Gregory Nelson, *A Touch of Heaven*, Pacific Press, 1999.

If you want something really comprehensive, check out:

Sigve Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*, Andrews University Press: Berrian Springs, MI, 2009.

HEAVEN SENT

Discussion Guide 10 “Connecting With God”

“Do you think it would be alright if I prayed for you, Heaven? I know you may not be convinced it will help, but it can't hurt to try now can it?’ He smiled again. ‘I guess,’ I whispered in a small voice. It wasn't like a bolt of lightning was going to shoot out of the sky because someone who wasn't sure whether she believed in God or not was trying to pray to Him. Pastor Dan left his hand on my shoulder and took a deep breath” (page 217).

“Look, Brad, ummm, I know I have no right to suggest this. And I don't know how to do this properly. But it really helped when Pastor Dan . . . Could I— could I . . . pray for you?’ I bit my lip. The words were out and I had no idea where they'd come from” (page 248).

“Ummm, God, ummm, thanks for hearing me. I'm glad You listen to us when we talk to You” (page 249).

Big Idea:

God wants to connect with you.

This guide explores what it means to connect with God and the difference that makes. It moves on to start looking at spiritual disciplines, including prayer and Bible reading. Depending on time, you may explore spiritual disciplines as part of this discussion or touch on it and come back to it at another time. The guide concludes with the idea of God working through us.

Group Activity:

If in a group, have several Connect Four games going and have a mini tournament. Then “interview” the “champion” about their winning strategy, what might have stopped them and what makes them so good at Connect Four. The main point: Connecting takes intentionality.

The Story:

In New Zealand, Heaven finds herself in a group of relatives and friends who give her a different picture of God. Heaven is sorting through a lot of issues and starts to consider that perhaps God may be worth “trying.” Heaven experiences a closeness of God’s presence in prayer and surprises herself when she offers to pray for Brad.

Heaven is introduced to God mainly through Brad. Every once in a while we all meet someone like Brad who seems different to everyone else—still achieving lots but doing it to the beat of a different drum. Their character seems deeper, ideas fresher, spirit softer, courage greater, leadership stronger, concerns wider, and compassion more genuine. They have a connection with God that makes a difference in the way they go about life.

- **Think about the last time you had a good chat with a close friend. What makes it easy to talk with your friend and why don’t you talk with everyone the same way?**
- **If you were to picture yourself as a Lego block, who or what would be the other Lego blocks you are connected to?**
- **What do you think it means to connect with God?**
- **Do you think it’s possible to be friends with God?**

Explore:

A lot of companies tell us to get connected. Usually, it’s in advertisements for high speed internet or mobile phones. It’s frustrating to be trying to get onto the net and unable to connect with the server. You can have the latest computer with the biggest hard drive, but if you can’t connect then it is very limited.

In John 15, Jesus describes the connection that is possible between us and Him like being a vine and its branches. He explains that if we, the branches, remain connected to Him, then through us He will bear much fruit. A truly fruitful, fulfilling life is one where, because of our connection with Jesus, He is able to work in and through us to produce the fruits of the Spirit.

Extra: The material in this box on Spiritual Pathways is useful in helping people develop their own, unique relationship with God. If you have time, it may be worth exploring in your group as part of this session. If not, it may be worth exploring at another time.

Your Unique Connection:

Did you know that you have a pattern on your lips that, like your fingerprints, is unique to you? There is no-one else like you on the planet. Did you know that God wired you uniquely so that the relationship He has with you is unlike any other on the planet? What makes you feel close to God will be different to anybody else. This means there are as many different ways to connect with God as there are people. However, there are some general ways these connections work. These ways are often called spiritual pathways and describe the way you most naturally feel connected with God and grow. The main pathways are:

- Intellectual—you connect best through learning, reading and hearing new ideas (eg, sermons, books).
- Relational—you connect best through talking with other people (eg, small group, testimonies).
- Serving—you connect best through involvement (eg, serving in your home, church, community).
- Worship—you connect best through times of adoration and praise (eg, private and public times of worship).
- Contemplative—you connect best through quietness (eg, contemplation, long walks, quiet time).
- Creation—you connect best through nature (eg, exploring in the outdoors, finding out more about an animal).

(The paths outlined here are adapted from Gary Thomas, *Sacred Pathways*, Zondervan, 2000.)

Most people connect with God best through at least one or two of these main pathways and there is usually at least one pathway that feels unnatural for you. Make sure you keep growing your strong points but stretch in the areas that may not be as strong. You must also be careful that as you create your unique connection with God, you are not simply doing things because someone else said it works for them but rather exploring and growing in ways that grow your unique relationship.

