

# **Lenten Study:**

## **“Questioning Our Grip on the Cross”**



### **Study 1**

**Making sense of the world.  
Making sense of God.**

## **Lenten Study: *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross***

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### **PRELIMINARY NOTES**

This Lenten Study has been prepared for use in study groups at Blackwood Uniting Church and other interested groups. It is hoped that engaging with this study series will, in some small way, lead to a deepening of understanding and an enlivening of personal faith.

It has been my observation that there are some people for whom reflection on their beliefs and understanding of the Christian faith seems not to be so terribly important, so focussed are they on compassionately *living* their faith, through acts of service and love. If you are in that category, all I ask is that I continue to be permitted to sit at your feet and to learn from, and be inspired by, the ways of your heart.

It is my view that Christian practices, including engaging in studies such as this, are valuable insofar as they contribute to our change and growth as human beings, better enabling us to engage positively with the world, and lovingly and compassionately with those around us. Whether this study contributes in such a way remains to be seen, but...*one lives in hope!*

A word about the reflection questions that accompany each study. Please consider these as suggestive, rather than prescriptive. They are not questions which I'm expecting you to answer like it's some sort of exam! Some of the questions I have raised may be questions that also come to *your* mind. Some questions may not have occurred to you, and you may deem them worthy of exploration. Other questions may have no interest or relevance to you at all.

To the extent that the questions are helpful in facilitating discussion in your group, or sparking your own thoughts, use them. Otherwise consider them of no account.

### **TWO WAYS OF ENGAGING WITH THE STUDY SERIES:**

#### **Study documents and YouTube video clips**

Study participants have two ways in which they can engage with the study materials. Firstly, there are the printed studies, which are also available as downloadable PDF documents that can be viewed on your computer, tablet or smartphone. Secondly, there are YouTube videos for each of the seven studies. It is hoped that these two study media will complement each other, but either can be used separately too.

How each group approaches the study is, of course, up to them. I would anticipate, however, that it may be helpful for a study group to first watch together the YouTube video for the particular week's study, and then discuss the study, using the printed/PDF study notes as a reference. The links to the downloadable PDF files and to the YouTube videos can be found at:

<http://blackwooduc.org.au/downloads/studies/lentenstudy2022>

I hope that you appreciate this study series *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross*.

Michael Dowling  
Minister  
Blackwood Uniting Church  
Email: minister@blackwooduc.org.au

This page has been left intentionally...  
well, okay, it's not exactly blank, but it's *nearly* blank.  
I wanted to give you a little bit of *space* before the study commences.  
Study 1 is the "heaviest" of the studies,  
both in terms of the presentation of ideas  
and in terms of the emotional heaviness.  
Hang in there!  
There will be more "lightness" in the studies that follow.

### Setting the scene for this Lenten Study

The cross of Jesus is the central symbol of the Christian faith. So regularly is the cross referred to in hymns, songs, scripture, prayers and in physical symbols within our churches that it has become “the water in which we swim” as followers of Jesus. The cross has become the accepted and unquestioned reality of the Christian faith. Herein lies the problem. When something is completely unquestioned, there is no inclination to examine the presuppositions behind it; instead it is simply accepted without scrutiny. This study, *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross*, is an invitation to explore and examine our own presuppositions surrounding the cross of Jesus.

The title of the study deliberately incorporates a double-meaning: a willingness to question how tightly we cling to the cross and why; and also a willingness to question our logical and emotional grip on, or understanding of, the cross. It is my hope that a willingness to examine and subject to scrutiny previously unexamined presuppositions around the cross may help lead us, ultimately, to a deeper and richer faith.

### Making sense of the world: Philosophy and the sciences

Human beings have always had a need to make sense of the world. A critical part of this has been the survival imperative, for the more one can understand about the workings of the world, the greater are one’s chances of surviving in this often-dangerous world. But there is also the yearning in the human heart to ask the sort of questions that *philosophy* asks. What can be understood about the world? How did the world come about? What sort of “stuff” are we made of? What is the purpose of life?

As philosophy asked more and more detailed questions, more and more disciplines and sub-disciplines spun off the mothership of philosophy: mathematics and science; physics, chemistry and biology; and an endless series of sub-specialities.

All of these approaches to making sense of the world share two things in common. First, each of these approaches seek to establish a framework for understanding, interpreting, and predicting events in the world. Second, each of these approaches, constructs a “model” to describe reality, rather than representing reality itself.

