



**ADULT LESSON GUIDE
SPRING 2025**

**LETTERS
FROM PRISON**

Living Godly in an
Ungodly World

**GRACE FOR
OUTSIDERS**

God Reaches to the Margins

**FROM MURDERER TO
MISSIONARY**

Paul's Story of
Transformation

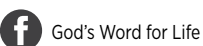
**GOD'S
WORD**
FOR LIFE



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GOD'S WORD



FOR LIFE

**ADULT LESSON GUIDE
SPRING 2025**

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LESSON GUIDE

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GETTING STARTED

The first page of each lesson gives pertinent information that will be foundational for teaching the lesson. Here you will find the Lesson Title, the Truth about God, the Truth for My Life, and both the Focus Verses and Lesson Text. In addition, a callout box will either give an overview of the series (the first lesson of each series contains this information) or will connect students with their daily devotional activity from the previous week.

MARCH 2, 2025
SERIES 1: LETTERS FROM PRISON

1.1

BY GRACE YE ARE SAVED

FOCUS VERSE
Ephesians 2:8
For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.

LESSON TEXT
Luke 19:10;
Ephesians 2:4-6

TRUTH ABOUT GOD
God is undeserving to us.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE
I will respond to grace through repentance.



Series Overview:
Paul penned two of his epistles, Ephesians and Philippians, from prison to minister to the church. The principles from these two short books give us a lesson to live godly, even in an ungodly world.

LESSON 11

SG TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: What is the worst job you have had in your life?
Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection

- I. GOD OFFERS GRACE TO ALL
 - A. God Extends His Grace to Us Because of His Great Love
 - B. God's Grace Saves Us
 - Why do we sometimes struggle to accept God's grace?
 - C. I Will Receive God's Grace
 - How would you describe a humble response to another person's failure? How would you describe a humble response to your own failure?
- II. JESUS WAS GRACIOUS TO ZACCHAEUS
 - A. Zacchaeus Was a Chief Tax Collector and Undoubtedly Was Hated
 - Why are labels harmful?
 - B. Jesus Graciously Spent Time with Zacchaeus
 - How would your actions toward others change by viewing others from a heavenly perspective (seeing what is most true about them)?
 - C. I Will Cherish Time with Jesus
 - What, if anything, keeps you from cherishing time spent with Jesus? What distractions, thoughts, or feelings get in the way?
- III. ZACCHAEUS'S RESPONSE TO GRACE
 - A. Zacchaeus Repented and Vowed to Make Restitution **W**
 - B. Jesus Affirmed Zacchaeus's Repentance
 - C. I Will Respond to Grace through Repentance

Internalizing the Message **I**

Prayer Focus
Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us see others as He sees them and to value them based on His perspective rather than our own
- For God to give us the strength and courage to live according to His values

SG TEACHING OUTLINE

The SG (Small Group) Teaching Outline is the lesson content in outline form. Each lesson main point is listed along with suggested discussion questions. Although the outline can be used to teach the lesson in a large group setting, the "SG" indicates the content is also designed to be used in a Small Group. Because of this, an icebreaker question has been provided to help jump-start interaction in the Small Group meeting.

SPRING LESSON 11

LESSON CONNECTION

A scholar named James Wilhoit tried to convey the role (or lack) of a believer simply receiving the grace of God. In one of his books, he shared the story of the birth of his second daughter and her battle with jaundice during her early days. For treatment, the doctor prescribed sunlight. Thinking there surely had to be a more sophisticated and complex treatment to cure his newborn baby, he asked the doctor what else could be done. The doctor patiently explained that jaundice is caused by too much bilirubin in a newborn's red blood cells, and light helps break down the excess bilirubin into waste products the kidneys can eliminate.

The cure really was as simple as sunlight. She didn't have to perform any special activity. Neither she nor her concerned dad exerted any grueling effort. Just sit in the sun. Still unsure and a bit reluctant, her worried parents placed their daughter on a pallet of blankets in her drape in front of the living room windows that welcomed large amounts of sunlight. As the day progressed, her attentive and loving parents adjusted her position to keep her in full view of the sun. "The cure did not depend on her but on her being kept in the light" (James Wilhoit, Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered).

Roughly a year and a half earlier, James and his wife were walking through their neighborhood and crossed paths with another couple strolling with their firstborn baby girl. On the sunny but cool March day, their neighbor's child lay in a stroller covered by a canopy while snugly wrapped head to toe with only a small portion of her face showing. The other couple explained she had jaundice and according to her doctors should be out in the sun. "Yet here she was outdoors, but not in the sunlight."

As James watched his newborn lay on their living room floor in full view of the sun, he realized: "so often I come to God only revealing the tiniest patch of skin for His healing light. For me, the clothing that blocks the healing light of Jesus most often is my pride, seen in the form of denial—deny that I need cleansing" (Wilhoit).

What Wilhoit discovered beckons to each of us as well: the cure does not depend on us, but on us keeping ourselves in the light of God's grace. Rather than deny and refuse—or worse, try to manufacture—our healing, we can simply receive it. God wants us to live it even more than we want it.

LESSON CONNECTION

Most often the Lesson Connection will be a story or illustration designed to give students a glimpse of the overall theme of the lesson. Since stories often appeal to the heart and emotions, this portion of the lesson seeks to engage the heart to receive the truth that will be taught. You are encouraged to personalize this section and include your own testimony to help students connect to the lesson.

BIBLE LESSON

The Bible Lesson is a manuscript of the entire lesson. The lessons are written by various Apostolic authors who not only skillfully explain the truths of Scripture but also share ways we can apply these truths to our lives. The lesson contains discussion questions to stimulate thought and media callouts (videos and images available in the Adult Resource Kit) to connect with students of all learning styles.

BIBLE LESSON

I. GOD OFFERS GRACE TO ALL

God has made His grace available for all who have "had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind" (Ephesians 2:3). According to Romans 3:23, we are all included. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Thankfully, that is not the final word on the matter. Paul continued his thought in the next verse: "being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). This free and undeserved grace saves all of us from living a life governed by sin and the authority of the evil one.

A. God Extends His Grace to Us Because of His Great Love

The weighty impact of Ephesians 2:4-8 is tied to the foundational work Paul established in the closing verses of chapter one. In its context, Ephesians 2:4 functions as a turning point toward hope. In stark contrast to the last three verses of chapter one that speak of the authority God has over "all principality, and power, and might, and dominion" (Ephesians 1:21), the first three verses of chapter two speak of the power that exerts itself over every human and the immoral state of every human. Though it may seem they contradict one another, Paul aligned them to send a powerful message. As humans, we have no natural power to defeat the devil and sin, but God does. Because of "his great love wherewith he loved us" (Ephesians 2:4), He gives us the undeserved, unearned blessing (simple definition of grace) of His authority and power over the dominion of sin and the devil. Truly it is "by grace ye are saved" (Ephesians 2:5).

B. God's Grace Saves Us

God recognizes our predicament as human beings and, in His great love, offers us rescue and redemption. "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved)" (Ephesians 2:4-5). When we are hopeless and bound, He offers us hope and freedom. We are outmatched and incapable of conquering sin, the kingdom of darkness, and death on our own. Not even our religious activities can save us. We do not earn our salvation by our good deeds; how many hours we have banked in prayer or meals we have missed by fasting. A fully completed Bible reading chart or perfect attendance at the church roll does not bring about salvation. While these spiritual disciplines are some signs of a transforming disciple, only God's grace saves us.

Perhaps familiar sayings like "you can't get something for nothing" have distorted our understanding of the biblical concept of grace. The influence of our contemporary way of thinking may cause us to think of our relationship with God as

11

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit.

You really should meet Nigel. He is a rambunctious and adorable cockspoo (cockie spaniel and poodle mix) that loves his human. Nigel's caregiver brought him to live at her house when he was just eight weeks old. This tiny, black furball nestled between her back and the seat of the car for a good portion of their four-hour drive home. For several weeks during the house-breaking phase, his caregiver used her lunch breaks at work to drive home, let him out of his crate, play with him, and teach him to go outside for his business. Nigel grew big and strong, and, as you might expect, loved his backyard. However, the backyard presented some issues, namely fleas.

Nigel's human's house sits in a neighborhood full of trees, not too far from a creek that inhabits all sorts of creatures: groundhogs, wild turkeys, raccoons, opossums, rabbits, and squirrels. Neither he nor his human know whom to blame, but during certain seasons of the year, fleas are a major problem. While Nigel adores his backyard, he does not adore the endless torment those tiny, pesky pests cause him.

His scratching and licking has disturbed more than one night's sleep and agitated more than one midday nap. The small pests interrupt playtime, bring cuddle time to a screeching halt, and limit time in his beloved backyard. For all Nigel is able to do—such as sit, stay, shake, speak, high-five, roll over, and play dead—he has not yet mastered how to rid himself of the fleas.

Enter Nigel's human. She immediately recognizes his struggle, sometimes before he does, and her heart goes out to him. She will stop at the store, spend her hard-earned money, and buy another box of flea treatment or bottles of flea shampoo to help her poor, tormented pup. She will sit with a flea comb and, for as long as he will let her, lovingly and attentively rise through his black curls to rid him of those chomping nuisances.

Nigel's human wields superior authority over the much smaller flea. Her remedy is proven and is available to him because she loves him. What he is unable to do for himself, he receives from the tender hands of his owner. Nigel would not begin to know how to deal with his tormentors, but his wiser and more adept owner does, and that is how he lives flea free, all because of grace.

We too live free because of God's grace. We cannot save ourselves or remove the stubborn stain of one single sin. We need His grace. Thankfully, He is as willing to give His grace to us as He gave His grace to Zacchaeus. Let us humble ourselves, admit we need Him, repent of our sin, be born again, and live our lives in full view of His glorious, cleansing, healing grace. Zacchaeus's story and our stories testify that God is gracious to all.

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us see others as He sees them and to value them based on His perspective rather than our own
- For God to give us the strength and courage to live according to His values

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INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The end of each lesson will offer a final call to action to apply the lesson's content. The goal of each lesson is not just to share biblical information, but also to show what must be done with the information, challenging students to apply God's Word to their lives. You are encouraged to use the Prayer Focus to end the lesson with a time of consecration.

LEGEND

The following icons and boxes are used throughout to aid leaders in navigating the content.

Contains a suggested discussion question

Gives direction regarding a media callout that is available

SG Signals the information can be used in a Small Group setting.

V Shows a video component is available to help illustrate the lesson information.

I Indicates an image is available to help illustrate the lesson information.

LEARNING AND LIVING OUT GOD'S WORD FOR LIFE



Your disciple making toolbox has another tool. Each Friday at noon (Eastern), God's Word for Life airs a new podcast episode. Listen as LJ Harry, our podcast host, walks through the upcoming Bible story and discussion questions to help you to prepare for Sunday before Sunday. Each episode complements the God's Word for Life Lesson Guide, Daily Devotional Guide, and the Small Group Guide as we think deeply about how God's Word impacts our lives. Like the guides, each episode features discussion questions to help us apply what we are hearing and start holy conversations.

Together, let's learn and live out God's Word for Life.

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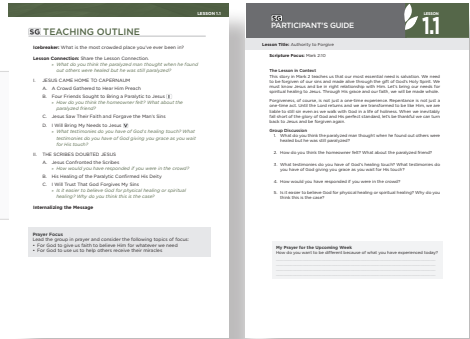
DIGITAL RESOURCE KIT

The Adult Resource Kit offers a wide array of materials to help expand the impact of each lesson. From videos that inspire discussion to social media tools to help encourage adults to join your group or class, this kit provides tools to help leaders grow their group and make teaching time more effective. Some resources include:



A Video to Accompany Each Lesson to Prompt Discussion or Further Thought

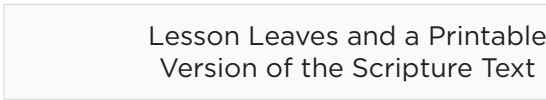
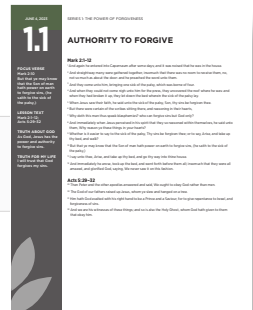
Small Group Teaching Outlines and Participant Guides



A Powerpoint to Accompany Each Lesson



Lesson Leaves and a Printable Version of the Scripture Text



Social Media Graphics, Tips, and Sample Posting Calendar



1.1

BY GRACE YE ARE SAVED

FOCUS VERSE

Ephesians 2:8

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.

LESSON TEXT

Luke 19:1-10;

Ephesians 2:4-8

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

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TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

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The weighty impact of Ephesians 2:4-8 is tied to the foundational work Paul established in the closing verses of chapter one. In its context, Ephesians 2:4 functions as a turning point toward hope. In stark contrast to the last three verses of chapter one that speak of the authority God has over “all principality, and power, and might, and dominion” (Ephesians 1:21), the first three verses of chapter two speak of the power that exerts itself over every human and the immoral state of every human. Though it may seem they contradict one another, Paul aligned them to send a powerful message. As humans, we have no natural power to defeat the devil and sin, but God does. Because of “his great love wherewith he loved us” (Ephesians 2:4), He gives us the undeserved, unearned blessing (simple definition of grace) of His authority and power over the dominion of sin and the devil. Truly it is “by grace ye are saved” (Ephesians 2:5).

B. God’s Grace Saves Us

God recognizes our predicament as human beings and, in His great love, offers us rescue and redemption. “But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)” (Ephesians 2:4-5). When we are hopeless and bound, He offers us hope and freedom. We are outmatched and incapable of conquering sin, the kingdom of darkness, and death on our own. Not even our religious activities can save us. We do not earn our salvation by our good deeds: how many hours we have banked in prayer or meals we have missed by fasting. A fully completed Bible reading chart or perfect attendance on the church roll does not bring about salvation. While these spiritual disciplines are some signs of a transforming disciple, only God’s grace saves us.

Perhaps familiar sayings like “you can’t get something for nothing” have distorted our understanding of the biblical concept of grace. The influence of our contemporary way of thinking may cause us to think of our relationship with God as

transactional—“I must do *spiritual activity X* to get God to love me.” This type of mentality can turn God’s grace into something to be earned, yet this is entirely opposite of what grace means. Grace is undeserved and unearned; grace is a gift we receive.

Why do we sometimes struggle to accept God’s grace?

C. I Will Receive God’s Grace

Acknowledging that our salvation does not depend on us requires humility. The apostle Peter instructed: “Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (1 Peter 5:5). A strong and necessary link exists between grace and humility. Humility acknowledges, “I am not perfect.” Humility understands our need for growth and improvement. Humility allows us to accept grace because humility allows us to truly repent.

How would you describe a humble response to another person’s failure? How would you describe a humble response to your own failure?

II. JESUS WAS GRACIOUS TO ZACCHAEUS

Jesus demonstrated God’s great grace when He encountered Zacchaeus while passing through Jericho. As we are introduced to Zacchaeus in Luke 19, we begin to get a grim picture of him by the way others labeled him. “A man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich . . . and . . . little of stature” (Luke 19:2–3). We quickly see how others around him knew him.

A. Zacchaeus Was a Chief Tax Collector and Undoubtedly Was Hated

Zacchaeus was not popular due to the job he chose. He was a Jew working for the Romans, which likely meant he was viewed as a traitor. Not only that, but it seems he had charged his fellow Jewish citizens extra on their taxes to profit from the surplus. He was getting rich off them. As you can imagine, Zacchaeus was not well liked in town.

In fact, the crowd labeled Zacchaeus again in Luke 19:7. When they saw that Jesus was going into Zacchaeus’s home, “they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner” (Luke 19:7). Zacchaeus certainly fit the description of an individual walking “according to the course of this world, . . . fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind” (Ephesians 2:2–3). Zacchaeus had risen to the top of the ranks of swindling tax collectors, and he abused his authority by getting rich off the hard-earned money of others.

Why are labels often harmful?

B. Jesus Graciously Spent Time with Zacchaeus

The crowd was not wrong in their assessment of Zacchaeus; the earthly labels were certainly true of him, but they were not the truest thing about him. From a purely physical and tangible perspective, he was indeed a sinner. But thankfully, God’s view of us is not from an earthly perspective; He sees our truest identity—God created us in His image, for His purpose, by His design.

God's actions toward us are not motivated by our labels but by His love. Plenty in the crowd were responding to Zacchaeus through the lens of earthly labels, leading them to hatred and rejection. Their view of Zacchaeus kept them from associating with him, accepting him, loving him, and acting in grace toward him. Jesus chose a different way. He chose to view Zacchaeus from a heavenly perspective. Jesus graciously invited Zacchaeus into a loving relationship. Jesus chose to accept him, not reject him. He chose grace motivated by His great love. Who wouldn't want to be around someone with that perspective?