- **When was a time you felt strongly connected to God? What factors contributed to this?**
- **What do you think your strongest spiritual pathways are? Do other people in the group agree?**
- **What spiritual pathway area would be good for you to extend yourself in?**

Training v Trying:

It's also worth remembering that growing your connection with God takes time, intentionality and training. Some people start reading their Bible, or start some other habit, for an hour or two a day and wonder why they don't feel different. It would be like running a marathon without any prior training, or expecting to play a piano concerto without having learnt to play scales. Even if you try really hard, trying alone does not allow you to do what can be experienced through training. Paul reminds us in 1 Timothy 4:7, 8 to "train" in godliness. Like growing muscles, spiritual growth is about starting where you are and building up bit-by-bit. Maybe start with a little bit of Bible reading before trying a whole hour. Maybe have 10 minutes of quiet time with God before doing an hour. Many people "try" God and when they wear themselves out with trying really hard, think God does not want to connect with them. What they have missed is "training." Training in heart-building habits helps you grow in your connection with God. Just like a gym, everyone is at a different point and has a different next step.

- **Can you think of some other examples where training allows you to do what trying alone does not?**
- **What are some ways you might be able to "train" in godliness, starting small and then growing in that habit?**

While there are lots of ways to 'train' in godliness, some basic heart-building habits include prayer and thoughtful Bible reading.

Prayer:

Heaven feels odd when Pastor Dan first prays for her. Prayer is an unnatural activity and may feel strange to begin with. We are taught to be self-reliant. However, prayer is about inviting God to lead. Prayer has been likened to leaving the smog of this world to breathe the pure air of heaven. It might seem a bit unusual talking to someone we can't physically see and even stranger to listen but God really wants to hear your voice—after all, you're His child.

Philippians 4:6-7 talks about praying to God about everything. Often we keep parts of our life separate from God, even though He knows everything about us. God is truly interested in every aspect of your life and wants you to share it with Him. Too often, we might think that God will only care about the "big" problems and situations, after all He has the whole world to worry about. However, God wants to be invited into your everyday, ordinary situations. God is keen to share everyday life with you.

- **Where is the most unusual place you have prayed to God?**
- **How do you feel about telling God everything?**
- **What ideas do you have for making more space for prayer throughout your day?**

God Speaking To You:

We rarely stop to wonder if God might want to speak to us. God speaks through His word, through people and through the direct leading of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps He will bring a verse to mind and guide you through thoughts and feelings. For example, the verse, "All things work together for good for those who love God," kept coming back into Heaven's mind.

- **Who or what do you think God used to speak to Heaven?**
- **When are you best able to hear God's still, small voice?**

What about "unanswered" prayer?

Doesn't "unanswered" prayer show that God has no power? God leaves no sincere prayer unanswered. If the request is not right for us, God says *no*. If the timing is wrong, God says *slow*. If you are wrong, God says *grow*. Sometimes the request is not wrong but in the infinite mystery of things the outcome still seems to be *no*. Every day, godly people get sick and unspeakable tragedies afflict believers and non-believers alike. We'll explore this in our next study.

Just Do It

In the end, we can analyse prayer, read all sorts of books about it and have all sorts of formulas for it, but the best way to go about growing in prayer is to just get started and pray. Talk to God about what is on your heart and take time in the quiet to listen to how He might want to work in and through you.

Bible Reading

In the Bible, God uses people to tell us the story of how much He deeply desires us and wants to be with us. He also explains what values and practices allow life to work best. All day our minds are bombarded by

billboards, TV shows and messages that pull us in a thousand directions. In this world, we need God's word to give us clarity about what really matters.

Reading the Bible is about letting God's word wash through your attitudes, thoughts and feelings. Studying the Bible is not about simply knowing more; it's about change in our lives. In the time of Jesus, the Pharisees prayed and studied, but they did so in a self-seeking way rather than looking for a connection with God. You can know that hydrogen and oxygen make water, but that makes no difference if you're dying of thirst. Knowledge is good, but only if it causes a change that leaves you with a stronger love for God and people.

Where To Start – Helpful Hints

Many people do not know where to start with their Bible. A new year comes and they make a resolution to read the whole Bible, start to finish, by the end of the year. By the time they get to Leviticus, their resolution starts to get a bit shaky. So how do we go about reading and applying God's word?

Jesus reminds us in John 14:26 to always start with prayer inviting the Holy Spirit to guide our study and impress us with what God wants to do in and through us. It's a good idea to start with just a small section. Read it slowly and repeatedly to see what God might want to say to you or until a word or phrase lights up for you. Listen to your feelings and God's nudgings.

You don't have to start in Genesis. It's probably best to start with the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). Study these books to discover all you can about Jesus. Ask:

- What seems important to Jesus?
- What sort of questions does He ask people?
- What sort of questions do people ask Him?
- What is Jesus inviting you to do?

Taking notes as you read can be helpful. Some people find it helpful to re-write the passage in their own words.

Some useful questions to ask as you read are:

- What speaks to my heart?
- What new thought or idea comes to me?
- What does scripture move me to do?
- Is there an example here for me to follow?
- Is there a promise to claim or a command to obey?
- Is there a truth to be applied?
- Is there a prayer for me to pray?
- Is there a sin to be confessed?
- Is there a question God is asking me?

Some people find it useful to read or listen to the Bible while exercising. Other people listen to the Bible as they drive. Check out the various Bible study apps. Some people focus on studying a particular word or theme, while others look at everything they can find about a character. How about printing a verse on a card and placing it where you will see it throughout the day or putting Bible verses on your screensaver? Memorising scripture is particularly useful. It allows God to bring back into your mind various verses at all times and in all places.