### Making sense of the world: Religion

But what about *religion*?

It is not unreasonable to consider religion as another path to constructing a viable model of reality; but here we begin to tread on sensitive ground. We might be willing to consider “religions in general” to be reasonably described as *models* of reality, but how open are we to considering our own religion, Christianity, as a “model”? I’ve heard numerous Christians say that Christianity is *not* a religion as such. Religions, they say, are human constructions, whereas Christianity is nothing less than God’s revealed truth. Viewed in such a way, Christianity is no “model” of reality, but represents reality itself. Christianity is God’s Capital-T Truth: The Truth, the Whole Truth, and nothing-but-the-Truth.

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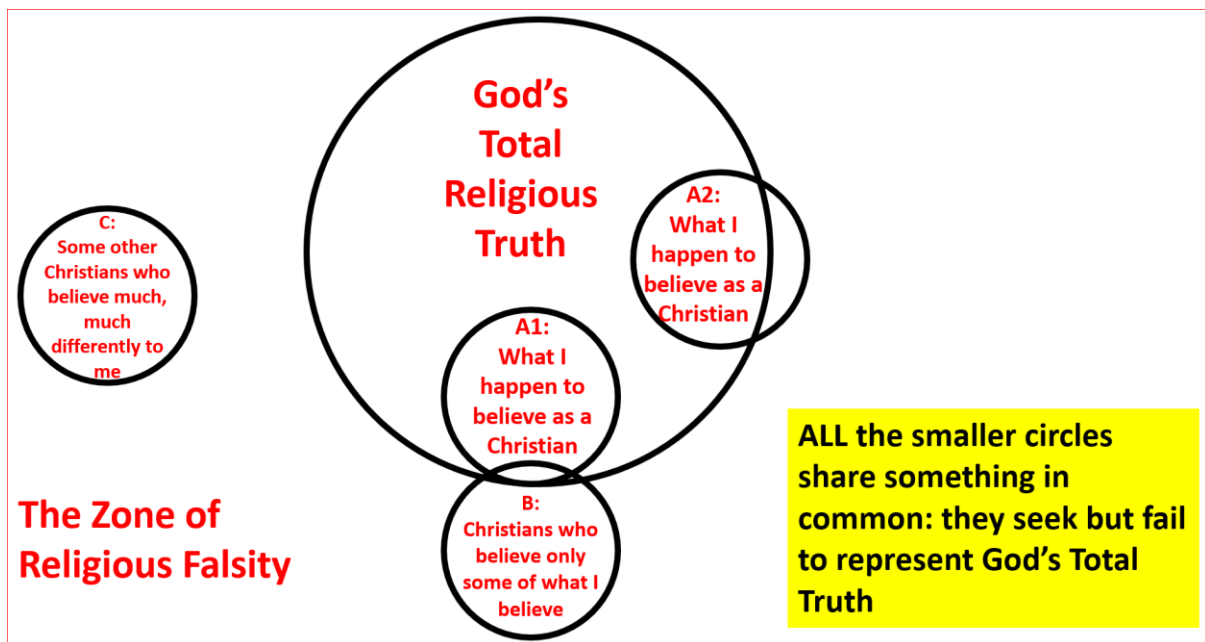
If this happens to be your particular position, then I would ask, “Which Christianity are you claiming represents God’s Total Truth?”

If you happen to be a *Conservative Christian*, are you saying that Progressive Christians *also* possess God’s Total Truth? I suspect not.

If you are instead a *Progressive Christian*, are you saying that Conservative Christians *also* possess God’s Total Truth? Again, I suspect not.

Whom then, along the very broad spectrum of Christian belief, are you saying *does* actually possess God’s Total Truth?

Consider the diagram below. The large central circle represents **God’s Total Religious Truth**. This is The Truth, the Whole Truth, and nothing-but-the-Truth, at least when it comes to *religious* truth. We will leave things like scientific and mathematical truths to one side. Outside this large central circle is the **Zone of Religious Falsity**. Where do *you*, as a Christian, see *your* beliefs in such a diagram? Where would you draw *your* particular circle? Unless you happen to be an authoritarian cult leader, I suspect that you *don’t* see your circle as being entirely coincident with **God’s Total Religious Truth** circle! Instead, I suspect that you might be prepared to accept that you do not grasp the totality of **God’s Total Religious Truth**. In other words, the circle representing *your* understanding is *smaller* than the circle of God’s Total Religious Truth.



