# The loving Father we all need: Tony Hoang

## Lesson overview

Tony Hoang is an ex-drug dealer who now works as a pastor at a church in Fairfield and tells his story to high school students. As a teenager, Tony was making $10,000 a week dealing heroin. At 21, he hit rock bottom, went into the church he’d attended as a child, and asked God for a sign – which God provided the very next day. His extraordinary story has caught the attention of people both within and outside the church, and he has given interviews in the secular media such as on Richard Fidler’s *Conversations* show on ABC Radio.

**Teacher note:** This lesson will work best (and Tony’s testimony will be most powerful) if you do not share any of these details with students before the lesson begins.

### Learning intentions

Students will learn about:

* How Tony Hoang pursued a life of crime, hit rock bottom, and then found Jesus
* The love of God for anyone who chooses to follow Jesus, no matter what they have been or done in the past.

### Success criteria

Students will be able to:

* Identify some attributes of God the loving Father from Bible verses (especially the story of the Prodigal Son) and link these to Tony Hoang’s story
* Demonstrate their understanding that we are saved by Jesus and not by being ‘good’.

### Note to teacher

The video extract has been carefully edited to omit Tony talking about his suicide attempts before his conversion. Be aware that if you send students off to find out more about Tony’s life, they are likely to encounter this material.

### Bible content

Psalm 30:1–3, 11–12; Matthew 18:12–14; Luke 15:11–32, 23:32–43; John 3:16; Romans 5:6–8; 1 John 3:1

### Link to Australian Curriculum

General capabilities – Personal and Social Capability; Ethical Understanding; Intercultural Understanding.

## Lesson plan

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| Preparing the lesson  * View the video content and read the questions that accompany each segment. * Read through the material provided and select the activities and Bible content you wish to use with your students.   **Note:** there are quite a few activities and Scripture passages provided for this lesson. You may wish to give greater focus to some activities and/or some Bible verses than others. You can omit or modify content as appropriate for your class and the time you have available.   * Use the resources listed in ‘Further reading’ if you wish to explore the topic more fully for your own reference before teaching. |

### A. Discussion starter (7 mins)

Say to students:

*Imagine there are three people who have decided they want to be with God forever when they die – or, to use a clichéd picture, they’re lining up at the ‘gates of Heaven’. The people are:*

1. *A volunteer charity worker who has quietly helped countless young homeless people to kick drug habits, find new homes and get stable jobs – all without payment or public acknowledgement*
2. *A drug dealer who has made money for many years from the misery and addiction of countless people, some of whom may well have died due to his activities*
3. *A middle-aged mum who is living a pretty good life, working hard to earn money and look after her family, but also sometimes steals lipsticks or pieces of clothing when she wants something nice for herself.*

*According to most people in the world, which of these people should be ‘allowed in’, and why?* *(You can choose one person, two people or all three.)*

### B. Teacher introduction (1 min)

Read this introduction to the video:

*In the video we’re about to watch, you’ll see interviewer Karl Faase talking to a guy called Tony Hoang. Tony’s parents fled the communist regime in Vietnam in 1980 and arrived in Australia on a boat. Like many refugee families, they had to work very hard to support their family of ten kids. Tony’s father spoke only Vietnamese, but Tony’s main language was English, so his communication with his father was limited. Life at home was not easy.*

### C. Show video (approx. 10 mins including questions)

While the video is playing/after it has finished, ask students to write answers to the following viewing and listening questions:

1. Why did Tony Hoang begin to resent his dad and look for other role models?

2. What drew Tony towards gang life? What did he find there?

3. How did his mother respond to his arrest? How do you think you would feel in this situation?

4. Think about Tony’s life in the years after he got out of jail aged 14. What made him do the things he did? What would you have done in his situation?

5. What did Tony ask for when he cried out to God, and how did God answer?

6. Where did Tony find true acceptance?

**Teacher note:** Prompt students to see that Tony was looking for acceptance in the wrong place, and found true acceptance in being loved by his Heavenly Father.

### D. Quick discussion activity (2 mins)

Say to students: *What did you think was the most surprising aspect of Tony’s story?*

### E. A similar story – in the Bible (10 mins)

Read the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32) together.