Always remember to study with a rake rather than a shovel—apply it to yourself rather than simply dishing it out to others.

- **If you already study the Bible, what tips do you have for effective Bible study?**
- **What sort of things have you memorised without trying? How might you be able to memorise Bible passages?**

Look:

Vine Illustration

Slowly read through John 15 and draw what is being described in the space on the next page:

1. (John 15:1-4) Draw a picture of a grape vine with roots, trunk and branches.
2. Put the name “Jesus” on the trunk of the vine.
3. (John 15:5a) Put your name and other people in your group on the branches.
4. (John 15:5b-6) Add some fruit to your vine.

Whose job is it to produce fruit? _____

5. (John 15:7-8) Draw arrows from where you have written “Jesus”, through the branches (you) to the fruit.

6 – Draw a circle at the point where the branch with your name on it connects to the vine. Write in the circle “Connecting.”

What is your job? _____



In the vine analogy Jesus also talks about how He prunes those who are connected to Him (see verse 2). Part of being in relationship with Jesus is to allow the pruning of things such as pride, jealousy and bitterness. The result of not abiding in this connection is “outer darkness.”

When you are “abiding”/staying connected in Christ, He promises to work in you. When this happens you find yourself being the person God designed you to be. You find yourself being concerned for what concerns God. Your heart beats and breaks for what God’s heart beats and breaks.

- **What do you think the fruits are that Jesus had in mind in the vine illustration?** Check Galatians 5:22, 23.
- **How do you feel about having God working in and through you?**
- **What do you think it means to be pruned?**
- **What do you think James meant when he wrote: “Get down on your knees before the Master, it is the only way you’ll get on your feet” (James 4:10, The Message).**

What Now:

Destroying Connection:

Living in connection with God does not just happen by itself. In Romans 12:2, Paul reminds us that we can easily get caught copying the patterns and customs of this world. We can get choked by distractions, exhaustion, assignments, wandering thoughts, bad timing or a sense of obligation rather than enjoyment of God. We can be like the seeds Jesus described in His parable (see Matthew 13), choked by the cares of this world.

- **What would you say are the biggest threats to spiritual growth?**
- **What step will you take within the next 24 hours to grow your connection with God?**

Go Deeper:

Ellen White, *Steps to Christ*.

John Ortberg and Haley Barton, *An Ordinary Day With Jesus*, Zondervan, 2001.

John Ortberg, *The Me I Want To Be, Teen Edition*, Zondervan, 2010.

Gary Thomas, *Sacred Pathways*, Zondervan, 2000.

HEAVEN SENT

Discussion Guide 11

“All Things Work Together . . .”

“‘But I thought,’ I cleared my throat, ‘I thought since you believe in God that . . . you know, He’d like look after you better than the rest of us.’ My voice sounded different in my own head, like from a long way off. He wiped away another tear. ‘God doesn’t promise to make our lives any easier than anyone else’s, Heaven,’ he said quietly. I shrugged. ‘Then what’s the point?’

“‘He just promises to be there when the tough stuff comes. And He will be, Heaven. He’ll be with you—if you want Him. . . .’ He squeezed my hand. ‘He was with us—we were never alone. When the pain got to be too much, I could pray and He’d give me . . . peace.’

“‘Peace, we could all use a little peace,’ I whispered. He nodded and we continued to just sit” (page 191-2).

“Pastor Dan rose to leave. ‘Pastor Dan?’ I grabbed his arm.

‘Yes, Heaven,’ he said, sitting back down.

“‘You know what you said in the prayer—about all things working together for good—what did you mean by that?’ I was clutching his arm, like I was trying to grasp the possibility of things being . . . good” (page 218).

“‘So what you are saying is that it doesn’t matter what I choose. If I trust in God, He will make it work out for the best?’ I smiled. ‘Yes, but don’t be fooled into thinking it will make your path easier. That’s not what He promises. But if you trust Him, then let Him give you guidance. One day you will look back on this time and realise He helped you and you did make the best decision you could make for you and your baby,’ he said” (page 219).

“‘We’re like a mosaic, Heaven. All of us are broken and God takes those broken bits and forms them into a masterpiece. In supporting and loving each other, God makes us into a beautiful picture of His love” (page 216).

Big Idea:

Following God does not mean bad things will not happen—but God promises He will be with us and work things for His glory in the big picture.

This guide works though what it means to claim that God works all things for good. In a sin-filled world, this can seem like a hollow promise, but rather than being a spiritual band-aid, it is an invitation to look at the big picture. This guide introduces the great controversy, human nature and God's plan.

Group Activity:

If you are able to, have an artist show how they mix their colours and use light and darkness to make their picture. Perhaps play a game of "Mr Squiggle" where each person in the group puts a squiggle on paper. They swap paper and each person then must turn the squiggle they are given into a picture.