How would your actions toward others change by viewing others from a heavenly perspective (seeing what is most true about them)?

C. I Will Cherish Time with Jesus

Luke 19:6 says Zacchaeus received Jesus joyfully into his home. Undoubtedly Zacchaeus was overjoyed to have this miracle-working Rabbi in his home and to have someone look beyond his faults and earthly labels to truly see him. Zacchaeus's joyful reception of Jesus leads us to believe he cherished His time with Jesus.

Let us put ourselves in Zacchaeus's shoes for a moment. We know what our lives are like. We know selfish ambition has produced misguided efforts. We know we have made decisions we should have made differently. We long for change, for healing, for reconciliation, for a chance to make things right. We feel ashamed because we are guilty. And now walking into our living room is one who chooses to look beyond all of that. He accepts us, treats us with kindness, respect, and dignity, and gives us the gracious invitation to repent so He can forgive us. His grace is undeserved, but here He is spending time with us anyway.

We do not have to imagine too much because Jesus' same loving, grace-filled invitation is extended to all of us as well. He is inviting each of us into a deeper relationship with Him. Daily He presents an invitation to spend time with Him who sees us through the lens of love and grace, who sees our wholeness, despite our brokenness. Such actions from Him are undeserved and unearned, but here He is inviting us anyway.

What, if anything, keeps you from cherishing time spent with Jesus? What distractions, thoughts, feelings get in the way?

III. ZACCHAEUS'S RESPONSE TO GRACE


Interestingly, Zacchaeus climbed a tree in order to see Jesus. That act alone showed his willingness to lay aside decorum and propriety he was used to. His climb was an outward demonstration of his deep inner willingness to do whatever it took to see Jesus. Although he was living a life he may not have been proud of, he was willing to lay his pride aside in a beautiful step toward repentance.

A. Zacchaeus Repented and Vowed to Make Restitution

"And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord; Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold"

(Luke 19:8). Zacchaeus's statement was evidence of deep sorrow and a desire for change in his life. Beyond simply being sorry for the wrong he had done, he was choosing to live life with a different attitude and mindset—one that more closely aligned with Jesus' example. This deep inner change led to generosity instead of selfishness and restitution to the people he had wronged. For Zacchaeus, and often for us, true repentance requires restitution. The actions and behaviors that follow our repentance indicate we are now living differently.

Teacher Option:

A supplemental video is available in the Resource Kit. 

B. Jesus Affirmed Zacchaeus's Repentance

Despite what the crowd was saying about Zacchaeus, Luke also recorded what Jesus said about him: "This day is salvation come to this house, forso much as he also is a son of Abraham" (Luke 19:9). Jesus knew Zacchaeus was the chief among the publicans and he was rich by exploiting the poor, but after he repented, Jesus identified Zacchaeus as a son of Abraham. This label reminded Zacchaeus and the people watching that God sees past our earthly labels; they do not define us. As our Creator, God alone defines us.

C. I Will Respond to Grace through Repentance

The grace of God ignores the labels attempting to define us by what we have or have not done. We have the opportunity to humbly accept God's grace, which leads to repentance. Remember, humility understands the need for growth and improvement. Like Zacchaeus, we must take an honest look at our attitudes and actions and then humbly admit we are not perfect and we have chosen wrongly. Repentance is rejecting our human, earthly way and living Jesus' godly, heavenly way.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit. 

You really should meet Nigel. He is a rambunctious and adorable cockapoo (cocker spaniel and poodle mix) that loves his human. Nigel's caregiver brought him to live at her house when he was just eight weeks old. This tiny, black furball nestled between her back and the seat of the car for a good portion of their four-hour drive home. For several weeks during the house-breaking phase, his caregiver used her lunch breaks at work to drive home, let him out of his crate, play with him, and teach him to go outside for his business. Nigel grew big and strong, and, as you might expect, loved his backyard. However, the backyard presented some issues, namely fleas.

Nigel's human's house sits in a neighborhood full of trees, not too far from a creek that invites all sorts of creatures: groundhogs, wild turkeys, raccoons, opossums, rabbits, and squirrels. Neither he nor his human know whom to blame, but during certain seasons of the year, fleas are a major problem. While Nigel adores his backyard, he does not adore the endless torment those tiny, pesky pests cause him.

His scratching and licking has disturbed more than one night's sleep and agitated more than one midday nap. The small pests interrupt playtime, bring cuddle time to a screeching halt, and limit time in his beloved backyard. For all Nigel is able to do—such as sit, stay, shake, speak, high-five, roll over, and play dead—he has not yet mastered how to rid himself of the fleas.

Enter Nigel's human. She immediately recognizes his struggle, sometimes before he does, and her heart goes out to him. She will stop at the store, spend her hard-earned money, and buy another box of flea treatment or bottle of flea shampoo to help her poor, tormented pup. She will sit with a flea comb and, for as long as he will let her, lovingly and attentively rake through his black curls to rid him of those chomping nuisances.

Nigel's human wields superior authority over the much smaller flea. Her remedy is proven and is available to him because she loves him. What he is unable to do for himself, he receives from the tender hands of his owner. Nigel would not begin to know how to deal with his tormentors, but his wiser and more adept owner does, and that is how he lives flea free, all because of grace.

We too live free because of God's grace. We cannot save ourselves or remove the stubborn stain of one single sin. We need His grace. Thankfully, He is as willing to give His grace to us as He gave His grace to Zacchaeus. Let us humble ourselves, admit we need Him, repent of our sin, be born again, and live our lives in full view of His glorious, cleansing, healing grace. Zacchaeus's story and our stories testify that God is gracious to all.

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us see others as He sees them and to value them based on His perspective rather than our own
- For God to give us the strength and courage to live according to His values

1.2

THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD

FOCUS VERSE

Ephesians 6:10

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.

LESSON TEXT

Ephesians 6:10-18

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God equips us to stand strong.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I can be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.



Thinking about Last Week:

Have students refer to their Daily Devotional Guide to answer the following questions:

1. What most affected you as you read through the Lesson Text and the Biblical Insights?
2. How did it shape your prayers and thoughts throughout the week?
3. Do you feel you grew closer to the Lord this past week? Why or why not?

SG TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: What was your favorite game to play on the playground as a child?

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. STAND YOUR GROUND

» *How would you describe being strong in the Lord? What does that mean?*

A. Our Enemy

» *What questions and fears arise in you when you read Paul's words about our struggle against the powers of this dark world and forces of evil?*

B. Our Armor

C. I Will Recognize Our Battle Is Spiritual

» *Have you experienced times when you could describe yourself as strong in the Lord or times when you have been weak? What has been the difference?*

II. GUARD YOUR CHARACTER

A. Truth, Righteousness, and Peace (V)

» *How do you ensure God's Word, not your emotions and reasoning, define absolute truth?*

B. Faith, Salvation, and God's Word

» *What protection does having faith in God provide for you?*

C. I Will Take the Whole Armor of God

III. PRAY IN THE SPIRIT

A. Watch and Pray

B. Persevere

C. I Will Persevere in Spiritual Warfare

Internalizing the Message (I)

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us be aware of the spiritual battles we are fighting
- For God to help us rely on His armor to protect and prepare us

LESSON CONNECTION

Playgrounds of the '80s and '90s were not for the faint of heart. Children and outdated (and even unsafe) playground equipment routinely tested boys' and girls' toughness. Who can forget sliding fifteen feet down the molten metal slides baking in the 90 degree sun?

Then there were the team games like Red Rover. If you're unfamiliar with this group game, the objective is to end with the most players on your team by maintaining the integrity of your team chain. Players—warriors really—stand side-by-side with hands joined as they faced off against their opponents who are also forming a human chain. Each team is trying to break through the other's line.

One team taunts the other with the words, "Red rover, red rover, send (insert player's name) right over." The children named ready themselves for the sprint of their lives; playground glory rests on this moment. If Ashley breaks through the opponent's line, she can capture a player and return as the conquering heroine. But, alas, if she is defeated and their line holds, she must remain on the enemy's team.

This game may sound innocent and simple, but kids employ ruthless strategies and tactics to assure their victory. When your team is the one issuing the challenge, you are extremely selective about the name you call out. Strategy demands you look for the smallest, scrawniest, most-likely-to-be-intimidated player on the other team. The team that has been challenged thinks it over and tries to identify their opponents' weakest link.

As the opposing team prepares to sprint at your line with their fiercest intensity, you squeeze your comrade's hand with all the strength you can muster and brace for impact. Your mission is to stand strong and refuse to allow your foe to break your line. The winner in the game of Red Rover is the team that stands with strength and courage without breaking, no matter what challenger is sent their way.

Red Rover helps to illustrate some challenges we face spiritually. Fortunately for us, in our spiritual Red Rover, we do not stand against the enemy's onslaught in our own power. Eternity's strongest warrior is on our side, and as we slip our hand into His nail-pierced hand, we can stand strong, no matter who or what tries to break through and break us apart from Him.

BIBLE LESSON

I. STAND YOUR GROUND

At the close of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul painted a picture of life in Christ in terms of a battle between two opposing forces. This battle rages between humanity and the devil. It started as an unfair fight, but because of Jesus Christ's victory on the cross and over the grave, we do not have to go into battle without God's supernatural help. Through His Spirit, God has provided the means to defeat the enemy, so we are not outmatched in this fight of faith. We stand "strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might" (Ephesians 6:10). The battle will rage, the enemy will charge at us, but grounding in Christ and Scripture provides us protection and ability to stand our ground (James 4:7).

How would you describe being strong in the Lord? What does that look like in real life?

A. Our Enemy

Our enemy is spiritual. We would do well to mirror Paul's firm conviction of the reality of the spiritual world and the presence of evil. In Ephesians chapter one, Paul declared God, through Christ, as the victor "far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come" (Ephesians 1:21). While Paul's primary goal was to present God as sovereign, he simultaneously presented the reality of a spiritual enemy working contrary to God's purpose. Paul's fellow New Testament writers also understood Satan to be a real threat and wrote of the devil's effort to prevent the work of God in people and through people (John 10:10; I Thessalonians 2:18; James 4:7; I Peter 5:8; Revelation 2:10).

Our enemy is not other people. Paul's description in Ephesians 6:12 identifies our enemy: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." Paul clearly stated believers should not consider other people to be our enemies. Sometimes the devil may use conflict with others to attack us, but we must understand that human beings themselves are not our enemy. Therefore, we must manifest the fruit of the Spirit in our interactions with them.

What questions and fears arise in you when you read Paul's words about our struggle against the powers of this dark world and forces of evil?

B. Our Armor

While Ephesians 1:21-22 points out the unseen world of spiritual evil, it also declares Christ has "all things under his feet," meaning He has authority even over that realm. We take part in the victory Christ won through His death, burial, and resurrection when we repent, are baptized in Jesus' name, and receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. Our victory over spiritual opposition is to be filled with the Spirit. This is how we arm ourselves to stand firm against all strategies of the devil—outright attacks from Satan or ways he will use our thoughts and emotions against us.

When Paul encouraged the early church to stand strong against our spiritual enemy, he used physical pieces of Roman armor to help illustrate his point. The precise function of each piece was not his only focus, but rather a thorough picture showing how the Spirit is God’s gift to us to attack Satan and defend against his attacks. Paul was illustrating that the whole armor is made up of several pieces that allow us to attack Satan and defend against his attacks. Paul did not intend for us to pick and choose which piece we need in a particular battle. The whole armor of God fits for any type of spiritual battle.

C. I Will Recognize Our Battle Is Spiritual

“Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2). Human sin results from our being governed by the devil, the spirit who rules both the powers of evil in the spiritual realm and human beings who refuse to obey God. Again, our battle is not with other people; it is spiritual. The enemy of our souls will use the weaknesses of our flesh (selfish human nature) to promote his purpose, which is to inhibit the work of God in and through us. Knowing his tactics helps us to recognize how we ought to fight. We need the Spirit of God to engage the enemy.

II. GUARD YOUR CHARACTER


Some of the armor Paul used in his metaphor were for defense, not to attack: helmet, shield, and breastplate. As humans, we are spiritual beings with a mind, will, and emotions. Therefore mental, volitional, and emotional battles can become spiritual battles. Surrender and submission to God will challenge the way we naturally think and reason (mental); it will challenge the way we respond to our feelings (emotional); and it will challenge our fleshly choices and decision-making processes (volitional). Lest we be afraid, we are not unarmed in this challenge. Surrendering to the Spirit of God (thus resisting our flesh) does not allow the enemy to destroy God’s work in and through us.

A. Truth, Righteousness, and Peace

The pull within each of us is to define what is true and what is right. As finite human beings, we are not capable of defining absolute truth within ourselves. Our experiences, traditions, thoughts, and feelings each taint our objectivity, as carefully as we may guard against it. Something may feel true or seem right based on our reasoning, but our emotions and minds are not the source of truth and righteousness; God is.

When Paul instructed to put on the belt of truth, he does not appear to be referring to the truth of the Bible or doctrinal truth; that came later. (See Ephesians 6:17.) The truth Paul referred to is similar to what David wrote about when he prayed, “Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts” (Psalm 51:6). We assess

Have you experienced times when you could describe yourself as strong in the Lord or times when you have been weak? What has been the difference?

Teacher Option:
A supplemental video is available in the Resource Kit. 

How do you ensure God’s Word, not your emotions and reasoning, define absolute truth?

our true motives and attitudes by asking God to search us and show us our hearts. We use the Bible as a mirror, and we must be honest about what it reveals in us. Regular review of our thoughts, reputation, habits, and conversations is one key way to stand against deception.

Earlier in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul told believers they used to walk “according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2). He was letting them know they were at odds with God. But in Ephesians 6:15, he instructed them to walk in peace. We are at peace with God through the gospel, which is the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1; I Corinthians 15:1-4).

B. Faith, Salvation, and God’s Word

Although the apostle Paul lived in a different culture and time period, evil is present in our day as it was in his. Satan will fire fiery darts of doubt, deception, or discouragement to hinder us, but faith, salvation, and God’s Word guard us against his wicked devices. The shield of faith calls us to trust in God rather than in our personal resources. The helmet of salvation protects our mind with the assurance of salvation provided through Jesus Christ. The evil one may try to use our past actions or present weakness to convince us we are not saved, but our faith in and right response to the gospel defeat that lie.

Just like Jesus defeated the devil in the wilderness, we can defeat him by standing on the truth of God’s Word (Matthew 4:1-11). We recognize that the philosophies of humans shift according to polls and trends, so we must be constantly drawn back to the unchanging Word of God as our source of truth and direction.

What protection does having faith in God provide for you?

C. I Will Take the Whole Armor of God

The armor God has given to us has been proven. The apostles battled and live victoriously through the armor of God. Our forefathers battled and lived victoriously through the armor of God. How can we use these weapons to protect ourselves from the same enemy who attacked them? Along with prayer, we arm ourselves with the whole armor of God: “Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God . . . having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:13-17).

III. PRAY IN THE SPIRIT

A. Watch and Pray

Every spiritual battle carried out against a spiritual foe must include prayer. God’s Spirit is able to search our hearts and guide

our prayers according to His will. This can keep us from making the mistake James talked about in his letter: “ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts” (James 4:3). In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus called Peter to “Watch ye and pray, lest ye enter into temptation. The spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:38). The enemy will use the frailty of our human bodies to drive a wedge between us and God. But what are we watching to see?

We are instructed to maintain vigilance over our spiritual health, which as noted earlier includes our mind, will, and emotions. We leave ourselves open to an attack if we are not examining our thoughts, choices, and feelings. This goes hand in hand with praying in the Spirit because not only can we pray for God to keep our focus sharp, but then once something is revealed to us, we must combat that through prayer.

B. Persevere

Jesus demonstrated this watchfulness and perseverance in His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane when His flesh struggled with the idea of laying down His life. He was honest about His emotions and how the choice was affecting Him mentally. Mark described Jesus as “very heavy,” “exceeding sorrowful,” to the point He prayed, “Take away this cup” (Mark 14:33–36). Ultimately, we see Jesus persevere through His mental, emotional, and physical battle to allow God’s work to be accomplished, but the spiritual struggle was evident (Mark 14:36).

If opposition came to Jesus, it will come to us, and in many forms: mental strain, emotional tension, difficulty in relationships, and cultural pressure. Paul’s admonition was to watch with perseverance (Ephesians 6:18). In other words, stay in the struggle and “fight the good fight of faith” (I Timothy 6:12).

C. I Will Persevere in Spiritual Warfare

God has equipped us with the necessary defense against every opposition. Whether we are challenged by a direct spiritual attack or the enemy attempts to use our human frailty to destroy us, we are armed with the necessary weapons of God’s Word, His Spirit, and prayer. Like Jesus, may we engage the spiritual, emotional, and mental battles that challenge us so the enemy will not be successful in his attempt to hinder the work of God in and through us.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit. 

The poise and concentration of the King's Guard amazes tourists year after year in London, England. Wearing bright red tunics with shiny gold buttons, black wool trousers, and the tall, furry bearskin hats, these soldiers guard the royal residence and other historic places in London. In addition to the striking uniform associated with their role, they also wear a deadpan expression as they perform their sober task.