Perhaps you might sit in either of circles A1 or A2:

**Circle A1:** You don’t possess the totality of God’s Total Religious Truth, but you certainly don’t have any false beliefs.

**Circle A2:** You don’t possess the totality of God’s Total Religious Truth, but possess instead some of God’s religious truth, as well as having *some* beliefs that may be *false*.

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Do either of these circles describe you and, if not, where would you draw *your* circle?

What about those holding Christian beliefs that *differ* from your own?  
(I've kept the diagram simple, by not including non-Christian religions)

If we consider the very wide spectrum of Christian belief, from extreme fundamentalist to extreme progressive, where do you place people from these varying groups on the diagram?

### **Circle B in comparison to yourself as circle A1:**

Christians who believe only some of what you believe.

In this case, everything these Christians believe in opposition to you is false.

In other words, whilst you have much to teach them that is true, they have nothing to teach you that is true.

**Circle C:** Some Christians who believe much, much differently to you.

The circle of these Christians lies *entirely* in the ***Zone of Religious Falsity***.

You might be tempted to call them, using a particular turn of phrase, "not real Christians."

All of these smaller circles, including our own, share something in common: ***they each seek, but fail, to represent God's Total Religious Truth.***

*Can I accept, however reluctantly, that my Christian faith and understanding is an "incomplete model" of God's Total Truth?*

If we can, this allows the possibility, as we work through the study, of gaining new insights, and perhaps even identifying underlying beliefs we hold that may be questionable.



### **Theodicy: The challenge faced by monotheistic religions**

Monotheistic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam face a particular challenge that polytheistic religions do not. The polytheistic religions of the ancient Greeks and Romans posited the existence of many, many gods, often at odds with one another, capricious and amoral in their behaviour, and prone to treating humans as their playthings. If the world we inhabit seems a dangerous and unpredictable place, that's hardly surprising because it exists at the whim of the gods, and the realm of the gods, frankly, is also a bit of a mess.

Monotheism, which emerged in the Middle East, offers no such easy explanation. With monotheism – the notion that there is one and only one God – the challenge of providing a religious explanation for the world we inhabit becomes extremely acute. The three monotheistic faiths believe in *one* all-powerful, all-loving God.

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This belief is challenged when it comes head-to-head with the observation that we live in a world that is, at times, dangerous, violent, and prone to natural disaster; that is, to use a much-banded term, “evil.”

### The key question:

**Why did a perfect, all-powerful, all-loving God create a world that contains evil?**

*If* God is all-loving, wouldn't that God have *wanted* to create a perfect world?

*If* God is all-powerful, wouldn't that God have *been able* to create a perfect world?

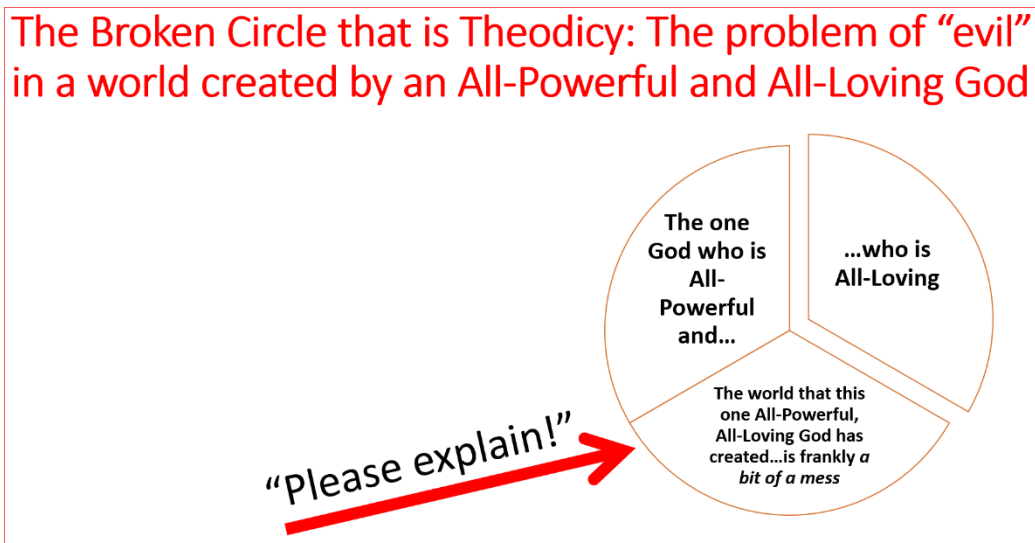
The questions above lead us, naturally, to question our starting premises:

Perhaps God *is* all-loving, but *not* all-powerful?