The Story:

Heaven is only starting to grow a positive picture of God and is still working out how God works and why someone would follow Him. She reflects on a DVD clip that showed a father carrying his child in the rain and heard the explanation that God holds His children close in the storms.

She wonders why God didn't stop the car crash that killed Brad's friend—her cousin, Will. If Brad is such a good guy and follows God, why was he not protected from the drunk driver?

In a discussion with Pastor Dan on adoption, Pastor Dan mentions Romans 8:28 in his prayer where Paul writes, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." While Heaven is not sure just what this means, she starts exploring and comes to find that God is weaving a tapestry and that even the messy parts can be shaped by God into a beautiful picture.

- **If you could talk face to face with God right now and ask Him one question what would it be?**
- **Do you think it's fair for insurance companies to call natural disasters "acts of God"?**
- **Why do you think some people get healed and some don't?**
- **Do you think God can stop every bad thing from happening?**

Explore:

Throughout history, many Christians have claimed the promise in Romans 8:28 that “all things work together for good for those who love Him.” Is it an empty promise just to make us feel better? Is Paul being a “Pollyanna” and just trying to see good in the bad? Does God really shape lives and use the storms of life in shaping us for His glory?

Rain falls on both:

Some people think that because they do what God asks, He owes it to them to protect them. This is how the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans treated their gods. If you offered the right sacrifices and followed the right rituals, then the gods would look after you—so they believed. If something bad happened, you must have upset the gods. Even in the New Testament, people thought that if someone was sick it must have been as a result of something they or their parents had done wrong. In this picture of the world, people try to control God. When bad things happen they give up on God. Sadly, what they are really giving up on is a bad picture of God.

Jesus tried to correct this picture by explaining that the rain falls on both good and bad and what matters is not so much what is happening outside but rather what people are on the inside. God actually tells us in the Bible that the rain will fall on the just and unjust and that storms come upon the wise and foolish (see Matthew 5:45 and 7:24-27). In John 16:33, He reminds His followers that they would have tribulations in this world.

- **Do you think it's fair that the storms of life fall on the good and bad?**
- **Can you think of an example of someone who you think is a good person but has had more than their fair share of bad stuff happen?**
- **Where do you think God is when the bad stuff is happening to this person?**

Paul—the guy who wrote the book of Romans—knew plenty about suffering. He was thrown in gaol, beaten and shipwrecked simply for continuing to preach the gospel. However, in spite of his persecution, he is still able to write that all things work together for good. Jesus does not promise an easy life but He does promise that He will do life with us and in the big picture all will be shaped into a wonderful story of how God works for our good. The good that God works might not be seen immediately. It may be years before we realise how God has shaped heart-breaking events. In fact, in this life, we may never see just how God is working.

- **Can you think of any stories where God has used a person's bad situations for good?**

- **How would you reply to someone who says that they can't believe in a God who lets suffering happen?**
- **What do you think it feels like to be God and see His children suffering?**

Why doesn't God stop the storms?

The question is, if God has the power to stop bad things, why doesn't He? If He can tell the wind to be still, why not stop the storms of life? If an angel can—and seemingly sometimes does—stop car crashes, why not stop the crash that killed Will or every car crash? Why not have an angel step in to protect Heaven from being raped?

Part of the answer is that we live in a world that has chosen sin. Adam and Eve were created perfect, in harmony with God, but their choice to disbelieve God and choose their own way perverted their hearts. In place of love, selfishness grew. You and I were born with this perverted heart and with it the inability to resist sin in our own strength. God does not force anyone to follow Him and when humans chose to go against Him, the world ended up following a plan far short of His ideal for us. Human's choice of sin brings with it pain, hurt and decay.

If God stopped every bad thing happening then He could be accused of manipulating things His way. His accusers could claim that people only follow Him because He stops bad things happening to them (this is what Satan accuses God of in the story of Job). The book of Job suggests God has to work within certain rules of the universe while the war with Satan continues. God's character is on trial before the universe, so He limits His power to fix everything so the universe can see the implications of life outside of God's way. However, when we pray it seems the rules that govern this battle get shifted in some way. We also need to remember that in the big picture God has a plan to make things right again—like He originally planned.

Part of the answer is that human choices have consequences and in a selfish world where sin has its way, the path of sin is being played out. While God can step in and perform a miracle at times, in the big picture sin has to be seen for what it is. Only then can God destroy Satan and still have beings worship out of love and not fear of what He might do to them should they choose otherwise.

Part of the answer is we simply don't understand the big picture. This is what God explains to Habakkuk when he asks why the good are being trampled and the bad are winning (see the book of Habakkuk in the Old Testament). God ends up explaining to Habakkuk that He has a plan beyond our understanding. God is working things out in a way so He can eventually destroy sin and make everything new, without pain, hurt, suffering, tears and decay. He is working in a way that is for the good of those who love Him even if, in our understanding, it doesn't make sense.

- **How would you feel knowing you could stop the suffering and destroy sin right now, yet have to wait until the right time to make it all work in the big picture of the universe?**
- **Can you think of examples that highlight the difference of being controlled by fear or taking action out of love?**

God's Work of Art:

Until Jesus comes again, bad things will increasingly happen to “good” people. God promises that He will be close to the broken-hearted and while the rain will fall, He will hold us close to His heart. When we give our brokenness to Him, He paints our life into something beautiful.