For years tourists have tried to make them laugh, smile, or respond in some way. Some tourists tell them jokes; some even touch and push them. Some take pictures with them, while others resort to more outlandish behaviors, all trying to break their focus and composure as they stand absolutely statuesque.

At the late Queen Elizabeth's funeral, an incident occurred with one of the men stationed near her casket as she lay in state at Westminster Hall. The Royal Guard stood closest to her in their typical still, composed manner. At the bottom of the steps were additional members of the British Army to guard and dutifully fulfill one last obligation to their sovereign. The queen lay in state for four days, totaling a whopping 114 hours. During this entire time, the Royal Guard stood at the corners of her coffin in two-hour shifts.

One of the men, representing an elite branch of their military, stood on the floor just off the podium. During the last several moments of his two-hour shift, he began swaying on his feet. The next shift was about to replace him and his fellow guardsmen, but not before he blacked out and fell forward, landing sprawled on the stone floor to bystanders' loud gasps as they stood in line to pay their respects. Two police officers stationed nearby rushed to the fallen man as the remaining guards continued to hold vigil next to the queen's body. Thankfully the fallen guard recovered quickly without serious physical injury.

This incident proved to be yet another test of the focus and discipline of the Royal Guard. They maintained perfect composure and did not falter in their responsibility to stand guard. The multitude of distractions large or small, near or far, scary or sad could not break their concentration; they were determined to fulfill their duty and stand.

In good or bad weather, in prime or dreadful conditions, during personal or national crises, they stand. May our spiritual commitment match and even exceed their national commitment as we stand for truth and righteousness. In prime or dreadful conditions, during personal or national crises, in times of happiness or sadness, by the grace of God, and armed with His whole armor, we stand.

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us be aware of the spiritual battles we are fighting
- For God to help us rely on His armor to protect and prepare us

1.3

THINK ON THESE THINGS

FOCUS VERSE

Philippians 4:8

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

LESSON TEXT

Joshua 1:8-9

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God wants us to meditate on His Word.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

Meditating on God's Word (or good things) will bring peace and success to my life.



Thinking about Last Week:

Have students refer to their Daily Devotional Guide to answer the following questions:

1. What most affected you as you read through the Lesson Text and the Biblical Insights?
2. How did it shape your prayers and thoughts throughout the week?
3. Do you feel you grew closer to the Lord this past week? Why or why not?

SG TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: What is the hardest construction or assembly project you have ever started?

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. MEDITATE ON GOD'S WORD

- A. Seek Guidance from God's Word
- B. God Commanded Joshua to Meditate
 - » *Prior to this lesson, what did you think about meditation? How, if at all, has your view changed?*
- C. I Will Study and Meditate on God's Word Daily
 - » *What Bible verses or passages do you meditate on?*

II. OBEY GOD'S WORD

- A. God's Plan for Us Is in His Word
- B. God Calls Us to Attend to All His Word
- C. I Will Observe to Do All the Lord Instructs

III. THE BENEFITS OF OBEYING GOD'S WORD

- » *What emotions do you have about the word obey?*
- A. God Will Make Our Way Prosperous and Give Us Good Success **V**
 - » *Prior to this lesson, what did you think about God's promise for success? How, if at all, has your view changed?*
- B. God's Presence Will Give Us Peace
 - » *How will you remind yourself of God's peace?*
- C. I Will Be Thankful for the Benefits of God's Word

Internalizing the Message **I**

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to give us understanding as we read His Word and learn how to obey it
- For God to help us ignore voices that disagree with Him and His Word

LESSON CONNECTION

The taste of adventurous exploration Lewis and Clark must have felt during their westward expansion is similar to the feeling one gets after successfully using a paper map. What a dismal thought that thousands of people may never know the anticipation of walking into a AAA storefront for a TripTik or the joy of purchasing the latest edition of a Rand McNally atlas. Those under a certain age are bound to use digital maps, which are not nearly as challenging as their paper predecessors. The only saving grace for employing Google maps, Siri, or other GPS navigation is accepting the challenge when your device of choice determines a particular minute when you will arrive.

You may not think about it when you ask Siri for directions to your vacation destination, but a delicate balance of trust, willingness, and obedience exists when using a road map. To some the detailed directions are merely suggestions, particularly if you are familiar with the area where you are traveling. Others obey Siri's every command to the letter, even if she says to turn left, but the only thing to your left is a sheer cliff or the Colorado River.

When we use road maps or web maps, more often than not, it means we admit we could use help to arrive at our desired destination. Some believe they are never lost and never need to stop and ask for directions, but for those not willing to drive in circles and frustrate themselves or their family, we recognize sometimes we need a map. Point A to point B is an unknown and we need directions.

When you plug in the address of your desired destination, each turn-by-turn direction leads you closer to where you want to go. The GPS on your device considers where you are and provides instructions and directions to where you want to be. That is the role of the navigation system. The role of the traveler is to trust the mapmaker and direction giver, be willing to make the turns needed, and obey the instructions as they are given.

God is the mapmaker, and the Bible is our map. God and His Word guide us in the direction we ought to walk to fulfill God's plan and purpose for our lives. We can trust Him and His Word. He has been leading pilgrims since Genesis, and He knows how to get us from where we are to where we are headed.

BIBLE LESSON

I. MEDITATE ON GOD'S WORD

What we allow to occupy our thoughts and influence our reasoning is extremely important. A consistent diet of temporal concepts, secular opinions, and earthly values contaminates our thinking and leads to a lack of true wisdom. On the other hand, a steady consumption of eternal concepts, spiritual opinions, and heavenly values purifies our thinking and leads to an abundance of true wisdom. God's Word is that source. Psalm 1:1–2 says the one who meditates on God's Word is blessed and finds delight.

A. Seek Guidance from God's Word

Many voices speak and compete for our attention. Our world is a marketplace full of merchants trying hard to sell us on their answers for our questions, but their answers change based on the latest polls, protests, and social media trends. Each voice attempts to direct how we think, feel, or reason—to guide what we prioritize and value—and to lead us to behave in certain ways. These voices speak through entertainment, spiritual leadership, our social media feed, our relationships, workplace conversations, and the list could continue. The only voices worth listening to are those speaking in unison with God's Word. For our lives to fully align with God's plan for us, we must seek guidance from His Word. We can trust the principles and values contained therein; they will lead us in the direction of God's best for us.

B. God Commanded Joshua to Meditate

We see God's command to meditate on His Word all throughout His Word. God commanded Joshua to meditate on the Book of the Law day and night. It is important not to impose a contemporary, secular meaning upon the term *meditate*. The common contemporary interpretation of that word speaks of emptying our mind. However, the biblical definition of *meditate* implies both deliberate consideration and contemplation. Again, meditation is not emptying the mind; it is filling it with God's Word. When we meditate on God's Word, we intentionally contemplate godly principles and values, which produces sound reasoning.

Prior to this lesson, what did you think about meditation? How, if at all, has your view changed?

C. I Will Study and Meditate on God's Word Daily

As noted earlier, a multitude of voices, thoughts, opinions, and values fills our daily lives. We cannot be casual about the thoughts and ideas on which we ruminate. We must intentionally study and meditate on God's Word, focusing on specific verses or general principles and values. Something will fill our minds—why not choose what those topics and values will be? As we continue in our journey of transformation to be more like Christ, we must prioritize God's Word, for that is where He has communicated His character, nature, and principles. We can

What Bible verses or passages do you meditate on?

make the same commitment the psalmist made in Psalm 119:15: “I will meditate in thy precepts, and have respect unto thy ways.”

II. OBEY GOD’S WORD

The practice of meditating on God’s Word moves us toward obedience. We must know His Word so we can obey His Word. A remarkable series of events took place just after Nehemiah finished rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 8-10). Those who had resettled in the land of Judah came together to celebrate the Festival of Trumpets, and during that celebration Ezra read from the Law. As the people listened, they mourned and wept when they realized they had not obeyed God’s law. What they did next is noteworthy: they rightly confessed their sins, studied God’s Word in order to learn what He required, and obeyed what they had learned. Their devotion did not conclude with confession and study; those actions moved them closer to obedience.

A. God’s Plan for Us Is in His Word

While God’s Word is the revelation of His nature and values, it also reveals His plan for us. His instruction to “be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:45; 1 Peter 1:16) contains both His nature (“I am holy”) and His plan (“be holy”). Thus in order to fulfill His plan for our lives—to be holy like Him—we must meditate on and practice obedience to His Word. It is a blessing that He has outlined His plan for us clearly in His Word, and He has also given us access to that Word. His plan is not unknown, hidden from us, or some great cosmic secret. Micah 6:8 states: “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”

B. God Calls Us to Attend to All His Word

Since His plan is for us to be like Him and the way to do it is revealed in God’s Word, attend to all His Word. Every instruction, command, or principle found in the Bible appears intentionally. We cannot overlook or undervalue an instruction or challenge from His Word because it challenges our comfort, current lifestyle, tradition, or previous experience. To neglect a piece of His Word is to be incomplete in our transformation. We are called to obey all His Word and to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37).

C. I Will Observe to Do All the Lord Instructs

Living in obedience to the Word of God takes a conscious effort every minute of every day. It also requires us to surrender our will to His and to lay down our identity to take on His. These deliberate choices to surrender and obey anchor us when we are tempted to guide ourselves. Through God’s Word, we know what actions, speech, attitudes, thoughts, and lifestyles please

Him. Through His Spirit and His grace, we can live a life pleasing to God.

III. THE BENEFITS OF OBEYING GOD'S WORD

God's Word is brimming with benefits, and we must consciously choose what we listen to, what we watch, what we think about, and what we meditate on because those choices will shape who we are. If you are depressed or anxious much of the time, what are you listening to? What are you watching? What are you thinking about? What are you meditating on?

If you watch the news in the morning and at noon and at night, you may feel the way you do because you feel helpless and frustrated with the state of the world around us. If you are angry or jealous of others much of the time, are you spending much time on social media reading posts from angry people or posts from people who appear to be living a fuller life than you are? If the news or social media is our steady diet, we are likely to worry or be angry. Let's choose to feed our souls on something true, noble, just, pure, lovely, virtuous, praiseworthy. Meditate on the Word of God.

Stay as current as you need to stay to know what is happening around us, but do not let the news or social media be your soul's steady diet. Read the Word of God. Listen to Spirit-led, Spirit-filled preaching. Listen to messages and original series on Discipleship Now. Meditate on the goodness of God. Listen to worship music that glorifies God. Remember what He has already done in your life and what He has promised to do. Journal His answered prayers. Read your journal and remind yourself God is good.

What emotions do you have about the word obey?

A. God Will Make Our Way Prosperous and Give Us Good Success

The Lord told Joshua to meditate on His law and obey it, "then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success" (Joshua 1:8). God's promise of prosperity and success was not given for earthly pursuits, material possessions, and temporal gain. It was given to those whose goal is to be more like God. His ultimate goal for us is to make our way toward Him more prosperous and give us good success in that endeavor.

Many in our culture define success as a bigger house, newer car, more toys, more fame, or more money, but God spoke of success as meditating on and obeying His Word. God knows that all the so-called success in our world only leaves us empty, but by meditating on and obeying His Word, we find ourselves no longer at war with God; we are in right relationship with Him.

He, who sees the end from the beginning, shows us the way we should walk when we don't know the way. The God who heals us from all our diseases is our healer when there is no other hope. Truly success is found in being right with God, and being right with God is found by meditating on and obeying God's Word.

We are not overlooking the fact that God provides earthly provisions and gives material blessings; He certainly does that. However, His ultimate goal is for us to be holy like Him, not for us to be comfortable, rich, and happy. He has comfort, riches, and joy we are unable to comprehend.

Prior to this lesson, what did you think about God's promise for success? How, if at all, has your view changed?

Teacher Option:

A supplemental video is available in the Resource Kit. ▼

B. God's Presence Will Give Us Peace

God's Word tells us who He is; obeying the instructions of His Word helps us to be like Him. As we walk with the Lord on this transformation journey, Scripture is our road map. The destination of this journey is Jesus Christ—Christlikeness is the ultimate goal. The Torah was not given to make Israel jump through moral and religious hoops; it was given to them so they could be holy, like God is holy. Likewise, "all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (II Timothy 3:16), not to boss us around and wield authority, but to help us fulfill His command to be holy, like He is holy.

The psalmist declared we are cleansed from our evil way by obeying God's Word: "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word" (Psalm 119:9). My evil way fades as God's holy way is established in my heart through obedience.

The Lord concluded His words to Joshua, saying: "Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest" (Joshua 1:9). Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid, for I am with you. The Lord recognized there will be challenges, afflictions, enemies, confusion, and fear along the way, but He will give us peace for the journey. That was true of Joshua's physical journey, and it is true of our spiritual journey. The Lord was not promising prosperity, success, and peace for just any journey we take in life, but if we will journey toward Him, we will have the peace He promised.

How will you remind yourself of God's peace?

C. I Will Be Thankful for the Benefits of God's Word

What a wonderful and merciful God to give us power along with the instructions and commands He has given. His Word gives light to our path (Psalm 119:105), order to our steps (Psalm 119:133), and understanding to our minds (Psalm 119:130). He has given us what we need to be successful in our pursuit of Him by giving us access to His presence and His Word.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit. 

If you have purchased an item from IKEA, hopefully you loved playing with LEGOs as a child and were good at it because you are going to be assembling nearly everything you buy from there. Whether you bought a simple bedside table or a complex eight-drawer chest, assembly is required, and even if it does not test the fruit of the Spirit in your life, your muscles and joints will need some ibuprofen afterward. If you are not sure you can come out on the other side of assembling a piece of furniture with as much Holy Ghost as when you began, just dole out a little extra and pay for the store assembly. They do offer that service, though some among us enjoy paying for frustration and fatigue, so we choose to assemble it ourselves.

Like with road maps, some consider the instruction manual as merely a suggestion. Perhaps they face the challenge to assemble a two-drawer nightstand with the bravery and skill of a seasoned craftsman. They reason that the extra three wooden slats and forty-seven unused screws left at the end are the oversight of the worker packing the boxes or the generosity of the manufacturer, never once considering they built it incorrectly.

Still others would never dream of deviating from the carefully prepared assembly guide. They unbox all the materials, meticulously organize them on the floor, and comb over the manual for the precise quantity of pieces promised. After careful study of the guide and a few calls to their construction worker friends, they are ready to begin. Their fastidious labor and rigid adherence to the construction handbook rewards them with a perfectly assembled piece of furniture matching the picture on the front.

An instruction manual for a headboard will not yield success when attempting to assemble a kitchen table. The pieces provided coupled with a willingness to follow the instructions determine the outcome. If assemblers will trust the guide, willingly obey the directions, and endure, they will end up with the desired outcome.

Our spiritual instruction manual—the Word of God—contains the words and nature of the one we are called to be like. It all starts with what we think about and meditate on. Let us think about and meditate on the goodness of God, obey God and His Word, and we will find ourselves holy just as our God is holy.

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to give us understanding as we read His Word and learn how to obey it
- For God to help us ignore voices that disagree with Him and His Word

1.4

I CAN DO ALL THINGS

FOCUS VERSE

Philippians 4:13
I can do all things
through Christ which
strengtheneth me.

LESSON TEXT

Judges 6:14–21;
7:19–25

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God can use anyone.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I am able to do
impossible things
with God.



Thinking about Last Week:

Have students refer to their Daily Devotional Guide to answer the following questions:

1. What most affected you as you read through the Lesson Text and the Biblical Insights?
2. How did it shape your prayers and thoughts throughout the week?
3. Do you feel you grew closer to the Lord this past week? Why or why not?

SG TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: What have you done that at first you thought would be too hard to do?

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. GOD CALLED GIDEON

» *When you hear “God can use anyone,” how does it make you feel about you? How does it make you feel about others?*

A. Gideon Was the Weakest of His Tribe and Least in His Father’s House

» *What negative aspects of your situation or life might God be able to use in positive ways?*

B. The Lord Was with Gideon

C. I Will Remember God Is with Me When He Calls Me

» *How will you remind yourself God is with you?*

II. GOD THINNED GIDEON’S ARMY

A. God Will Not Share His Glory **I**

B. God Fights Our Battles

C. I Will Trust in the Power of God, Not in Myself

III. GOD ENCOURAGED GIDEON AND DEFEATED THE ENEMY

» *What stirs inside of you when you realize God knows what you need?*

A. God Knows Our Fears

B. God Fought for Gideon **V**

» *How has God fought for you?*

C. I Will Respond to God’s Invitation to Participate in His Mission

Internalizing the Message

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us see ourselves as He does, no better and no worse, realizing His grace is sufficient for us
- For God to give us faith to participate in His mission

LESSON CONNECTION

Imagine a young piano student attending the concert of a renowned pianist. He is there because his mother wanted him to hear one of the greats with the hope it would inspire him to progress in his own skill and ability. As they find their seats in the packed concert hall, his mother spots a friend in a different section. She walks down the aisle to greet her friend, and her young son sees his opportunity to roam and explore this magnificent building with its intriguing hallways and countless doors. The sign on one such door reads: “No Admittance.” The boy is brave—and perhaps a little ornery—so the sign does not stop him. He finds a piano in that room and begins fumbling through a song he knows.