(Alternatively, show the story in video form – e.g. this one, just under 5 mins long: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJgROx4wFKM&ab_channel=SaddlebackKids>)

Discussion questions:

1. *What similarities are there between Tony Hoang and the young son in the story?* (Prompt for how he was selfish, careless, hurt others, hit rock bottom, realised his need to humbly admit his wrong and need for a father, took the step of coming back, received love …)

2. *What similarities are there between God and the father in the story?* (Prompt for how both God and the father in the story don’t mention the past or the wrongdoing, pour out their love on Tony and the prodigal son respectively, don’t require any proof of worthiness/promises/ paying back/making up for the past …)

3*. When Jesus told this story, he wanted people to see that it doesn’t only apply to the ‘bad’ people in society. In what ways might all people actually be like the young son in the story (and also like Tony Hoang)?* (Prompt for how we all try to live our own way but we all have a Father who wants us to live in relationship with him and will forgive us if we turn back to him; how we all crave true acceptance and sometimes look for it on the wrong places …)

### F. Optional extra Bible verses (10 mins – in addition to the 40 mins of other material)

**Teacher note:** This material can be used to expand students’ thinking about God’s love for us in spite of our unworthiness. Use if time permits – e.g. you have a longer lesson than normal, or you wish to spread this one over two lessons – *OR* skip to the closing activity.

Read some or all of the following Bible verses together and identify (a) how they connect to Tony’s story and (b) what attributes of God’s/Jesus’s character they reveal. (You can ask students to fill in this table independently, or hand it out as a note-taking scaffold to be used while you explain the connections, or just discuss. To save time, you could divide students into groups and allocate verses to different groups.)

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| **Bible verses** | **What attribute of God/Jesus do you see in this quote?** | **How does this relate to Tony’s Hoang’s story?** |
| **Ps 30:1–3, 11–12**  I will exalt you, Lord,     for you lifted me out of the depths     and did not let my enemies gloat over me. Lord my God, I called to you for help,     and you healed me. You, Lord, brought me up from the realm of the dead;     you spared me from going down to the pit.  …  You turned my wailing into dancing;     you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.     Lord my God, I will praise you forever. |  |  |
| **Matthew 18:12–14**  “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.” |  |  |
| **Luke 23:32–43**  Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.  The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.”  The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”  There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the jews.  One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”  But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”  Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.[b]”  Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” |  |  |
| **John 3:16**  For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. |  |  |
| **Romans 5:6–8**  You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. |  |  |
| **1 John 3:1**  See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! |  |  |

### G. Closing discussion/writing questions (10 mins)

(Choose one of these if time is limited.) Say to students:

1. *Tony now works as a Christian pastor and tells his story to school students in the hope that they will understand God’s love for them. Why is he able to be so sure that God forgives him and that he will be with God forever, in spite of the things he did in the past?*

2. *Think back to our opening discussion about the three people at the gates of Heaven. How might people be like the older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son? Why is this not consistent with what the Bible teaches?*

### H. Going deeper: optional extension ideas

Depending on available lesson time, students’ interests and school priorities, teachers may wish to build on this lesson plan and further explore:

* A study of the psalms in which the psalmists express faith in God in hard times or cry out to God because they know he’s the only one who can save them (e.g. Psalms 13, 23, 30, 51, 63, 71, 121)
* A deeper study of key verses from Romans that lay out our sinfulness, our need for God, and God’s saving grace
* Apologetics addressing the notion of only ‘good’ people being worthy of God’s love
* Ideas about asking for signs from God, having extraordinary conversion experiences, etc. – and the fact that these are not everyone’s experience; every genuine experience of God’s love is valid.

### I. Further reading

* Karl Faase with George Marriot, *Faith Runs Deep Anthology: Unearthing stories of faith in Australia*, Olive Tree Media, 2022
* ABC NEWS article: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-05-14/religion-meet-tony-hoang-the-gangster-and-dealer-turned-pastor/102317864>
* ABC Radio ‘Conversations’ podcast interview August 2022 with Tony Hoang: <https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/conversations/conversations-heroin-drug-dealing-cabramatta-redemption-god-hope/14005384>
* Video version of the Prodigal Son story: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJgROx4wFKM&ab_channel=SaddlebackKids>