When you look at an artist painting, there are times when we cannot see the object the artist has in mind. It is not until it is finished that all the colours—both bright and dark—work together to make a beautiful picture. Our life is like a beautiful painting! The colours of our life are different shades. Some of the colours are vibrant, while others are grey and sombre, but they can all be “worked together” to shape something of beauty.

Heaven uses the idea of a mosaic where the broken pieces are put together to form a beautiful picture. By itself, each piece is simply broken glass. When shaped by a master craftsman, it becomes a thing of beauty.

- **How do you feel about God taking your broken bits and using them for His masterpiece?**
- **Do you think there are any parts of you that are so broken God can't use them in shaping His masterpiece?**
- **How do you feel about being held in God's arms during the storms of life?**
- **What do you think it means to be “with” God in the “tribulations” of life?**

Look:

Read Romans 8:18-39.

Read through the passage, noting how Paul says we should respond to suffering.

- **What do you think it means when Paul writes that the whole of creation is groaning (see verse 22)? Do you think creation's groaning has got louder since Paul wrote these words?**
- **What do you think it means to wait patiently for God (see verse 25)?**
- **If Heaven asked you to explain Romans 8:28 to her, what would be your answer?**

Paul then asks: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No; none of these hardships—no force, visible or invisible—can frustrate the divine plan of God" (Romans 8:35-39).

- **How do you feel about being a part of God's plan?**

In Psalm 46:1-3, 7 and Isaiah 41:10, God promises He will be with us in suffering.

What Now:

- **What do you think it means to have God with you and hold you in times of suffering?**
- **What ideas do you have to allow God to work through you to help other people who are suffering?**

Go Deeper:

If possible and if you have not already done so, watch Nooma 01 "Rain" by Rob Bell (Zondervan, 2005). This is the DVD Heaven watched that started her re-thinking her picture of God.

Another useful clip that addresses these issues is:
Ty Gibson, digma.com, "Paradigm Shift."

HEAVEN SENT

Discussion Guide 12

“Forgiveness”

“I didn't hear any more of the sermon, I was too busy thinking about Corrie ten Boom and her act of unmerited favour. I wondered if I was capable of that kind of forgiveness—I really didn't think so” (page 183).

“‘But Brad, do you pray for God to help you forgive yourself?’ He looked shocked. So shocked he pulled over. I let my words sink in for a moment before adding. ‘I don't know much about this God business . . . but it seems, from what I've heard of Him, that He probably forgave you already—am I right?’ Brad nodded blankly. He was still shocked by what I'd said. . . .

“‘Well, to me . . . it looks like the only person yet to forgive you . . . is you!’ I said, reaching over to squeeze his arm” (page 248).

Big Idea:

God forgives us and washes our guilt away. We are to forgive others.

In a world that is about my rights and self, forgiveness can seem odd or weak. This study looks at what it means to accept God's forgiveness and the implications for forgiving others.

Group Activity:

Before the group meets, get together a collection of laundry detergent, hair shampoo or other cleaning product packets that have descriptions of what the product does. Hand around the packets and then have each member read their blurb but instead of the brand name substitute “Jesus.” Talk about how it is right to talk about Jesus washing us clean.

The Story:

A sermon Heaven hears leaves her working through what it means to forgive others, particularly her father and her ex-boyfriend. While talking with Brad about the death of Will, she comes to realise that Brad has not forgiven himself for what happened. Even though the accident was not Brad's fault,

he still blames himself. In an unusual twist, Heaven ends up praying for Brad and leading him through the process of self-forgiveness.

- **If you were writing the dictionary how would you define the word “forgive”?**
- **If you had to make a clay model that represented forgiveness what would it be?**
- **What do you think it means to have your heart washed clean?**

Explore:

Heaven blames herself for her “situation” and feels the weight of her “big mistake.” She feels she is not good enough for Brad and is self-conscious about what being pregnant says about her morality, especially around a bunch of Christians. However, from God’s perspective, all of us are broken and fall short of His glory and have no room to judge one another (see Romans 3:23). The best news you will ever hear is that regardless of what you have done God is still head over heels in love with you, wants to forgive you and make you clean.

God Forgives You

Sin—choosing self over God—is the big problem. Sometimes we can forget how serious the sin problem is. We tend to think of sin as something we do, like cheating in a test or telling a lie. This is one definition of sin but the Bible has 12 different definitions of sin including the sin of omission, which is failing to do the good we could have! The actions we most often call sin are really the apples on the apple tree, with the tree being the sin in our heart. Reality is that sin is an issue of the heart and sin equals death. Even if we could stop doing those outward actions we call sin, we would still have the sin problem in our hearts and that’s the big issue.

Sin puts a gap between us and God. This is why Adam and Eve wanted to hide from Him after they first sinned. Ever since, people have tried to avoid God and fill the gap in their hearts with everything else but Him. Like a wrong note in a chord, our hearts are not in harmony with God.