His mother makes her way back to her seat as the house lights dim in preparation for the concert to begin, but her son is not there. As the curtains part and the spotlights shine on the impressive, polished Steinway on the stage, she sees someone on the piano bench. He is not a full-grown man in tuxedo tails; he is a young boy who looks remarkably like her son. He is her son, and he is fumbling his way through “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”—right notes and wrong.

About that time, the world-famous pianist walks out on stage to take his place at the piano. Noting the confusion on the faces of the audience, but not willing to embarrass the boy, he quietly walks up behind him and kindly whispers in his ear, “Don’t quit, keep playing.” The master musician then leans over the boy and begins playing the bass notes with his left hand. A few moments later he adds in his right hand, playing bright runs and arpeggios to complement the boy’s simple melody. The audience is mesmerized and responds with thunderous applause. The master has accompanied the novice to create a masterpiece. The skill the young student lacked met the proficiency of the expert, and the music they played together was beautiful.

BIBLE LESSON

I. GOD CALLED GIDEON

The story of Gideon demonstrates that God can use anyone to do great, even impossible works. God alone knows the full potential of each individual. Many times potential remains hidden from us and from others. Because God is our Creator, He knows how our individual qualities correspond to His ultimate plan. Like God called Gideon, He invites us to be part of what He is doing, despite how impressive or unimpressive our résumé or pedigree may be because victory or success rests in His power. He invites humanity to partner with Him, and His Spirit will make up the difference where we lack.

When you hear, “God can use anyone,” how does it make you feel about you? How does it make you feel about others?

A. Gideon Was the Weakest of His Tribe and Least in His Father’s House

Gideon described himself by what he and others could see: “My family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house” (Judges 6:15). Gideon’s family was one of the poorest in the tribe of Manasseh, and his clan was one of the weakest, and he was the lowest of all of them. The lowest of the lowest clan of a poor family—not exactly what most recruiters would look for to lead their army. From Gideon’s perspective, God did not have much to work with, but from God’s perspective, it was just enough.

What negative aspects of your situation or life might God be able to use in positive ways?

B. The Lord Was with Gideon

While Gideon fired off a list of reasons God should call someone else, God patiently listened, lovingly ignored his excuses, and responded by assuring Gideon: “I will be with thee” (Judges 6:16). Basically He was saying, “Where you lack, I am more than enough.” Gideon assessed the situation from the perspective of what he had to offer, and God assessed it from what He and Gideon would do together. Later in the story, the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon (Judges 6:34), like it came on others in the Old Testament when they were called to perform a task or were ordained for an office.

Since the Day of Pentecost and the birth of the church, the Holy Spirit is a gift for everyone who rightly responds to the gospel of Jesus Christ, not just to individuals in specific roles. One role of the Spirit is the same now as it was for Gideon; the Spirit equips God’s servants to do the work He has called us to do (Acts 1:8; I Corinthians 12:7-10).

C. I Will Remember God Is with Me When He Calls Me

As God invites us to partner with Him to fulfill His plan and carry out His mission, He wants us to remember He is with us and has fully equipped us through the power of His Spirit. Daily aligning our hearts and minds with His purpose will help us when we

*How will you
remind yourself
God is with you?*

feel outmatched by the task or opportunity in front of us. In our own strength, we will feel incapable, but as we are learning from Gideon, our willingness plus God's power equals victory.

II. GOD THINNED GIDEON'S ARMY


God had a purpose in using Gideon and not Israel's strongest, most seasoned and strategic warrior. Likewise, when it came to the army God used to defeat the Midianites, He did not want big numbers. Gideon began with an army of 32,000 men, but the Midianites boasted an army so large it could not be counted. They stopped counting at 120,000 enemy soldiers. Then the story took a strange twist. God told Gideon he had too many men. When they won this war—and they would win this war—they would get the glory, not God. The only way to show Israel that God won this war for them was to thin out the ranks. So God and Gideon did.

A. God Will Not Share His Glory

Gideon announced, "If you're afraid you'll march into battle and not march out, you can go home." Twenty-two thousand soldiers left. God tapped General Gideon on the shoulder once more. "You still have too many. Take them to the brook and watch how they drink water." Gideon was confused, but he marched his reduced troops to the brook and watched them drink water. Only three hundred of them kept watch as they drank. God and Gideon kept them and sent the other 9,700 home. Thankfully, God was finished dishonorably discharging the troops.

God made victory nearly impossible by reducing Israel's army to three hundred to face an innumerable, mighty Midianite army, which is precisely how He wanted it. God knows humanity tends to take the credit for success. He knew if outnumbered Israel won, they would boast, "Mine own hand hath saved me" (Judges 7:2). But that was then they boasted 32,000 soldiers. If they won with three hundred, only God could have saved them. Lest we think we are in charge and deserve the credit, Scripture is clear: all glory goes to God (Isaiah 42:8). Without a doubt, God wants to use us, but our part should always glorify Him, not us.

Teacher Option:

*A supplemental
image is available in
the Resource Kit.* 

B. God Fights Our Battles

Throughout the Old Testament, we see God depicted as a holy warrior fighting for His people. Moses told the Israelites who were being hunted down by angry Egyptians: "The LORD shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace" (Exodus 14:14). The Levite Jahaziel told King Jehoshaphat's army: "The battle is not yours, but God's. . . . Ye shall not need to fight in this battle" (II Chronicles 20:15-17). King Hezekiah boldly declared: "With us is the LORD our God to help us, and to fight our battles" (II Chronicles 32:8). Though we may not be fighting flesh-and-blood armies like Israel did, God invites us to rest in Him and

His power. When He wins, only God gets the glory because God fights the battle.

C. I Will Trust in the Power of God, Not in Myself

Trust in God. Rest in God. Paul declared God to be “far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come” (Ephesians 1:21). Paul later encouraged believers to “be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might” (Ephesians 6:10) because “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Ephesians 6:12), the very ones over which God is sovereign.

III. GOD ENCOURAGED GIDEON AND DEFEATED THE ENEMY

Gideon marched his miniature army to the armory for the weapons. Once again God spoke to Gideon to share some more “interesting news.” He started handing out water pitchers, torches, and trumpets. A few soldiers thought Gideon should have spent more time in the Situation Room. The fearsome Israelite army was a band of three hundred men with pitchers, torches, and trumpets—and Almighty God. That is all Gideon had to go to war with.

God encouraged him: “Arise, get thee down unto the host; for I have delivered it into thine hand” (Judges 7:9). He snuck up to the enemy’s camp for a recon mission to see and hear what was happening. He overheard one enemy soldier tell another about a dream where God, through Gideon, routed the Midianites. Gideon heard their voices tremble in fear. One soldier winced and remarked, “It’s the sword of the LORD and of Gideon.” Gideon had no idea that the enemy was as afraid of him and his God as he was afraid of them. Right then and there, Gideon worshiped God because he knew God and His people were about to win this war.

What stirs inside of you when you realize God knows what you need?

A. God Knows Our Fears

Like Gideon, we may respond to God’s invitation to join His great and grand plan. A most encouraging verse in the Bible is Psalm 103:14: “For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.” God knows our human emotions will get the better of us and paralyze us at times. The way God interacted with Gideon demonstrates how God will work with us right where we are. God is not bothered by or surprised by our humanity; He knows we often fear and doubt. He is simply calling us to trust Him even in those moments. So many characters in Scripture expressed their doubts, questions, and fears when facing the impossible, yet we read their stories and think of them as heroes and heroines anyway. Why? Because their momentary fear and trepidation


did not write the end of the story; they chose to trust in God, and God fought for them.

B. God Fought for Gideon

Gideon returned to his micro army with newfound courage. He divided his three-hundred man army into three companies and ensured each soldier carried a torch to put inside an empty pitcher, and he gave them a trumpet to sound. He instructed them: “When I come to the outside of the camp, it shall be that, as I do, so shall ye do. When I blow with a trumpet, I and all that are with me, then blow ye the trumpets also on every side of all the camp, and say, The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon” (Judges 7:17–18). Even if they played clarinet in fifth grade band, they were a trumpeter that night. Gideon wanted the enemy to know God was fighting for Israel.

Right around midnight, and on Gideon’s signal, the Israelites blew the trumpets, broke the pitchers, and shouted their war cry. Suddenly God rose up and sent the enemy into a panic. They were so confused, so surprised, they drew their swords on each other. Most Midianites died of “friendly fire.” Others ran for their lives from a fistful of people with pitchers and torches and trumpets. Remember, these were the same Midianites who had bullied Israel and destroyed their crops for the last seven years. But God was fighting for Israel, and Midian did not stand a chance. When Gideon realized he had the enemy armies on the run, he drafted troops from other tribes to finish them off, and Scripture records this postscript in Judges 8:28: “Midian never recovered.”

Teacher Option:

A supplemental video is available in the Resource Kit. 

How has God fought for you?

C. I Will Respond to God’s Invitation to Participate in His Mission

What about you? What enemy are you facing that you know you are too powerless to fight? Perhaps you do not have the degree to fight a raging disease or the income to fight the threat of bankruptcy. Maybe you do not have the training or even the willpower to fight a ruthless, relentless addiction. God did not ask Gideon to destroy the Midianites on his own; He asked Gideon to participate with Him as He destroyed the Midianites.

The apostle Paul and General Gideon had much in common. Although Paul was highly educated and world renowned, he found himself chained to a prison guard, to the prison floor, or both. Yet he still dipped the quill in the ink and penned a letter from prison to the church in Philippi to remind every “Gideon” there and every “Gideon” who would later read this letter that the answer is not in us; it is in Him. We too can testify to the same powerful words of the apostle Paul: “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4:13).

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Most people loathe spiders. Arachnophobia (an extreme fear of spiders) is a common phobia around the world. Even reading E. B. White's classic *Charlotte's Web* is not powerful enough to overcome the urge to step on a spider when we see one. But one day, during one war, a spider's web was all one man needed to live to fight another day.

A US Marine in World War II was fighting alongside his fellow soldiers on a Pacific island where intense gunfire kept raging. In the smoke and the crossfire, he was separated from the unit and lost touch with them. Alone in the jungle, he heard enemy soldiers working their way toward him. This solo soldier scrambled for cover up a high ridge to several small caves in the side of the mountain. He quickly crawled inside and thought he was safe for the moment. As he waited there all alone, in unfamiliar territory with adversaries in hot pursuit, he prayed, "Lord, if it be Your will, please protect me. Whatever Your will though, I love You and trust You. Amen."

The prayer ended, and he lay quietly listening to the enemy approach his position in the cave. His confidence wavered for a moment and he thought, *Well, I guess the Lord isn't going to help me out of this one.* As he feared for his life, he saw a spider begin to weave a web over the mouth of the cave where he was hiding. The enemy soldiers were closing in, and the spider continued to work quietly and quickly on its web, connecting strand after strand, completely unaware of the lethal danger making its way toward the cave.

The soldier thought to himself, *What I need is a brick wall to hide behind, and the Lord sent a spider.* The enemy battalion searched one cave after another until they finally arrived at his. As he mentally prepared to make his last stand, to his amazement and bewilderment, his adversary simply glanced in the direction of his cave and moved on. Why didn't they search this cave? It dawned on him: it must have looked like no one had entered that cave for a long time with a spider's web over the entrance. Had anyone come in, they would have broken the web.

The young soldier looked toward Heaven and prayed, "Lord, forgive me. I had forgotten that in You a spider's web is stronger than a brick wall." Gideon understood it. Paul understood it. We understand it. God is able to fight our battles for us, even when we feel like we have less than little to offer. All we have to do is say, "yes, Lord" to whatever He asks, do whatever He asks, and then give Him the glory for fighting the battle He alone will win.

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us see ourselves as He does, no better and no worse, realizing His grace is sufficient for us
- For God to give us faith to participate in His mission

2.1

KINDNESS FOR THE FATHER'S SAKE

FOCUS VERSE

II Samuel 9:7
And David said unto him, Fear not: for I will surely shew thee kindness for Jonathan thy father's sake, and will restore thee all the land of Saul thy father; and thou shalt eat bread at my table continually.

LESSON TEXT

I Samuel 20:41-42;
II Samuel 7:8-9;
9:1-5, 7-8, 11-13

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God's grace is extended even to those we think are undeserving.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will receive God's grace and extend it to those in need.



Series Overview:

Portraits of grace hang in gilded frames in the galleries of the Old and New Testament. The grace that saved Rahab, gave Mephibosheth a second chance, led Jesus to the cross, and caused Paul to fight for the Gentiles is still available to everyone who needs it.

SG TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: Have you ever cared for someone who had a disability? How did you demonstrate God's love to them?

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection. **I**

I. GOD'S GRACE TO DAVID

A. David, an Unlikely King

» *Why do you think Jesse excluded David when Samuel told him to assemble his sons?*

B. Grace, God's Unmerited Favor

C. I Will Recognize That God's Grace in My Life Is Undeserved

» *Have you ever felt like God treated you unfairly by not giving you what you thought you deserved? What was that experience like?*

II. DAVID'S GRACE TO MEPHIBOSHETH

A. Jonathan, David's Unlikely Ally

B. Mephibosheth, the Fulfillment of a Promise **V**

» *How can you further incorporate those experiencing disability into your faith community?*

C. I Will Extend Grace to Those Who Appear Undeserving

» *Are there people you believe are "undeserving" of God's grace?*
 » *How can you extend the grace God has given you to others?*

Internalizing the Message **I**

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us to develop further awareness of the grace He has given us
- For God to guide us to share with others the same measure of grace He has given us

LESSON CONNECTION

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit. 

Just before Christmas 1982 in Melbourne, Australia, the Vujicic (pronounced voo-yi-chich) family was ready to welcome their son into the world. Long before 4D sonograms, the family saw their baby through three sonograms, and they did not reveal any complications. As soon as he was born, they were stunned. He was born with a rare syndrome called tetra-amelia syndrome, a disorder marked by the absence of arms and legs.

According to Nick Vujicic's autobiography, his mother refused to see him or hold him shortly after his birth. She and her husband left the hospital to process what life was about to look like for the rest of Nick's future and theirs as they committed to caring for him. As Nick grew and enrolled in elementary school, his classmates bullied him. At one point, he tried to drown himself, but someone jumped in and saved his life. He wondered why he struggled while other children did not; he even questioned if his life had any purpose.

His parents recognized his depression and loneliness, and they helped him see the positives in life. Somewhere in those adolescent years, Nick looked to God and started a relationship with Him. To this day, he points to his faith in God as the strength that helps him day by day. At nineteen years old, Nick gave his first inspirational talk and realized his life could inspire others to overcome whatever challenges they were facing.

Although he does not have fully formed legs, he was born with one foot just a few inches below his left hip. The toes on that foot were fused, and he underwent an operation to separate the toes so he could use them as fingers. He refers to them as his "chicken drumstick." He can type up to forty-three words per minute, just above the average of a non-professional typist. Since his first inspirational talk, he has shared his story to millions of people—sometimes to stadiums full of people, sometimes to a church youth group.

When he turned thirty-two, he founded NickV Ministries (formerly Life without Limbs) where he still serves as president and CEO. Seven years later, on February 12, 2012, he married Kanae Miyahara, and he and his wife have two daughters. Nick is an author, speaker, musician, actor, and his hobbies include fishing, painting, and swimming—all without arms and legs. His story continues to amaze those who hear it and is a living example of someone who overcame major physical challenges to make an impact.

BIBLE LESSON

I. GOD'S GRACE TO DAVID

Before the time of kings in Israel, God had wanted to be their King. However, Israel rejected God so they might have a king like surrounding nations (1 Samuel 8:6-7). God accommodated their request despite being rejected, and Samuel anointed Saul as king. While externally Saul seemed to be the ideal candidate for king, internally Saul had different plans. Instead of executing the will of God, Saul chose to execute his own will. God ultimately rejected Saul because Saul believed his ways were better than God's, leading us to young David.

A. David, an Unlikely King

David was the youngest of Jesse's several sons, and he shepherded some of his father's sheep. Samuel, Israel's last judge, was called to anoint a new king over Israel since God had rejected Saul as king. Samuel arrived at Jesse's house. Jesse must have been surprised to see the judge and prophet, Samuel, visit his home unannounced. The prophet asked Jesse to assemble his sons because God had promised to speak to Samuel when Israel's new king stood before him.

Jesse called his sons, and they assembled before Samuel. Perhaps Samuel walked before them, like a drill sergeant inspecting new cadets. Likely, everyone was nervous, but Samuel may have been the most nervous. If Saul found out Samuel was seeking out a new king while Saul still sat on the throne, it may be the end of Samuel.

After examining all of Jesse's sons standing before him, God spoke to Samuel that none of these were the right candidate. Confused, Samuel asked Jesse if he had any more sons. Jesse looked at the ground for a moment, and then he answered that he had one more, David, who was out tending the sheep.