Or, perhaps God *is* all-powerful, but *not* all-loving?

Or perhaps those things we deem as “evil” are *not* actually evil at all?

Any way you cut it, the belief in a God who is *both* all-powerful *and* all-loving God, coupled with the existence of evil in a world created by such a God, creates a problem. Theologians give this particular problem a name: the **theodicy** problem.



Attempts by the monotheistic religions to solve the theodicy problem are, within their monotheistic frameworks, “*models* to explain the world we actually live in.”

### **Theological hand-wringing**

There is much angst on the part of certain Christian theologians when it comes to the subject of theodicy. They wring their hands over the idea that the God of the Bible, whom they assert is “all-powerful and all-loving,” could possibly have created a world that exhibits certain less-than-all-loving aspects such as, for instance, human beings that make a habit of killing each other. “How is it,” they ask, “that the all-loving God of the Bible could create such a world?!”



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Perhaps, though, there is less reason for puzzlement than these theologians seem to indicate.

Before continuing, please read:

***Appendix to Study 1: The “All-Loving” God of the Bible?***

*Be sure to take some slow, deep breaths both before and after reading Appendix 1...*

### Have we indeed solved the theodicy problem?!

After reading such texts, in which God is depicted as being, at times, *hateful and violent*, is it really so hard to understand such a God creating a world that is, at times, *hateful and violent*?

If we believe in the veracity of these texts, is not the theodicy problem instantly solved?

If we believe in the veracity of these texts, does not the ambivalence of human nature (that we can be *both* loving *and* violent) simply mirror the biblically depicted ambivalence in the divine nature?



### Texts of Divine Violence: What to do with such texts?

To pose the bumper sticker question: **WWJD?**

***What would Jesus do ...if given a knife by Moses and told that it was God's will that he cut the throats of the Midianite infant boys?  
(Numbers 31: 15-18)***





***“No! That’s it!  
I’ve had enough!  
I’m too depressed to  
go on!”***

If you’re feeling a bit like this at the moment, **then I empathize with you, *very much!***  
Such texts also make *me* feel very uncomfortable.

*If you are like most people...*

You may prefer to do nothing with such texts.

You may prefer to look away from them.

You may prefer that sermons and Bible studies steer away from them.

Because such texts make you feel *uncomfortable*.

You may also feel that such texts have no relevance to your Christian faith, which is centred around the person of Jesus; so why would you bother wasting your time looking at them?

Once again, ***I empathize very much!***

Such texts do ***not*** inspire and motivate ***my*** Christian faith.

I am drawn instead to ***the God of love*** revealed in the life of Jesus of Nazareth!

Yes! I am drawn to the ***all-loving God*** revealed in the life of Jesus!

Yes! You heard me correctly! I ***do*** believe in an ***all-loving*** God!



***“Then why, oh why, are we  
spending our time looking at  
these hideous texts?!”***

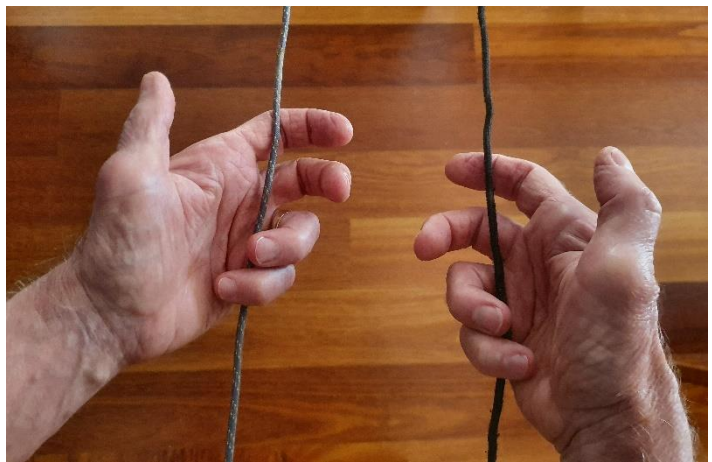
***That is an excellent question!***

It is the assertion of this Lenten study that the unquestioned, background acceptance of these biblical texts of violence-masquerading-as-the-will-of-God contribute, ultimately, to our acceptance of theologies of violence surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus. **If we are to recognise violence that is rarely named as such, it is important, therefore, that we sensitize ourselves to violence from the outset.** That is the purpose of looking, with no hint of averting our gaze, from these overt examples of divine violence in the biblical text.