You might think this whole sin thing is not such a problem. You might not go around murdering, stealing, taking God’s name in vain or committing adultery. Maybe you don’t swear—perhaps you don’t even say “shut up.” But how would it feel if we could plug into your brain and have your thoughts put up on a screen for everyone to see?

In Matthew 5, Jesus reminds us that this is where the real action is. He talks about adultery being even looking at another person lustfully. He talks about murder even being thinking badly about someone else. By ourselves, things look pretty grim.

- **What pictures come to your mind when you think of the word “sin”?**
- **What do you think stops people wanting to live in “harmony with God”?**

An Extreme Makeover

God is keen to take your old “stony” heart and give you a new one (see Ezekiel 11:19). Only through Jesus can we be put back into harmony with God. We can try really hard to fix our sinful hearts by ourselves but it makes little difference: “It is impossible for us, of ourselves, to escape from the pit of sin in which we are sunken. Our hearts are evil, and we cannot change them” (Ellen White, *Steps To Christ*, page 18.)

Maybe you will be able to change some outward behaviour by will power. All sorts of people who don't really care about God can manage to overcome bad habits by will power. However, the real problem is still there because sin is an issue of the heart. Remember that humans look at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart (see 1 Samuel 16:7).

You cannot change your heart, only God can do that—but you can choose to live life with Him. It is entirely what Jesus did in dying on the cross, taking on the price for sin, then working in and through us that gives us any ability to grow in His likeness.

- **Why do you think TV makeover shows only deal with external appearance and never deal with people's life issues?**
- **Why do you think so many people today choose to keep their “old” hearts rather than live life with God and receive a new heart?**

Choosing A New Start

Repentance is an unusual word and one not often used today. It means being truly sorry for our wrongdoing and wanting to make a new start. In a world where we look out for ourselves and don't show weakness, people aren't into repenting and confessing of sin. Even in our court system, it seems people only confess if there is some bargain in it for them. Repentance and confession take humility and that's something selfish people do not have.

However, renewal of the heart won't happen without repentance. "Repent and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19). Following his sexual unfaithfulness, King David was truly repentant in the prayer that you can read in Psalm 51. It includes the lines: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10).

Remember we can do none of this by ourselves. We must come to Christ just as we are, repent and allow Him to work in us. It doesn't mean we will all of a sudden no longer have sinful thoughts. It does mean we will allow God to work in us, to prune and grow us and we will be growing in love, grace, forgiveness, mercy and those things that move us toward harmony with God's heart.

Accepting the offer of a new heart is the big deal. It's about us letting God go to work, rather than us working to achieve some idea of perfection. While you might not be perfect, the incredible thing is that in God's eyes you will be seen as perfect in Jesus. When you accept His offer of a new heart, you are described as being "in" Him and His perfect life is counted as yours.

When Jesus comes again and takes us to heaven, we will know what it is to be re-created and have a heart totally in harmony with God. Until then, the prayer of David is a good prayer: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." Psalm 51:10

- **How do you feel when you read that God wants to create a clean heart in you?**

Forgiving Others:

God longs to forgive you and then work through you to forgive others. Jesus spent a great deal of time talking about the importance of forgiving people who have wronged us. He made it clear that forgiveness is to be a characteristic of His followers (see Matthew 8:21-35).

To forgive means to not seek revenge on the one who has hurt us. It means letting go of the anger we harbour inside us and trusting God to deal with the situation. It doesn't mean excusing a wrong or denying that it happened. It means we don't allow ourselves to be consumed with anger toward the one who has done something to us.

After Jesus taught the apostles about forgiveness (see Luke 17:3-5), they said to him, "Give us more faith!" Forgiving is not easy. It takes the strength of God to truly be able to let go. It takes faith and much prayer to say to someone, "I will repay this evil with good. I will not hate you."

Jesus taught, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

- **Why do you think it is so hard for us to forgive people who don't deserve it?**
- **Do you think Heaven should forgive Jarrod? If so, what would change between her and Jarrod? Does forgiveness mean she has to take Jarrod back?**
- **Does forgiving someone mean the offense is forgotten and has no further consequences?**

Tips to help you forgive:

- Do not deny that you have been hurt—forgiving is not denying.
- Make a decision to forgive others (see Luke 17:3–5).
- Do not seek revenge or repay evil for evil. Let God handle it (see Romans 12:17).
- If you are angry, ask Jesus to help you work through your anger (see Ephesians 4:26, 27, 31).
- Pray for a forgiving heart.
- Pray for those who have hurt you (see Matthew 5:44).
- **Which do you think is the hardest of these tips?**

Accepting God's Forgiveness:

Knowing you are forgiven and accepting that in your heart can be quite different. Many people go through life having confessed to God, having made things right with others, but still feeling guilty. Satan wants us to feel as if we are not good enough for God.

Even though Brad's car crash was not his fault, he still feels guilty about it. It's not until Heaven suggests she pray for Brad and then asks God to take away his feelings of guilt that Brad is able to sort through what is going on. Unresolved guilt drives many people to dislike themselves and see themselves as unworthy before God. Remorse can be good. Holding on to guilt is not.