We cannot know with certainty why Jesse did not call David, but we can deduce Jesse believed David was not even a candidate for king. Suddenly David heard voices calling for him in the distance, and he took off running toward home. When he arrived, he saw the puzzled expressions on the faces of his father and brothers, and then David's face turned toward Samuel. Samuel's eyes opened wide with surprise as if he found something (someone) he had been searching for. Samuel approached David and poured anointing oil upon his head. David would be Israel's next king. As quickly as Samuel came, Samuel left, leaving Jesse and all his sons awestruck with surprise. Perhaps they did not know it then, but they had just experienced God's grace.

Why do you think Jesse excluded David when Samuel told him to assemble his sons?

B. Grace, God's Unmerited Favor

The word *grace* may describe how a ballet dancer moves graciously. It may also be utilized to express gratitude following a gracious donation. However, the Bible usually uses the word *grace* to refer to the way God continues to view and respond to humanity favorably. In short, God's grace is God's decision to respond to us favorably when we do not deserve it. It is "unmerited favor." When Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree and realized they were naked, God responded with mercy and undeserved favor by fashioning their clothes. When Israel cried out to the Lord during years of bondage, God was favorable to them and sent a deliver, such as Moses and various judges. Then when Israel's request for a king violated God's commandments, God responded with undeserved favor by anointing a new king, one who would grow to be a man after God's own heart.

C. I Will Recognize That God's Grace in My Life Is Undeserved

The idea that human beings have somehow gotten a raw deal from God is, unfortunately, quite common. We believe we have worked hard and are entitled to rewards, virtues, privileges, and blessings. When we understand all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23), we realize none of us deserve God's grace. Nevertheless God has treated us unfairly. Instead of responding with justice, He responds to us with grace. Despite our flaws, He looks at us favorably. Where only sinfulness exists, God sees the potential for holiness.

God uses grace for transformation through His favor, so we may become the people He calls us to be. He gives so graciously, our cup runs over (Psalm 23:5). Likewise, God also gives grace to us so we may lead others along on the process of transformation, healing, and reconciliation. Our cup does not run over for us to be secure in God's abundant grace, but so we may be vessels who spread God's abundant grace to all those around us.

Have you ever felt like God treated you unfairly by not giving you what you thought you deserved? What was that experience like?

II. DAVID'S GRACE TO MEPHIBOSHETH

God's tremendous grace kept David and carried him from a shepherd's field to the battlefield and from exile in the wilderness, to the throne in the palace. Indeed, David knew by faith and experience that God was with him always, even when he walked through "the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4). Once David was in the palace, he felt compelled to spread God's grace to others, specifically those in Saul's household.

A. Jonathan, David's Unlikely Ally

Jonathan, Saul's son, was David's greatest friend and ally. Jonathan could have treated David as an enemy. David's existence and anointing stood in the way of Jonathan's succession to the throne following Saul's death. Likewise, David should have viewed Jonathan as competition for the throne. Nevertheless,

Jonathan did not once oppose the will of God like his father Saul had repeatedly done. David wept when he learned of the deaths of Saul and his best friend Jonathan (II Samuel 1). Some were happy for David because he was finally free from Saul's maniacal manhunts, but David mourned his friend and his friend's father. Several years later, King David wanted to honor them both by being gracious to what remained of their family. In other kingdoms, a new ruler was expected to fell the previous ruler's family tree to prevent pretentious usurpers who might challenge the new ruler. David had no such plan. He wanted to spread God's grace to Saul's family.

B. Mephibosheth, the Fulfillment of a Promise

Mephibosheth was Jonathan's son and Saul's grandson. When news came that the Philistines had defeated Israel at Mount Gilboa, Mephibosheth's nurse feared for their safety and fled the palace. While making their hasty escape, the nurse somehow dropped Mephibosheth, and the injuries he sustained left him lame in both his feet. At only five years old, he could no longer walk. Mephibosheth, his nurse, and his family went into exile in the north. Initially they feared being killed as the Philistines continued their conquest of Israel. However, when Mephibosheth and his family learned of David's coronation, perhaps they feared that David would put them to death to secure his claim to the throne. This assumption may explain why they stayed in exile and did not return to Jerusalem.

Mephibosheth's disability also changed how Israelite society viewed him. Israelites considered disability to be the result of sin. The prevailing theories were that the parents, another family member, or the person experiencing the disability sinned. When a person was born with a disability, religious experts even advocated that the person had somehow sinned in the womb before birth. Sadly they even suggested the resulting disability was a consequence of even prenatal sin. This view continued into the time of Jesus. (See John 9.) Mephibosheth was eking out a living on the margins of society, not only because he was of Saul's family but also because he had a disability, which would have marked him as a grievous sinner.

Some years later, David sought out Saul's family because he wished to show them "the kindness of God" (II Samuel 9:3). David learned of Mephibosheth and invited him to the palace where he restored Saul's lands to him and invited him to live with him in the royal palace. Mephibosheth would dine with the king every night.

We shake our head and smile at David's lavish grace. Not only did he give Mephibosheth access to a life of luxury and comfort, but David also lifted him out of the margins of society and replanted him into a position of prominence. Mephibosheth was able to manage the lands that were rightfully his and use them to make a profit, which he and others used to support the family for generations

to come. David's gracious act gave Mephibosheth power over his future and access to meaningful purpose for his life.


C. I Will Extend Grace to Those Who Appear Undeserving

Some may have seen Mephibosheth as an enemy or threat to David's rule. Others would have seen Mephibosheth as a sinner due to his disability. However, David saw someone to whom he could show God's abundant grace. David was a recipient of much of God's grace. He had come far since his time shepherding his father's sheep. Nevertheless, David lived the lesson he had learned; David knew his cup ran over so he might extend God's grace to others. As Christians, our cup is also running over. God calls us to extend God's grace to others, especially those we might think are undeserving. When we rate someone as "undeserving" of God's grace, it speaks little of the speck in the person's eye and largely of the plank in our own (Matthew 7:3-5). God still maintains a favorable attitude of grace toward humankind; we as Christians must do the same.

First Peter 4:10 reads: "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." God has called us to be good stewards, or managers, of the grace He has given us. We must use the gifts He has given us to minister to others. In the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30), Jesus demonstrated what happens to those who receive gifts from the Master based on how they use those gifts. Those who productively use their gifts receive more, while those who are unproductive have what was given to them taken away. We must use what God gives us to build His kingdom and extend His grace to others, especially to help the marginalized and disenfranchised.

How can you further incorporate those experiencing disability into your faith community?

Teacher Option:

A supplemental video is available in the Resource Kit. 

Are there people you believe are "undeserving" of God's grace?

How can you extend the grace God has given you to others?

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit. 

On May 9, 1969, the children's program Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood aired a controversial episode. In the episode, Fred Rogers (Mr. Rogers) had his feet in a small plastic children's swimming pool, cooling his feet on a hot summer day. He invited Francois Clemmons an African-American police officer, to join him in the pool to cool his feet as well. For anyone too young to remember the Civil Rights movement, this scene may not seem too controversial. However, in 1969 it was rather controversial.

While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, many swimming pools remained segregated. Not only did Mr. Rogers and Officer Clemmons share a pool, but they also used the same towel to dry their feet. Mr. Rogers understood the circumstances of the time and chose to use his platform to further deconstruct the barriers and obstacles of racism that kept races segregated. He understood that racism is a sin, and the faith community must oppose it at all costs so all humanity may experience community. As we have witnessed in history, disability is not the only separation humanity has devised. Racism and prejudice also divide. Any barrier or obstacle that prevents a person from being integrated as a member of the community or from accessing the community must be removed.

While segregation is no longer legal, sadly the separation between races continues, with Sunday being one of the most segregated days of the week. How one may casually refer to a church as a "black church" or "white church" is evidence of this. Christians must remove barriers that keep us apart. Churches must build bridges. As the mission statement of the United Pentecostal Church International's suggests, it is time for the whole gospel to be taken to the whole world by the whole church. No divisions, barriers, or obstacles may keep us apart.

Although many in Mephibosheth's day looked down on him, David extended the grace of God to him. David sharing God's grace increased Mephibosheth's access to the world and restored a meaningful purpose in his life. Likewise, we must extend God's grace by removing boundaries, increasing others' access to Jesus Christ and the body of Christ, and developing a meaningful purpose for their lives within the body of Christ.

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us to develop further awareness of the grace He has given us
- For God to guide us to share with others the same measure of grace He has given us

2.2

EMBOLDENED BY GRACE

FOCUS VERSES

Joshua 6:22–23

²² But Joshua had said unto the two men that had spied out the country, Go into the harlot's house, and bring out thence the woman, and all that she hath, as ye swear unto her.

²³ And the young men that were spies went in, and brought out Rahab, and her father, and her mother, and her brethren, and all that she had; and they brought out all her kindred, and left them without the camp of Israel.

LESSON TEXT

Joshua 2:8–16;
6:20–25; Matthew 1:5;
Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God will save anyone who chooses to believe and obey.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will trust God's grace and boldly ask for what I need.



Thinking about Last Week:

Have students refer to their Daily Devotional Guide to answer the following questions:

1. What most affected you as you read through the Lesson Text and the Biblical Insights?
2. How did it shape your prayers and thoughts throughout the week?
3. Do you feel you grew closer to the Lord this past week? Why or why not?

SG TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: Recount a situation when you had to trust someone you did not know well. What was it like?

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection. **I**

I. RAHAB'S BOLDNESS

A. A Successful Mission?

» *Have you ever tried to do something challenging without God's help only to discover later that God had a better plan? How did it go?*

B. Rahab's Astonishing Faith

» *Why is it harder to rely on our knowledge than it is to rely on our faith in God?*

C. I Will Recognize God's Work as a Call to Faith in Him **V**

» *How can you become more aware of the wonders of God that already surround you? How can you better remember what God has already done for you?*

» *If you have experienced problems with trusting others or with anxiety, what was it like for you to experience God's perfect love?*

II. RAHAB'S LEGACY

A. Rahab's Bold Request

B. Joshua Honored Rahab's Covenant

» *Were you ever an outsider regarding the community of faith? What was it like to join the body of Christ?*

C. I Will Boldly Ask for God's Grace to Meet My Needs

Internalizing the Message

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to give us faith to believe His Word
- For God to help us become more aware of His presence in every area of our lives

LESSON CONNECTION

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit. 

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran theologian who lived during the twentieth century. He is most famous for becoming involved in a plot to spy on key figures of the Nazi government, which led to a failed coup to assassinate Adolf Hitler on July 20, 1944. Bonhoeffer served as a pastor, professor, traveling speaker, and writer. Several of his writings are considered modern classics within the Christian world.

After completing seminary studies in Germany, Bonhoeffer traveled to America where he attended Abyssinian Baptist Church, the first African American Baptist church in New York. The church spearheaded an effort to address racial equality and advocate that racism was a sin and repentance was the only cure. Bonhoeffer was enthralled with the work of advocacy to support those who were considered “outsiders” within society. Bonhoeffer’s experiences in the United States prepared him for the rising gathering storm in his homeland—the Nazi Party.

The Nazi Party’s final solution for non-Aryans was death or forced labor in concentration camps. Non-Aryans were primarily Jews; however, the Nazi Party also strived to eliminate gypsies, people of color, persons experiencing mental and physical disabilities, those who did not conform to Nazi’s social norms (alcoholics/drug addicts, beggars/persons experiencing homelessness, pacifists), members of Freemasonry, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, those of Polish and Slavic descent, and political opponents (communists, trade unionists, and social democrats).

The Nazi Party’s explanation to eliminate these groups was eugenics, the theory that other ethnic groups had “bad genes” and Aryans were genetically superior in every way. Slowly the social privileges of non-Aryan groups disappeared. The Nazi Party told the German people that non-Aryans must be removed for the Third Reich to achieve its great destiny.

To some degree, most of the German public either bought in to the ideology or lived in fear of being killed or shipped to a concentration camps themselves if they disagreed. Most did not oppose the Holocaust. Since what was “wrong” with non-Aryans was not a moral or character flaw that might be changed but rather a genetic flaw, the Nazis preached elimination in the name of progress as the only outcome.

Bonhoeffer returned to Germany just as Hitler and his Third Reich began their rise to power. When the German Evangelical Church embraced the Nazi Party’s views as its own, Bonhoeffer formed the Confessing Church, a body of Christian believers within Germany. He eventually took extreme measures to secure the safety of the Nazis’ “outsiders.” Like Bonhoeffer, we must look out for our society’s outsiders and make provision for them so we may share God’s grace and love with them.

BIBLE LESSON

I. RAHAB'S BOLDNESS

Even though the Israelite spies were trying to appear inconspicuous, Rahab spotted something different about them. Perhaps they looked different than others in Jericho, or maybe Rahab had gotten good at reading people. These two Israelite spies visited her home (a brothel) for safety and lodging, rather than any other nefarious act. She knew these two were not her normal clientele. The spies likely considered her as a woman who could keep a secret. We do not know why they chose her home, but they ended up there when they entered Jericho. That's how Israelite, God-fearing spies on their way to the Promised Land met Rahab the prostitute.

A. A Successful Mission?

Israel had previously sent spies into the land according to Numbers 13, but Joshua sent these two before Israel invaded Jericho. He sent them to “go view the land, even Jericho” (Joshua 2:1). Joshua thought like a military strategist. He knew that to destabilize the region, Israel would have to conquer fortified Jericho as soon as they crossed the Jordan. He commissioned these two spies to collect information on Jericho so he could use that information to plan the most efficient strategy to take the city. Joshua was neither a novice nor a fool. Although Israel had a string of military victories, they had never tried to take a walled city. The fight would be challenging so he needed the best intel to plan his strategy.

Later the Lord delivered a perfect strategy to Joshua; however, until the Lord revealed the strategy, Joshua did what appeared most rational.

Israel's mission was successful but not because it was strategically planned or rationally sound; rather they succeeded because the invisible hand of God guided the plan. The spies chose to stay with Rahab because it seemed like a perfect cover. Citizens in Jericho commonly saw men in and around Rahab's home. However, the spies found something unexpected in Rahab's house—her astonishing faith in Jehovah.

Have you ever tried to do something challenging without God's help only to discover later that God had a better plan? How did it go?

B. Rahab's Astonishing Faith

Rahab professed faith in Israel's God. She believed God had given Israel the land (Joshua 2:9). In the ancient Near East, most pagan regions believed their “gods” controlled land in the region where the people lived. With this in mind, Rahab's statement was quite profound. Even though pagan religious leaders may have trained her in the religion of her region, she had faith the land belonged to the LORD and His people, Israel. Rahab also confessed that all the people, including her, were terrified of Israel because they had heard about the Exodus from Egypt, the

Red Sea crossing, and Israel's military victories in the wilderness. Due to God's exploits, Rahab concluded that Israel's God must be the ruler of the heavens above and the earth below (Joshua 2:11). He was not just a god of a specific region but the God of the earth and sky.

Rahab had great faith in Israel's God, despite knowing very little about Him. While it is great to continue learning about God and His Word, faith is not just dependent on knowledge. A knowledgeable person may not also be a faithful person. We may know a great deal and still have little or no faith. Some of the greatest contemporary professional theologians, as far as academic careers are concerned, are agnostics or atheists. Knowledge, then, does not indicate whether a person is faithful to God. But Rahab's story is fascinating. She is a key example that a person may know very little and still have great faith. Rahab trusted in what little she had heard about Israel and their God. She chose to lean toward her faith and risk her life for the Israelite spies rather than allow her faith to surrender them to the custody of the city authorities.

Why is it sometimes harder to rely on our faith in God than to rely on our knowledge about God?

C. I Will Recognize God's Work as a Call to Faith in Him

When we notice the work of God's Spirit, we must respond somehow. First, it is essential to God's work all around us. We live in His creation. His miracles surround us. As the old hymn proclaims, "This is my Father's world." Even if you do not live near an ocean or mountain range, every day God splashes the morning and evening sky with color. Every day, the trees give us the oxygen we need, and we give them the carbon dioxide they need. It's a wondrous relationship. This truly is our Father's world. The whole earth is full of His glory. We can respond in faith when we become aware of His beautiful works.

Furthermore, God's Spirit will bring to our remembrance the past experiences, wonders He has worked, and words He has spoken. These are other opportunities to respond in faith. Finally, when we experience the presence of God's Spirit during prayer and worship, we may respond by lifting our hands and voice, dancing in His presence, or in whatever way we celebrate God. Whatever we do, let us respond to His grace in faith.

How can you become more aware of the wonders of God that already surround you? How can you better remember what God has already done for you?


Although we see what God has done and is doing, some may still reject God's plan because of fear. The apostle John stated: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18). According to John, someone who is fearful to trust God, or anyone else for that matter, has yet to experience perfect love. We are not alone, and we are not the first. Rahab was afraid. She had legitimate reasons to fear. She did not truly know why Israelite spies were hiding under her roof, and she did not know what would happen to her if her own city guard discovered she had tricked them.

Nevertheless, she chose to respond with faith in Israel's God, rather than fear. Faith is a choice, and the choice to experience God's perfect love will transform our lives. Fear often causes people to do wrong or to do nothing, which results in apathy and complacency. While doing nothing may seem like a neutral option, not making a choice is still a choice. God calls His entire creation to trust in Him; every individual has a response. We must continue to respond in faith as often as we hear the call.