### ***Following the threads...of violence and of love***

As we continue through this study series, we shall find ourselves following two different threads: the thread of ***violence*** and the thread of ***love***.

An acceptance of violence, both in our world and in our theology, leads inexorably to further violence. **In contrast, a rejection of violence in all its forms, including theological violence, follows the path of love, and holds enduringly to the fundamental reality of an all-loving God.**



Both these threads – of violence and of love – will lead us, ultimately, to the cross.

## **Study 1 Reflection Questions**

### **1: TRUTH CIRCLES DIAGRAM**

How helpful or unhelpful is such a diagram in navigating our differences in belief?  
Have you ever thought of your Christian understanding as “an incomplete model” which is open to being updated?  
Is this religious-understanding-as-a-model concept helpful or unhelpful and, if so, how?

### **2: THE AMBIVALENCE IN GOD’S BEHAVIOUR AS DEPICTED IN THE BIBLE**

How do you feel when you read Old Testament passages such as those in the appendix?  
How do you respond to the threads of divine love and divine violence?  
Are the passages depicting divine violence consistent with the God of love revealed in Jesus of Nazareth?  
On the occasions you encounter them, how do you “make sense” of such passages?

### **3: DO WE EVER USE THE “RICHARD NIXON DEFENCE” TO DEFEND GOD?**

The “Richard Nixon defence” is based on the famous line from President Richard Nixon in his interviews with David Frost, defending his actions in the Watergate conspiracy: “When the *President* does it, it’s not illegal!”

Can “The Richard Nixon Defence” ever be applied to *God’s* behaviour: “**If God does it, then it’s *not*: unloving, violent, murder, genocide!**”

Does an evil act somehow become a good act if God commands it, or is evil (e.g. the murder of defenceless children) *always* intrinsically evil?



How do you feel when people, either laity or ministers, seek to “justify” what you deem indefensible behaviours by God in the Bible?

How do you feel when Old Testament passages such as those in the appendix are avoided or glossed over? Are you relieved, or do you think it’s a cop-out?

### **4: THEODICY PROBLEM**

What do you think about the theodicy problem?

How do you reconcile the existence of a less-than-perfect-world with its creation by a “perfect, all-powerful and all-loving God”?

Do you question whether God is indeed all-powerful?  
Might there be some things that God is simply powerless to do or to prevent?

Do you continue to hold to the notion of an all-loving God, or do you question at times whether God is indeed all-loving?

How do you view the less-than-satisfactory nature of existence?  
Do you see this as implying a deficiency on God’s part as Creator?

## **Appendix to Study 1: The “All-Loving” God of the Bible?**

*This is a very limited sampling from the Old Testament...*

### **Psalm 13:5**

But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.

### **Psalm 36:5**

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.

### **Psalm 63:3**

Your unfailing love is better than life itself; how I praise you!

### **1 Samuel 15:1-3**

Samuel said to Saul... Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.’”

### **Deuteronomy 20: 16-17**

But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded.

### **Numbers 31: 15-18**

Moses said to them, “Have you allowed all the women to live? These women here, on Balaam’s advice, made the Israelites act treacherously against the Lord in the affair of Peor, so that the plague came among the congregation of the Lord. Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man by sleeping with him. But all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves.



***News flash  
from Sunday  
School!***

“Miss, Miss! I think I might have solved the theodicy problem!”

“Yes, Johnny?”

“Well, the Old Testament shows God as being *loving*, but it *also* shows God as being *really angry*. And sometimes, when God is really angry, God lashes out and, well, God just wants to kill a lot of people, and wants the Israelites to kill a lot of people too. So, Miss, *if* we believe the Bible, then maybe God *isn’t* all-loving, all the time, after all. Maybe that would explain why we aren’t either?”

“Johnny! Wash your mouth with soap and water!”



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  - ❖ **A place . . .**
    - ★ **of love**
    - ★ **of safety**
    - ★ **of integrity**
    - ★ **of compassion**
      - ✓ **to listen**
      - ✓ **to connect**
      - ✓ **to ask hard questions**
      - ✓ **to contemplate God.**