The answer is to recognise that you are made clean by God. You have a fresh, clean heart. Look in the mirror and try to see what God sees rather than what your "unworthy" voice says you are: "There is therefore now no

condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:1).

Look:

Read Romans 8:5-17, John 3:3:

- **What do you think it means to have the spirit of God living in you (see Romans 8:9-11)?**

Read 1 Peter 3:9:

- **What do you think it means to repay someone back with a blessing?**
- **Do you think this attitude is even possible in today's culture?**

Read Luke 7:36-50:

- **What do you think is the main point of Jesus' story?**

Read 2 Corinthians 5:17:

- **How do you feel about being a "new creature"?**

What Now:

- What do you think the evening news would look like if more people were forgiving?
- Is there someone you need to forgive? What's stopping you?

Go Deeper:

Phillip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*.

Andy Stanley, *The Grace of God*, Thomas Nelson, 2010.

John Burke, *Soul Revolution*, Zondervan, 2008.

HEAVEN SENT

Discussion Guide 13

“The Mosaic—Living in Community”

“Brad shook his head, he could see he wasn’t going to get anywhere with this conversation. He sighed again. ‘Look, Heaven, I don’t understand where you got the idea that Christians are all perfect. We’re not—we’re far from it. What makes the church beautiful is all the broken pieces coming together. We’re like a mosaic, Heaven. All of us are broken and God takes those broken bits and forms them into a masterpiece. In supporting and loving each other, God makes us into a beautiful picture of His love’” (page 206).

“I know I’ve only known God for a little while, but I feel the difference. I want Stella to grow up with people who will teach her about Him. I want her to see and be a part of the beautiful mosaic God can make from those who allow Him to be in their lives. For the first time in my life, I feel like I’m not alone. I feel part of something bigger. I want to know more and I want Stella to grow up in a home that lives the mosaic—not just on the weekends but every day” (pages 273-4).

“‘God bless you, Heaven, for what you’ve done for us,’ she cried as we stepped out onto the stage. . . . ‘Trust me, Sharon,’ I added, my heart bursting with joy as we stepped forward to dedicate our children to God, ‘He already has!’” (page 279).

Heaven sees her new church community as a beautiful mosaic of broken lives. This guide looks at what it means to be a “church” community and how loving relationships demonstrate a loving God.

Big Idea:

God created you for community

We live in a culture where consumerism, with its focus on individualism, works against community. This guide looks at what it means to live in community. It particularly looks at the value of church community.

Group Activity:

Provide several pieces of the same jigsaw puzzle (not too many pieces). Then in groups of three, race to get the puzzle done. Time the fastest group and then do the puzzle again with everyone helping and see if the time can be beaten. Main point: working together works.

The Story:

In New Zealand, Heaven becomes part of a church community. Her relatives and Brad connect Heaven into a “wider family” where she feels part of “something bigger.” She meets people at the “3D” afternoon, goes to the worship service and even camping with them. Far from being the judgmental group she thought her pregnant state would highlight, she became part of a community of people who cared about her.

At first, she was unsure about their motives: Why were they being so kind? Did they simply want her baby? However, as she got to know them she decided they were different and this community was exactly the environment she wanted Stella to grow up in.

While Brad and Pastor Dan assured Heaven they were not perfect, they also showed her how the broken lives of people in the church community came together to show a beautiful picture of God’s love. Jesus says people will see God through the love of people in the church (see John 17). For Heaven, that is exactly what happened. When she was making some of the biggest decisions of her life, she had people who cared about her, didn’t judge her and gave her wise advice—and she knew she was not alone.

- **If Heaven came to your youth group, who would she meet? How would she fit it? Would she see God through you?**
- **How do you respond to the new person who comes into connection with your youth group? Do you make them feel part of the group?**
- **When Heaven went out with Brad and his friends from church, Fee was not overly welcoming. What motives do you think stop people from being friendly to others in a church youth group?**

Explore:

We have more ways to connect than ever before. We live closer together than ever before. However, while we can have hundreds of Facebook friends, we are now the loneliest society in the history of the planet. Sure, you need time by yourself. However, God's dream for His children is that we live in deep relationship with each other.

The whole Bible is the story of how God wants to create community, how sin destroys it and how God does whatever it takes to make a way for that community to be experienced again.

You Need Community

We live in a society that puts more emphasis on individualism than it does on community. You and I can easily get caught in this self-serving trap. We think that achieving the next goal will take us closer to happiness. But happiness comes from experiencing community with God and others. Life is about living deeply with other people—people you can laugh with, cry with, share problems with and know that they care about you.

Social networking sites like Facebook can easily give us the wrong picture of community. People share a limited picture of themselves. On Facebook, we often market the image of ourselves we want people to see rather than the whole picture of us with hurts, concerns and the odd things that make us unique. Facebook tends to show us the veneer of a person rather than what is going on in their heart. Facebook can leave us discontent as we see the highlights of everyone else's life and we think we are missing out.