If you have experienced problems with trusting others or with anxiety, what was it like for you to experience God's perfect love?

II. RAHAB'S LEGACY

Rahab's legacy is her great faith while living in such a faithless place. Similar to Abraham, Rahab heard of God's marvelous works, and she believed. Her faith gave way to a bold request; she asked the spies to save her and her family's lives when they conquered her city. She knew they were coming to take over, it was just a matter of time. The spies gave her instructions, and if she followed those instructions, she would save herself and everyone inside her house. She faithfully obeyed all they asked her to do. Due to her faithful obedience, New Testament authors saw Rahab as a person of faith and a symbol of faithfulness worthy of our emulation.

Teacher Option:
A supplemental video is available in the Resource Kit. 

A. Rahab's Bold Request

Rahab deceived the city authorities and set them on a futile manhunt. When the coast was clear, she asked the spies for a guarantee that they would keep their word. The spies stated their lives would be the guarantee of this promise. They instructed her to leave the scarlet rope in her window that she used to lower them down from the city walls. In a sense, God's people and this seeming faithless prostitute named Rahab entered into a covenant together, all based on her faith in Israel's God. (See Joshua 2:21.) The scarlet rope marked her home. The spies were likely thinking in human terms. They would inform Joshua that Rahab had helped them and request that no soldiers harm anyone inside the home with the scarlet rope in the window. Joshua and his men focused on their human ability, but God had better plans.

B. Joshua Honored Rahab's Covenant

Joshua and the people of Israel faithfully carried out God's unconventional battle strategy to march around Jericho's once indomitable walls, and those walls of Jericho fell flat. Still standing above all the rubble from Jericho's felled wall was Rahab's house, with the scarlet thread hanging out of the window. When the army of Israel stormed the city, they followed Joshua's instructions. They did not harm Rahab and her family. In fact, they led them out and escorted them to safety before burning the city. God showered grace on an outsider and her family. God honored and exceeded Rahab and the spies' covenant. Israel spared Rahab and her family, and she and her family joined Israel and became members of the faith community.

Despite her sinful past, the Bible presents Rahab as a symbol of faith (Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25; Matthew 1:5). In Hebrews and James, Rahab is showcased as an example of faithfulness, alongside Abraham, the father of the faithful. Just as Abraham believed God's promise concerning his offspring and God credited it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:4-5, James 2:23), Rahab displayed similar faith by believing the spies. Rahab chose to trust them, even though they were enemies. Since New Testament authors envisioned Rahab as a person of faith, similar to Abraham, this indicates God credited righteousness to Rahab due to her faith. In addition to being a person of faith, Rahab is also listed in Jesus' genealogy (Matthew 1:5), thus making her one of Jesus' ancestors and King David's great-great-great grandmother. That's not too shabby for Rahab, who was formerly known as a prostitute.

Were you ever an outsider regarding the community of faith? What was it like to join the body of Christ?

C. I Will Boldly Ask for God's Grace to Meet My Needs

Rahab's faith was astounding. On a cognitive level, she may not have known much about God. However, on an experiential level, Rahab knew her faith gave her access to God and even pushed her to ask for mercy from the people of God. Centuries later, the writer of Hebrews came to this same conclusion after experiencing the gospel of Jesus: "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Due to experiencing faith in Jesus Christ, the writer of Hebrews knew he could approach the throne of grace. He also knew Jesus would be "touched with the feeling of our infirmities." In short, Jesus can empathize with us because He has shared in the human experience. Not only does He know what it is to be fully human, but He also knows the way to carry out God's will as a human so He might direct us in the way most pleasing to God. Like Rahab, we will boldly approach God in faith so we might find grace in our time of need.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The Nazis initially imprisoned Bonhoeffer because they discovered his role in a plot that allowed fourteen Jews to escape to freedom. Due to family connections, Bonhoeffer was allowed to serve in a Nazi military intelligence office. He used the information he obtained in that position to lead “outsiders” to freedom and assist the small German resistance to the Nazi Party. Fourteen months after his imprisonment, Nazi intelligence finally discovered Bonhoeffer had shared confidential information connected to Operation Valkyrie, the code name for a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. After learning Bonhoeffer had conspired in Hitler’s assassination, Nazi officials removed him from his original post and sentenced him to a concentration camp.

Bonhoeffer’s position against Nazi injustice was clear. Not only did he live by those words, but he also died by them. Bonhoeffer stated his position against the Nazi Party and general injustice best in his own words: “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself” (servlife.org, “Drive a Spoke”). Indeed, Christ calls us to minister to those who are suffering. Bonhoeffer took matters even further. He believed it was the ministry of the Christian to oppose such systems of oppression directly and, if possible, destroy those systems.

When Jesus said the Spirit anointed Him to preach deliverance to the captives and liberate the bruised (Luke 4:18), Bonhoeffer understood Jesus’ mission had become his own. Our mission is to bring those who are “outside” inside the kingdom of God. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter spoke beyond his understanding when he preached: “For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:39). Perhaps at the time Peter thought this call would only go to Jews; however, this call extended to the ends of the earth because God was, is, and will be calling all people into covenant with Him. Our ministry is to bring the “outsider” inside and to deconstruct systems of oppression, barriers, and obstacles that may be in their way.

On April 9, 1945, the Nazis executed Bonhoeffer alongside other political conspirators at the Flossenbürg concentration camp. On April 23, 1945, United States forces liberated the camp, only two weeks after Bonhoeffer’s death. Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood and lived out a fundamental piece of discipleship: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die” (DesiringGod.org, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer Was Hanged Today”). Even when God’s answer to faithfulness is not deliverance, God still calls us to faithfulness and discipleship. A faithful life consists of days of faithful living. Let us faithfully carry out Jesus’ mission by making every foreseeable effort to bring the “outsider” inside the body of Christ.

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to give us faith to believe His Word
- For God to help us become more aware of His presence in every area of our lives

PS

GRACE FOR THE WORLD

FOCUS VERSE

John 12:19

The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing? behold, the world is gone after him.

LESSON TEXT

Mark 11:1–11;

John 12:19

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God's grace extends to everyone, regardless of what we have to give.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will follow Jesus.



Thinking about Last Week:

Have students refer to their Daily Devotional Guide to answer the following questions:

1. What most affected you as you read through the Lesson Text and the Biblical Insights?
2. How did it shape your prayers and thoughts throughout the week?
3. Do you feel you grew closer to the Lord this past week? Why or why not?

SG TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: Do you consider yourself to be more of a leader or more of a follower?

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection. **I**

I. BEFORE JERUSALEM

- A. Jesus Prophesied His Own Death
 - » *Have you ever expected God to reward you or do something for you, only to discover He asked instead for sacrifice or service?*
- B. Jesus Healed a Man Who Was Blind
- C. I Will Value Jesus, Not Just His Works
 - » *When we encounter God's miracle-working power in our lives, do we "grab and run," or do we treasure God for who He is and make an intentional choice to follow Him?*

II. INTO JERUSALEM

- A. The Crowd Laid Coats and Waved Palm Branches
 - » *In what ways have you sacrificed your own earthy security to follow after Jesus?*
- B. The Crowd Cried Hosanna **V**
- C. I Will Worship Jesus with What I Have
 - » *Are you giving God the best you have when you worship? If not, how can you start today?*

III. THE RELIGIOUS RESPONSE

- A. Some Pharisees Tried to Stifle the Crowd's Praise
- B. Some Pharisees Believed the World Had Gone after Jesus
 - » *What would the world look like if everyone had indeed gone after Jesus?*
- C. I Will Follow Jesus

Internalizing the Message

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to remind us we are called to be servants
- For God to reveal Himself to us so we understand His identity and character and do not just seek His miracles for our own benefit

LESSON CONNECTION

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit. 

It was a balmy Saturday as Justin packed up his tools to head over to Grandpa T's house again. For almost three years, the two men had spent Saturdays side by side, working to restore an old 1968 Chevy Camaro. Today was special because with just a few tweaks, the car would be ready for its first test drive since it was locked away in the garage. Justin could hardly contain his excitement as he pulled down the wide, tree-lined driveway and parked alongside the spacious work garage.

Justin shouted to Grandpa T, "Let's get this done today!" Grandpa lifted his head from under the hood and waved. As they worked, Justin occasionally ran his hand across the shiny, restored chrome and felt a rush of satisfaction. Lately Grandpa expressed a fresh urgency to get the car up and running. With Justin's thirtieth birthday just around the corner, he felt confident Grandpa would hand him the keys to the Camaro.

Just after lunchtime, the two men got into the car for their first drive down the tree-lined lane. They held their breath as they turned the key. The car roared to life, and the men shouted for joy. Freshly washed windows framed the bright faces of two men, one old and one young, proudly enjoying the reward of their countless hours of sweat equity. About ten minutes into the drive, Grandpa T turned down an unfamiliar street. "Where are we heading?" asked Justin. Grandpa didn't reply, but he winked his eye and raised an eyebrow mischievously.

They pulled in front of a humble house with a small yard surrounded by a chain-link fence. The happy squeals of two boys playing in the front yard came drifting into the car as Grandpa T rolled down his window. "Hey boys! Go ask your mom if Grandpa T can give you a ride to get some ice cream in this old Camaro Justin and I have been fixing."

The boys shouted with glee, and Justin vaguely recognized their faces from church. Sally, a single mom who had been faithfully attending since her husband tragically died in a work accident, came to the door and waved her approval. The two boisterous boys eagerly climbed into the back seat.

An hour later, full of ice cream and stories about the car, the two boys were safely home with their mom. Justin and Grandpa T sat in the car, enjoying a moment of quiet after an hour of happy chatter. Grandpa turned to Justin with an intense look in his eye and soberly said, "There's something I want to talk to you about." The air got still as Justin heard the next words: "The Lord has been talking to me about giving this car to Sally. Her old car broke down a month ago, and it's been really tough for her to raise those boys without reliable transportation."

A cold sweat came over Justin. For years he had imagined himself behind the wheel of *this* Camaro. He had worked for almost three years at Grandpa T's side, and he was the only grandson. After three years of hard work, was this really the plan?

BIBLE LESSON

Plans don't always go as we expect. Examine the days leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus. We sit on this side of history, which makes every conversation and every moment significant to us. However, the disciples could not have known what was just around the corner. They could not have imagined their three-year ministry journey with the Master would come to a dramatic and abrupt end. The disciples had witnessed many miracles, but they likely never whispered to each other, "This miracle may be the last one we will witness Jesus perform on this earth." The disciples had already heard the disgruntled complaints of the Pharisees, but they could not have fully anticipated how quickly the religious leaders of the day would be propelled to action by their fury toward Jesus. We have the benefit of perspective and can look at how Jesus chose to spend His last moments on earth.

I. BEFORE JERUSALEM

A. Jesus Prophesied His Own Death

The disciples should not have been surprised when Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane. As they began to journey from the coast of Judea up toward Jerusalem, Jesus launched into conversation, attempting to prepare them for what was to come. "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, . . . and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles: and they shall mock him, and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again." (Mark 10:33–34).

Although Jesus clearly articulated that the coming days would be dark and troubling, it seems the disciples did not fully absorb what was to come. Instead, James and John selfishly inquired if they could sit on Jesus' left and right hand in glory. Their request was self-serving and trivial in light of what was to come. Jesus seemed equally incredulous and asked them in return, "Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?" (Mark 10:38). He reminded them of the unique qualities of His kingdom by teaching, "Whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all" (Mark 10:44). After three years of journeying with Jesus, those closest to Him still did not comprehend fully that His heavenly Kingdom was about sacrifice and servanthood, not personal gain and political positioning.

Perhaps we are much the same, easily dismissing the narrative of Christ's suffering and turning our thoughts to what we hope to gain from God's kingdom. When we think of the Crucifixion story, do we remember that Jesus also called His followers to a life of servanthood? Charles H. Spurgeon once said, "There are no crown-bearers in heaven who were not cross-bearers here below."

Have you ever expected God to reward you or do something for you, only to discover He asked instead for sacrifice or service?

B. Jesus Healed a Man Who Was Blind

After this verbal reminder from Jesus to His disciples that His purpose was to serve without expecting anything in return, Jesus gave them a living example of this principle. As they passed out of the city of Jericho, they came across a man named Bartimaeus who was blind, sitting by the road begging. He sat there totally dependent, in direct contrast to the assumptions of James and John's hopes that they would occupy a place of priority beside Jesus in glory. Blind Bartimaeus had nothing to offer Jesus or His followers. He sat by the road, firmly establishing his position at the bottom of society's hierarchy. His cry, "Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me" was perhaps annoying to the disciples. It certainly irritated the crowd following Jesus, who shouted for Bartimaeus to be quiet. But to Jesus, it was the perfect illustration of His kingdom.

One more time, as He had so many times before, Jesus paused His journey and laid aside His agenda, asking Bartimaeus what he wanted. The answer was simple. The man wanted to see. And instantly Jesus responded: "Go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole" (Mark 10:52). What was this faith about? It is easy to brush past this question and assume the obvious: Bartimaeus had faith Jesus could perform a miracle. But when looking at the words spoken in this story, we see Bartimaeus also had faith in the deity of Jesus. We know this because he called Jesus the "Son of David," which was a phrase used for the Messiah.

C. I Will Value Jesus, Not Just His Works

In that moment, Bartimaeus received exactly what he wanted—healing from blindness. There was no more reason for him to engage Jesus. He could have easily gone on his way, joyfully celebrating his miracle from the Master. But instead, Bartimaeus "followed Jesus in the way" (Mark 10:52). The man who had been blind made a choice to invest his future in Jesus. He understood Jesus not only to be a miracle-worker, but as the Messiah, He was worthy of following.

II. INTO JERUSALEM

A. The Crowd Laid Coats and Waved Palm Branches

As Jesus and His disciples made their way into Jerusalem, two of the disciples retrieved a donkey for Jesus to ride on into the city. While kings would often ride a horse into a city, the choice to ride a donkey speaks of the humility of Christ. Jesus was the King of kings, but He was willing to humble Himself and not assert His authority. His choice of transportation was another reminder of the lesson of servanthood Jesus was teaching those closest to Him.

The crowd ran ahead, laid down their coats on the path, and gathered palm branches to wave in worship. This crowd was

When we encounter God's miracle-working power in our lives, do we "grab and run," or do we treasure God for who He is and make an intentional choice to follow Him?

most likely composed of people such as Bartimaeus, who had been following Jesus as He traveled and performed miracles. Jesus did not need the attention of the crowd. He did not seek attention, but it is beautiful to imagine the spontaneous praise that welled up in the hearts of men and women whose lives had been impacted by the Master.

When they laid their coats in front of Jesus, they were not just forming a red carpet for Him to ride on. A coat had great significance in Bible days. It was a treasured article of clothing that represented security and was even used as collateral for a loan. Bartimeus likely draped a beggar's coat over his lap to collect the coins and to let the crowd know he was alive only by their grace. Part of worshiping Christ is to show we are willing to lay aside or even sacrifice those things that make us secure here on earth, and we are willing to put all our trust and confidence in the Lord.

B. The Crowd Cried Hosanna


Jesus' choice of transportation continued to illustrate His mission as a meek Messiah. It was also a subtle signal that He was fulfilling a messianic prophecy Zechariah delivered in the book that bears his name. "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9, NKJV). When we couple Bartimeus's understanding of Jesus as the Son of David and Jesus' own choice to enter Jerusalem on a donkey, the Gospel writer was clearly pointing out the deity of Jesus.

As Jesus passed through the street on the coats laid before Him, the crowd waved palm branches and cried, "Hosanna; Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord: Blessed be the kingdom of our father David, that cometh in the name of the Lord: Hosanna in the highest" (Mark 11:9-10). *Hosanna* was a desperate cry for help by the Jewish people who were under Roman rule, meaning, "Save us." The declaration of the crowd was a clear sign Bartimaeus was not the only member of the crowd who understood Jesus was the Messiah. The shout of the crowd was a collective and powerful declaration they were identifying Jesus as their hope for deliverance. Even if He had not yet worked a miracle for them personally, they knew He could save them from the Romans, but Jesus came to save them from their sins.

C. I Will Worship Jesus with What I Have

We have come to identify the crowd's response on that day as "Palm Sunday." But they were not auditioning for a new holiday; they were just worshiping Jesus with palm branches because that's what they had. Men, women, and children quickly identified what they had around them—their coats, palm branches from nearby trees, and the power of their own voices—to demonstrate their praise. God loves when His children spontaneously offer

In what ways have you sacrificed your own earthy security to follow after Jesus?

Teacher Option:
A supplemental video is available in the Resource Kit. 

themselves in worship. It is something we can do in our corporate worship, but it is also the daily choice we make to give all we are in worship to our King. He deserved boutique brands, but the disciples laid down thrift store finds, and He welcomed their worship because it was the best they had.

Are you giving God the best you have when you worship? If not, how can you start today?