Being a friend on Facebook simply means being added to a list as compared to real-life friendships that take time, can be messy but also are what life is about. We can look up from our Facebook page and 300 friends to find we are still very lonely. When Mark Zuckerberg, the guy who invented Facebook, was made the *Time* magazine's 2010 "Person of the Year," the magazine claimed that Facebook was able to turn people into products (Timothy Willard and Jason Locy, *Veneer: Living Deeply in a Surface Society*, Zondervan, 2011, page 74).

Australian model Lara Bingle seems to have it all. As a 24-year-old model, she is attractive, wealthy, gets invited to all the right parties and seems to have an endless supply of admirers. Yet, in an interview with a newspaper she admitted she is lonely and feels disconnected (*Sunday Telegraph*). People are beginning to realise that in the quest to be what society tells us we should be, something important has gone missing.

- **What do you see as the good things about social networking sites like Facebook?**
- **What do you see as the dangers of social networking sites like Facebook?**
- **How do you think Facebook's definition of a friend compares to real life friends?**
- **Why do you think there are so many lonely people in our society?**

Community is more than a profile page. It's about connecting deeply with people who care about you. If you can't think of people who you can share deeply with, now is the time to re-order your life around God's plan of community.

"No matter how little money we have, no matter what rung we occupy on the ladder of 'success,' in the end we discover that what matters most is people. Human beings who give themselves to relationship building—who have friends they laugh with, cry with, learn with, live and love and grow old and die with—these are the human beings who lead magnificent lives."—John Ortberg, *Everybody Is Normal Till You Get To Know Them*, page 31.

Consumerism Destroys Community

In our culture, consumerism destroys community. Consumerism says life is about me and people exist to be productive. We say that time equals money. Relationships take time and that is one thing people in our society do not have. As consumerism grows, community shrinks. Our society turns people into commodities to be used, rather than God's special treasure.

- **What do you think stops people growing meaningful relationships?**

Your Church Family:

You were not designed to live by yourself; instead, you are to be a part of Christ's family, to be members of His body.

While Christians should care for everyone, even their enemies, they will take special interest in fellow members of their church community: "As we have

opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10). More than times in the New Testament the phrases “one another” and “each other” are used when talking about our church family. We are commanded to love each other, pray for each other, encourage each other, serve each other and teach each other. We are called to accept each other, honour each other, bear each other’s burdens, forgive each other, submit to each other and be devoted to each other.

When we think of the word “church” pictures of a building, service or an organisation are usually first to come to mind. While these are aspects of what it can mean to be a church, they are not primarily what the church is called to be. When Paul thought of the church, his first picture was of people—a living, growing, functioning body, a community on a mission. Paul describes the church as Christ’s body in which we all join together. Even though we are all broken, together we still form Christ’s body—the church. The word that we most often translate “church” in the New Testament is actually the Greek word for community. The New Testament describes the church in terms of connecting, serving, worshipping, sharing and growing *together*.

John uses strong language when talking about the church being a family: “Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). Jesus said that it was love that would identify God’s community, the church: “All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another” (John 13:35). The price for not being in community is enormous. It leads to a church full of people warming pews and looking on but never being changed.

God has called the church to create environments where authentic community can take place. As a church, it is only when we live in authentic community that we can model what happens when people live by God’s guidelines. The church must run counter-clockwise to the world. In place of individualism, we must value interdependence. In place of consumerism, we must value service. In place of things, we must value deep relationships with people. This would truly be the revolution our society desperately needs.

- **On a scale of 1-10 where would you relate your commitment to building community in the church family?**
- **What ideas can you think of to grow community in your youth group?**
- **What about ideas for growing community in your church?**

Community Is Forever:

Community is forever. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17, we find that even in death God still works in community. We do not arrive in heaven one by one or even just a few at a time, but as a community raised or joined together at the Second Coming. At this point, we will really understand the community that God created us to be part of.

- **What would you say are the costs to you of not living in community?**

Look:

Read John 17:20-26

Jesus' prayer in John 17, just before He goes to the cross, reveals His deep dream for community. He desperately wants the disciples to experience God deeply and reflect His love to one another. He then prays for future believers—including you and me.

- **Why do you think Jesus' prayer, just before He goes to the cross, was all about community?**
- **What do you think it means to live in unity? Is it the same as uniformity? Can you live in unity yet have different opinions?**
- **Where does Jesus, in John 17, say that true community starts?**

"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:2, 3).

Have each person look up one verse from the list below. Then have them summarise what that verse says about community and an idea they might have for how they can go about living out that idea.

- Romans 12:10
- Ephesians 4:2, 32
- Galatians 6:2
- Ephesians 5:21
- Colossians 3:16

- 1 Thessalonians 5:11
- Hebrews 10:24
- James 5:16

What Now:

- **What changes can you make right now in your life to build community?**
- **How can you make your home, school/workplace and church a better community?**

Go Deeper:

Gilbert Bilezekian, *Community 101*, Zondervan, 1997.

John Burke, *No Perfect People Allowed*, Zondervan, 2005.