III. THE RELIGIOUS RESPONSE

A. Some Pharisees Tried to Stifle the Crowd’s Praise

While the crowd adoringly worshiped Jesus, some of the Pharisees emerged and expressed their outrage. In fact, they wanted Jesus to rebuke the crowd! (Luke 19:39-40). They understood the significance of the words spoken by those who had been following Jesus. They were declaring His lineage in the kingdom of David. They were crying for Jesus to save them. This could only mean one thing: the crowd believed Jesus was their Messiah. This was dangerous to the religious rulers of the day, who were seeking desperately to discredit Jesus and retain their positions of power.

B. Some Pharisees Believed the World Had Gone after Jesus

Upon watching and listening to the crowd, the Pharisees came to a startling realization. Many in this crowd had witnessed Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. They had begun telling others about it (John 12:17-18). Others, like Bartimaeus, had joined the crowd because of their own personal testimonies of Jesus’ miracle-working power. The Pharisees turned to one another privately, shook their heads in dismay, and angrily admitted: “The world is gone after him” (John 12:19). The New Living Translation puts it this way: “There’s nothing we can do. Look, everyone has gone after him!”

What would the world look like if everyone had indeed gone after Jesus?

The significance of this moment in the story of Jesus is profound. The worship of the crowd and the power of miraculous testimonies created a tipping point. It was evident many were choosing to follow Jesus, and the Pharisees recognized their attempts to discredit the ministry of Jesus had proven futile. While Palm Sunday was a beautiful and victorious day of worship, it should also remind us of the humility of Christ and a day in history that inevitably set into motion Jesus’ one-way journey to the cross.

C. I Will Follow Jesus

When Jesus demonstrates His miraculous power in our lives, our response should be to worship and to follow Him. If we truly believe the revelation of Jesus as God, we will not stay the same or linger back in our old patterns and habits. The work of Jesus in our lives should compel us to put our trust and security in Him. We should use whatever we find in our hands to exalt Him. And finally, our lives should be set on a path to follow Him, no matter what others may believe or do.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

One church had a zealous new convert who wanted to share Jesus with everyone in his city. On Saturdays he would take a few others to a local homeless encampment and share the gospel with the men and women they met. Then on Sunday mornings, he would return with a van and squeeze as many people as he could into the van and transport them to church.

The local congregation became alarmed at the sudden influx of homeless individuals sitting on the back rows each Sunday. Some did not smell very nice. Others would drop their heads to their chests and sleep during the message. Occasionally, one or two would become rowdy and warrant intervention from the ushering staff. Some parents expressed concerns for their children. It was a genuine crossroads for the congregation. How would they respond to this dilemma?

Church leaders met and determined the blossoming homeless ministry should be curtailed due to the concerns of the church body. While some individuals continued to minister to the encampment on Saturdays, and some efforts were made to provide food and basic necessities, the ministry withered and eventually ceased to exist. Some in the congregation felt profound regret the gospel had been kept from precious souls who needed to hear it.

Jesus was willing to engage people who represented every social demographic with grace, warmth, and compassion. He was far less concerned with the comfort of His disciples and far more interested in touching the broken and hurting. His habit was to move among the crowd, engaging those who were blind, could not walk, or were of ill repute. Jesus willingly responded to every level of need He encountered.

In Western culture, it is easy to become consumed with our routines of working a job, living in comfortable homes, eating decent meals, and seeing our basic needs met. How much do we make ourselves approachable to those who are destitute, troubled, hungry, or needy? When we follow after Jesus, we may find ourselves in situations where we are uncomfortable.

It only took three years for James and John to get haughty and become distracted by their status as close disciples of Jesus, but Jesus reminded them His kingdom was marked by the cross, and He came to be a servant to all. God is giving each of us the same challenge. When He saves us from our own brokenness, we are invited to a path of servanthood. Every day is an opportunity to follow His example.

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to remind us we are called to be servants
- For God to reveal Himself to us so we understand His identity and character and do not just seek His miracles for our own benefit

2.3

JESUS CHRIST DIED FOR US

FOCUS VERSES

Romans 5:7-8

⁷For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die.

⁸But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

LESSON TEXT

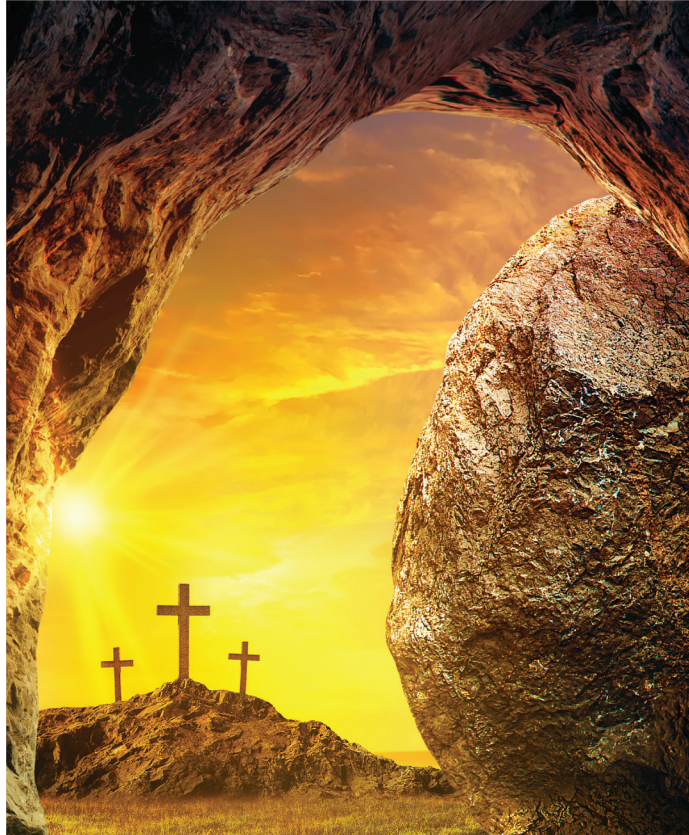
Luke 23:26, 32-34, 39-43; Romans 5:6-11

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

The cross is the ultimate expression of God's grace.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will recognize God's grace as the sole basis of salvation.



Thinking about Last Week:

Have students refer to their Daily Devotional Guide to answer the following questions:

1. What most affected you as you read through the Lesson Text and the Biblical Insights?
2. How did it shape your prayers and thoughts throughout the week?
3. Do you feel you grew closer to the Lord this past week? Why or why not?

SG TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: Recall a time when you received abundantly good news. What happened? How did it make you feel?

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection. **I**

I. LUKE'S ACCOUNT OF THE CROSS

A. Between Two Thieves

» *What was it like when faith revealed Jesus' true identity to you?*

B. "Father, Forgive Them" **V**

» *What feelings do you experience when you think about Jesus' sacrifice on the cross?*

C. I Will Accept God's Gracious Forgiveness

» *How can you incarnate (manifest) Jesus in your daily life so others may experience Jesus?*

II. PAUL'S EXPLANATION OF THE CROSS

» *Have you ever thought about the bad news that precedes the good news, or the gospel? How might you present this news to a contemporary audience so they may be more receptive?*

A. A Demonstration of Grace

B. Justified and Reconciled

» *Since salvation comes entirely from God's power, what role, if any, does our human effort serve in salvation?*

C. I Will Embrace God's Grace as the Sole Basis of Salvation

Internalizing the Message

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us understand the gospel in a deeper way and apply that understanding to our daily lives
- For God to help us rest securely in His grace

LESSON CONNECTION

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit. 

While many who are not avid runners cannot fathom the joy of running a marathon, some find great pleasure in marathons. Still others take their participation to a seemingly fanatical level, as competing in such lengthy races often requires rigid lifestyle changes to harness the endurance to finish the race. The word *marathon* comes to us from Greek history. While the story certainly involves running, the focus was not on winning a race but on delivering a message.

During the Greco-Persian wars, the Persians' first invasion of Greece resulted in a huge military blunder and a costly defeat at the Battle of Marathon. In 490 BC, Persia invaded Greece with the intention of conquering the entire region. The Persians had a much larger army than the Athenians. The Athenians met them near a city named Marathon. The Persians assembled their army after landing their ships. The Athenians met the Persians head-on and the battle began. During the battle the Persians pushed the middle of the Athenian army, but they failed to realize as they pushed inward, the Athenians flanked them on both sides.

Athens was only twenty-five miles away from Marathon. The city had likely already been preparing for a siege should the Athenians suffer defeat there. The Athenian army dispatched a messenger named Pheidippides to carry the good news of the Athenian victory. As the runner appeared in the distance, watchers on the city walls in Athens likely could tell whether the news was good or bad by how the runner carried himself.

The Battle of Marathon is a great story to illustrate how New Testament authors used two key Greek words to convey the gospel of Jesus Christ. Pheidippides, the messenger, likely would have been known as an *apostolos*, which means “one who is sent forth” and was usually translated as “messenger” or “ambassador.” In the New Testament, only a quick glance is necessary to understand how this word translated “apostle” is one of the most common renderings. This messenger came with a message: the *euangelion*, which means “good news.”

Now that we understand these two words, we have a clear glimpse into what it means to share the gospel, the good news, about Jesus Christ—Jesus died for us, was buried, rose again, and provided a way of salvation for all. We are messengers. We are those sent forth into the world to share the good news. We are ambassadors for His kingdom, and we represent the values and principles of Christ's kingdom wherever we go. As we carry this message, others can see if we have “good news” by how we live because we live through the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

BIBLE LESSON

I. LUKE'S ACCOUNT OF THE CROSS

Luke's contributions as a New Testament author—the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles—employ a unique perspective. Thankfully, God inspired His writers to write, and He allowed their personalities and journalistic styles to shine through their writing. Unlike Matthew and John, who presumably wrote from their own experiences, and those who wrote epistles (such as Paul, Peter, James, and so on), Mark and Luke used sources to help write their Gospels. Mark's only known source came from tradition, which informs that Peter's experiences influenced Mark's Gospel.

Luke informed his readers of four items to understand his Gospel. First, Luke acknowledged there were other Gospel accounts and his narrative was not the first attempt (Luke 1:1). Second, Luke's motivation to write was to use the knowledge and information he had acquired to produce an accurate account (Luke 1:3). Third, Luke also shared that his Gospel utilized sources, namely the previous Gospels in circulation—Matthew and Mark—and eyewitness accounts Luke had likely obtained through stories told in the church or perhaps even interviews.

Finally, Luke stated the purpose of his writing was so Theophilus, Luke's intended recipient, would be sure of the faith he had been taught. Some believe *Theophilus* (meaning “loved by God”) is a generic way of encompassing all Christians as the intended audience. However, others believe Theophilus was also a real person, likely a Roman official. Either way, since we understand the background, perspective, and purpose of Luke's Gospel, we can better process and understand Luke's description of Jesus' passion.

A. Between Two Thieves

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke each mention Jesus crucified alongside two thieves, but Luke's Gospel includes a detail Matthew and Mark do not. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, the criminals and the crowd generally scoffed at Jesus. However, in Luke's Gospel, one thief scoffed at Jesus, but the other did not. Church tradition refers to these thieves as penitent and impenitent.

The penitent thief rebuked the other saying, “Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss” (Luke 23:40-41). The penitent thief affirmed they deserved their death sentence. He had begun to take accountability for his actions, indicating the roots of repentance.

From their brief interaction, Jesus knew this man was different. The man confessed faith in Jesus by asking Jesus to do for him something only Jesus could do: “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom” (Luke 23:42). A thief addressed Jesus as “Lord.” Criminals, not lords, were crucified, so the revelation of Jesus as Lord could only have been revealed to the penitent thief by faith.

What was it like when faith revealed Jesus’ true identity to you?

B. “Father, Forgive Them”

The following poignant prayer is unique to Luke’s Gospel: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). We owe Luke a great debt for writing Jesus’ seemingly impossible prayer for us to read. He forgave the ones who crucified Him. Luke presented Jesus as a suffering servant who was compassionately giving His life for others. Despite those who hurled insults at Him, wounded Him, and finally killed Him, Jesus offered them compassion and petitioned for their forgiveness. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus gave His life to others as He gave His life for others.

In the previous verse, Luke told his audience that the Romans had crucified Jesus and the two criminals, meaning they had completed the crucifixion process. The three men’s hands and feet were fastened to their wooden crosses with nails. Next, their executioners lifted each cross and dropped it into a hole in the ground. The impact of the jolt often knocked the crucified person’s bones out of joint, thus making any movement, much less escape, nearly impossible. With the crucifixion complete and in excruciating pain (a term coined from crucifixion meaning “out of the cross”) Jesus chose to love and petition for forgiveness rather than judgment. What magnificent mercy!

Teacher Option:

A supplemental video is available in the Resource Kit. ▼

What feelings do you experience when you think about Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross?

C. I Will Accept God’s Gracious Forgiveness

Jesus’ crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection are God’s invitation to us for forgiveness, reconciliation, and ultimately resurrection. God chose this path because He wants to forgive us, restore relationship with us, and save us from the guilt and power of sin. We must accept what God has offered us through Jesus Christ by placing our faith in, or trusting, Jesus Christ and the atonement He provided at Calvary for our sins.

With this invitation also comes a higher calling. Jesus displayed compassion and forgiveness toward others so we might emulate Him. Earlier in His ministry, Jesus put it this way: “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Jesus invited His disciples to deny what seemed natural to themselves and carry around their cross, which was a symbol of the death penalty, to follow Jesus.

In summary, Jesus taught that being a disciple was about denying ourselves and carrying around the inevitability of death, spending our lives serving His higher purpose. Forgiveness, reconciliation, and salvation come alongside the call for believers to incarnate

the risen Christ in our lives by displaying the compassion and grace of Jesus Christ to others.

How can you incarnate (manifest) Jesus in your daily life so others may experience Jesus?

II. PAUL'S EXPLANATION OF THE CROSS

In the Lesson Connection, we explored the Greek word for the gospel, *euangelion*, which means “good news,” and how *apostolos*, which means “messenger,” carried this message. While Paul commonly introduced himself as an “apostle of Jesus Christ” and his key message was the gospel, perhaps it is easier to grasp when considering Paul as a messenger of Jesus Christ. The message he carried explained how the news of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection is good news for human beings.

Perhaps you have asked others the question: “I have good news and bad news. Which would you like first?” Paul did not seem to give his audience that choice. Before presenting the good news, Paul often presented the bad news first. Consider it this way: since salvation involves being saved from something, to understand what it means to be saved, we must know we are in danger and need a Savior. Imagine a person is unknowingly trapped in a burning building and, although they are in great danger, they live like everything is normal. They need to know the bad news—the building is on fire—before they accept the good news—help is only one call away.

The bad news preceding Paul’s good news is learning that the fire has human beings trapped, but we cannot escape through our own power and ability; we need someone to save us from the fire, lest we perish. Salvation is possible because God has demonstrated His grace to all humanity by making salvation available to us all.

Have you ever thought about the bad news that precedes the good news, or the gospel? How might you present this news to a contemporary audience so they may be more receptive?

A. A Demonstration of Grace

God demonstrates His grace toward us by choosing to deal favorably with us. Furthermore, God is not gracious toward us because of anything we have done, are doing, or may do in exchange. In Ephesians 2:8–9, Paul clarified: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.” Both grace and faith extend from God. We believe, not because of our faithfulness but because of God’s faithfulness.

In Romans 5:6–8, Paul made it clear that salvation is not the result of our strength or effort. Jesus was the only one who would care enough for us to lay down His life for sinful and ungodly people like us. In verse 7, Paul used a rational human argument to explore this concept further. It would be rare for a person to risk his or her life for a righteous person or cause (such as fighting for freedom in the American Revolution or serving as a conductor on the Underground Railroad); however, Paul clarified that Jesus laid down His life for sinful human beings. Earlier Paul indicted the entire human race as sinners (Romans 3:23). When Jesus surrendered His life, it was not for the righteous but for the ungodly.

B. Justified and Reconciled

Justification and *reconciliation* are unusual terms to those in twenty-first-century North America. *Justification* is a legal term. In ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman societies, when at least two parties agreed, they formed a covenant. The covenant was a transactional relationship; both parties promised to perform their duties. An example of a covenant today is marriage. When one party breaks the covenant, the offended party can demand that the other party who broke the covenant “make it right.”

The process of “making it right” is to provide some form of satisfaction. Jesus provided this on our behalf through the Atonement. The Spirit of God laid upon the Man Christ Jesus the sins of humankind to display God’s justice. (See Romans 3:25–26.) However, removing our offense was not enough to repair the breach in our relationship with God. The holy God of Heaven imputed all our sins to the righteous Man Jesus, who never sinned. Now through the gospel, God graciously imputes Jesus’ righteousness to us, who do not always live righteously. The term “double imputation” is often used to encompass these concepts.

Paul used the legal term *justification* to indicate God declares us righteous because we have placed our trust in Jesus’ atonement for our sins. Justification does not mean we are righteous, only that God has declared us righteous. Imagine a courtroom drama where the evidence of the defendant’s guilt is evident, yet the jury declares the defendant “not guilty.” This example is our closest contemporary equivalent of justification.

Reconciliation, however, is a relational term rather than a legal one. The parties may decide to reconcile after the offending party delivers satisfaction to repair the damage done through their covenant violations. Reconciliation is the restoration of the covenantal relationship that was previously damaged. Paul indicated that violating the covenant had made us enemies with God, but through Jesus’ atonement, the relationship between God and humankind is restored (Romans 5:10). God does not just want to release us from negative consequences; He also wants to develop an intimate relationship with us.

Since salvation comes entirely from God’s power, what role, if any, does our human effort serve in salvation?

C. I Will Embrace God’s Grace as the Sole Basis of Salvation

Grace is the only basis for salvation. Even if we could somehow live a righteous life from this point forward, our sinful record is already against us. Just like perfect attendance at work or school may be tarnished by one absence, even one sin eliminates the possibility of us living the righteous life that is God’s standard. Although God knows we will never be fully righteous, He still offers us salvation from our guilt and from the power of sin through Jesus Christ alone. Now that is extraordinarily good news.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

It only took three centuries and political interference from the Roman emperor Constantine (amid other factors) for the church to begin losing its gospel identity. While there is evidence of brief movements during the Middle Ages that emphasized the importance of faith, Christianity had largely lost sight of faith. History held its breath until the Protestant Reformation in the fifteenth century when the church began rediscovering the concept of faith. Theologians of the Protestant Reformation, trained in studying the Bible in Latin, used three Latin words to define faith: *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*. These three ingredients help us understand faith, how faith leads to salvation, and how we may place our faith in Christ alone.

Notitia refers to having enough knowledge to believe in something. A good English word to connect it to would be *notion*. This ingredient of faith means to have the knowledge to understand an idea or concept. *Notitia* is to say one understands the basic content of the Christian faith. You could take a world religions class in high school or at community college and obtain *notitia* of the Christian faith and likely other religions.

Assensus means to affirm the *notitia*, the content, as true. The English word, *assent*, is a good way to remember what *assensus* means. Regarding the Christian faith, *assensus* refers to us assenting that the content of the Christian faith is true. Truth is exclusive. To say the gospel is true is to say other ways to right relationship with God are not. Therefore, *assensus* is a key ingredient of faith because it requires taking the Bible as it presents itself, the true revelation of God to humankind.

The third and final ingredient is *fiducia*, which has to do with trust, reliance, and confidence. A helpful English word to remember this term is *fiduciary*, a person whom another person or group trusts to manage money, such as a trustee. We could affirm that a person is a trustworthy candidate (*notitia* and *assensus*) to be a fiduciary or trustee. However, it is one thing to affirm someone's trustworthiness and another to trust that person with your money. Likewise, we can affirm the trustworthiness of the Christian faith; however, placing trust in Christ for salvation and affirming His Word is true are different.

Consider a ladder as an example. We may see a ladder, count the rungs, and affirm it is a ladder (*notitia*). We may affirm we believe the ladder could support our weight (*assensus*). However, the only true way to know if the ladder can support us is to trust it by starting to climb it (*fiducia*). The question here is: do we trust in Jesus for salvation? Are we resting in the finished work of His cross? He can carry us. It is up to us to cast our own cares aside and allow Jesus to support us all the way.

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us understand the gospel in a deeper way and apply that understanding to our daily lives
- For God to help us rest securely in His grace

2.4

GRACE THAT IS (ALWAYS) GREATER

FOCUS VERSE

Acts 10:34

Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons.

LESSON TEXT

Acts 2:39; 10:9-16, 28-29, 34;

Galatians 2:11-16

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God's grace reaches further than we can imagine.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will ask God to help me grow in my exercise of His grace.



Thinking about Last Week:

Have students refer to their Daily Devotional Guide to answer the following questions:

1. What most affected you as you read through the Lesson Text and the Biblical Insights?
2. How did it shape your prayers and thoughts throughout the week?
3. Do you feel you grew closer to the Lord this past week? Why or why not?

SG TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: Do you remember a situation as a child where something seemed unfair? Why did you think it was unfair?

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection. **I**

I. PETER'S SLOW REALIZATION

» *Has God ever illuminated something to you that you missed or changed due to your own thinking?*

A. Peter's Pentecost Proclamation **V**

B. Peter's Full Realization

» *Is there a group of people you believe are too hard to reach with the gospel? How can God make it possible?*

C. I Will Allow God's Grace to Reveal My Prejudices

» *Since illumination of truth and discipleship are a process, how has that process changed you over time?*

II. PETER AND PAUL'S CONFRONTATION

» *What sinful behavior or attitude has been persistent for you? How have you learned to address it through God's grace and the power of the Spirit?*

A. Peter's Lapse into Hypocrisy

» *Have you ever tried to address a sin, only to find out the sin was more pervasive than you thought? How did you use spiritual resources such as your church family, prayer, and Scripture to address the sinful behavior?*

B. God's Grace is Greater than Prejudice

C. I Will Repent of My Prejudices

Internalizing the Message **I**

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to make us aware of hidden prejudices that hinder us from extending Jesus' gift of grace to others
- For God to reveal any challenges that hinder others from coming to Jesus and to give us the motivation and direction to remove those obstacles

LESSON CONNECTION

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit. 

No one truly knows what made the Hatfields and McCoys hate each other so much. One day they were neighboring families in Kentucky and West Virginia, and seemingly the next day, they were sworn enemies, willing to fight for their families' honor—even to prison, death, or both. But what started it all? A few theories swirl around in the history books and online articles. Perhaps it all started when one of the Hatfields stole one of the McCoys' razorback hogs. Or maybe Randolph McCoy's vitriol kicked off when his own daughter Rose Ann moved in with the Hatfields after she discovered she was carrying Johnse Hatfield's baby.

It could have begun when a band of Hatfields crossed the Tug Fork into Kentucky and went prowling around the McCoys' land. We do not really know what ignited the fuse, but it all exploded in August 1882 when one of Randall McCoy's sons yelled something at an unarmed Ellison Hatfield, Ellison fired back with some strong language of his own, and McCoy literally fired back with his revolver and several added knife wounds, recording the first (but far from last) deadly casualty in one of America's most famed family feuds.

The Hatfields and McCoys in America's nineteenth century were somewhat similar to the Jews and Gentiles of the Bible's first century. Their beef with one another was not just over theft, romance, or land: their hatred for each other was over identity. To the Jews, they were God's covenant people, the Gentiles were not. It was that simple, and so were the rules. The Jews did no good deed for the Gentiles.

The last place Peter or any Jewish preacher would want to preach the gospel of Jesus was in a Gentile's home to a Gentile family. But by the time we come to Acts 10, God had been reaching for a Gentile, he had been reaching out to God, and God was planning to send a Jewish preacher to preach the gospel to erase the bold, long-drawn line between the Jews and Gentiles.

BIBLE LESSON

I. PETER'S SLOW REALIZATION

While Peter is known for presenting some tremendous insights into Jesus' significance and identity, Peter also struggled to realize the implications of Jesus' significance and identity. One key example of Peter's shortfall is recorded in Matthew 16. He recognized Jesus was the Christ. Jesus stated this truth only could have been revealed to Peter by God Himself (Matthew 16:15-17). While Peter did receive a revelation from God and tremendous insight into Jesus' significance and identity, Peter failed to grasp what it meant for Jesus to be the world's Messiah. Only a few verses later, Peter rebuked Jesus for declaring that as Messiah, He was destined to go to Jerusalem, die, and rise again on the third day. Jesus revealed that Peter's rebuke came not from God—who revealed Jesus' deity to Peter—but from human thinking.

Peter's story serves as a cautionary tale that illumination can easily become blended with our fallible, often faulty, human thinking. The illumination may have come from God, but the implications were devised from human thinking. From Acts to Galatians, readers of the New Testament may see how this blending of theological illumination and human implication was a pattern for Peter. God used various experiences to address Peter's pattern. Like Peter, we must be careful not to allow our biases or prejudices to override the truth that God is for the whole world. Like Peter, we may learn how to break free of this pattern through God's Word and interaction with fellow Christian believers.

Has God ever illuminated something to you that you missed or changed due to your own thinking?

A. Peter's Pentecost Proclamation

Even at the beginning of the Book of Acts, the disciples still were not envisioning the goal of Jesus' mission. When Jesus gave them His parting words in Acts 1, the disciples asked Jesus: "Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). The question reveals their expectations and values. They shared their messianic expectations of their countrymen: the hope the Messiah would restore Israel's kingdom and remove the Romans. Jesus dismissed their question and offered them His parting words.


Jesus promised they would receive power in the form of the Holy Spirit, equipping them to be witnesses beginning in Jerusalem and extending to the uttermost part of the earth. They knew Jesus would use them in Jerusalem and Judea, but Samaria? Would He really want them to preach His glorious gospel to the hated Samaritans? They were part Jew, part Gentile. And to the ends of the earth? That's where the other nations lived, and they were fully Gentile. But God was patient with Peter and the rest of the apostles. The Holy Spirit continued to lead them so they understood the true mission of Jesus' church.

In Acts 2 God poured out His Holy Spirit on the Jews on the Day of Pentecost. The Spirit anointed Peter to preach a message

that reached its apex in and around Acts 2:39: “For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.” The setting of this sermon was Jerusalem on a feast day. Very likely, everyone in the audience who responded to Peter’s sermon was a Jew, so when Peter said the promise of salvation is for you and your children, it was an appropriate statement for that setting.

However, Peter preached beyond what he may have even believed when he preached the promise to all who were far off; he unintentionally included other groups, the dreaded Samaritans and Gentiles. In our culture, inclusion is one of the highest values. Everyone should be included. The gospel is the most inclusive message in the world because it is good news for everyone: the rich, the poor, the bond, the free, male, female, the well known, the unknown. While Peter did not understand it then, he would learn in time that there are really only two groups of people in the world: those in covenant with God and those God wants to call into covenant.

Teacher Option:

A supplemental video is available in the Resource Kit. 

B. Peter’s Full Realization

Just as Jesus promised them, the disciples were witnesses of Jesus’ mission in Jerusalem, Judea, and eventually Samaria. Peter himself witnessed Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit and speak with tongues, just as he and the other Jewish believers had. Perhaps this event challenged Peter’s racial prejudice since Jews and Samaritans had historical racial tension due to Samaritans sharing a mixed lineage of Jewish and Gentile ancestry. Nevertheless, Peter accepted what God was doing; after all, God was restoring the fallen house of Israel, even those afar off, such as the Samaritans.

However, in Acts 10, Peter’s faith in the gospel ran into another high hurdle of prejudice: God called Peter to witness to a Gentile. This Gentile man, Cornelius, was also a Roman centurion. He represented the military and governmental power, actively oppressing Israel. One of his colleagues supervised Jesus’ crucifixion. Surely such a scoundrel could not be saved and included in God’s covenant community alongside Peter, could he? Surely ministering to Roman soldiers was in direct conflict with the restoration of Israel, yet God called Peter to share the gospel with his enemy. Maybe Peter heard Jesus’ grace-filled message echo in his ears: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you” (Matthew 5:44).

Before going to Cornelius’s house, Peter had a vision. God instructed him not to call what God had cleansed “common” (Acts 10:15). While Peter did not initially understand what the vision meant, the meaning was revealed to him while he interacted with Cornelius and his household. God spoke to Peter in a vision so Peter would understand that through salvation, God wanted to invite Gentiles into the covenant community, and because God was cleansing the Gentiles just like the Jews, Peter should not call them “unclean” anymore (Acts 10:28).

As Peter shared the gospel with Cornelius's household, the Holy Spirit fell on them. Peter knew they received the Holy Spirit because they spoke with tongues, just as he and the other Jews with Peter had. (See Acts 2:4; 10:44-46.) With one divine act of Holy Spirit outpouring, God erased the line that society had drawn in bold permanent marker that separated Jews from Gentiles, especially from Romans.

Peter determined they must be baptized and granted full inclusion into the covenant community. In that holy moment, Peter realized God was calling all people into covenant, not just those with Jewish ancestry. Because of this inclusion, Peter's prejudice against Gentiles must end. When he testified to his brothers and sisters in Jerusalem in Acts 11, Peter testified that the Gentiles received the Spirit just like the Jews did. But in case he started to redraw the line and make Jewish Christians more valuable than Gentile Christians, he made the Gentile Christians the model in Acts 15:11. Peter affirmed: "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they." We are no better than them; they are no better than us. God erased the line; let's not draw it again.

C. I Will Allow God's Grace to Reveal My Prejudices

Peter's process of realization demonstrates that God reveals biases over time, indicating that being a faithful disciple is a process, not a task. Despite God revealing the inclusion of Gentiles in the Old Testament (Isaiah 42; 49; 56; 60), Peter and other Jewish Christians missed it due to their cultural biases and prejudices. But God patiently worked with them to help them become the covenant people He was calling them to be by repenting of their prejudice so they would carry the gospel of Jesus to the world. Likewise, we must allow God's Spirit to search our hearts and reveal to us what part of ourselves is contrary to His mission so we might continue to carry the gospel of Jesus across the earth and across town.

Is there a people group you believe is too hard to reach with the gospel? How can God make it possible?

Since illumination of truth and discipleship are a process, how has that process changed you over time?

II. PETER AND PAUL'S CONFRONTATION

Unfortunately, Peter's repentance, much like our own, did not have the final word on this matter. Sin is persistent. It is comparable to a weed we pluck out of the garden, only to return later to find the weed growing again in the same spot. While we experience illumination of truth from God, sometimes we take half measures and fail to get to the heart of the sin or address the sin's pervasiveness in our lives. Peter struggled with this same human problem, and Paul addressed it so Peter could continue to grow into the man God called him to be.

What sinful behavior or attitude has been persistent for you? How have you learned to address it through God's grace and the power of the Spirit?

A. Peter's Lapse into Hypocrisy

In Galatians 2, Paul's letter to the church at Galatia, he recounted two experiences with Peter. The first appeared at the Jerusalem

Council (Acts 15), and the second appeared after this council in Antioch. In the letter, Paul recounted his experience at the Jerusalem Council, which formalized the church's acceptance of the Gentiles into covenant community. Paul even recounted that Titus, a fellow Gentile co-laborer and a product of Paul and Barnabas's ministry to the Gentiles, was accepted even though he was not circumcised. Paul recounted that Peter, James, and John—key leaders in the Jerusalem church—publicly supported Paul and Barnabas's ministry to the Gentiles.

Paul's second meeting with Peter did not go as smoothly. Before Paul arrived, Peter was eating with the Gentiles (unheard of before the gospel). But when Peter's Jewish friends arrived, he abandoned the Gentiles to save face with the Jews. Paul happened to notice, and he publicly rebuked Peter for his hypocrisy. Peter had certainly come a long way and no longer targeted Gentiles, but he still dealt with prejudice in his heart. The effects of prejudice and racism are often so pervasive, they become difficult to remove from the human mind, soul, and spirit. Just like when we try to remove sand from our bodies after leaving the beach, just when we think it is all gone, we spot another irritating grain of sand. Sin affects us this way, and God's grace and the power of His Spirit are necessary to pull up sin by the root finally.

B. God's Grace is Greater than Prejudice

Paul spent his entire Christian ministry as a minister to and advocate on behalf of the Gentiles. Paul was a Pharisee who converted to Christianity and was called to be an apostle (Philippians 3:7-14). He began his life as a "Jew of Jews" and ended his life preaching the gospel in Rome, the center of the Gentile world. While Paul thoroughly addressed this subject in his letters to the churches at Rome and Galatia, in almost all his letters he condemned obedience to Jewish law as a pathway to salvation or to some form of higher standing within the Christian community. Paul advocated level ground at the foot of the cross for Jews and Gentiles, and in the spirit of Paul, we too must advocate for racial equality.

C. I Will Repent of My Prejudices

We must allow God to minister to us through His grace and His Spirit. We must allow Him to teach us about ourselves. We must be courageous to venture on when the Spirit leads us to a place within our own hearts where we do not wish to go. Finally, we must embrace each other as full members of God's church by acknowledging we are all people for whom Christ died. When we experience Christ's perfect love that casts out fear, we can truly begin to love others (1 John 4:18-21).

Have you ever tried to address a sin, only to find out the sin was more pervasive than you thought? How did you use spiritual resources such as your church family, prayer, and Scripture to address the sinful behavior?

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

A supplemental image and video are available in the Resource Kit. 

The author Jared Wilson has nicknamed Lemuel Haynes “the most important American figure you’ve never heard of.” Haynes was born on July 18, 1773, to a black man and a white woman. He grew up in colonial Vermont, and as he grew older, he spent most evenings after work reading and memorizing while other children were playing. He has also been called a “disciple of the chimney-corner,” because that is where he read and studied. And that is where he first started following Jesus.

Since he was only five months old, he was given as an indentured servant to the Rose family until his twenty-first birthday. One night after he read a published sermon to the family, some of them curiously asked, “Was that a Whitefield?” He replied, “No, that was a Haynes.” Wilson suggests Lemuel Haynes was as exceptional a Bible student as Jonathan Edwards or George Whitefield. Haynes was the first person of color ordained as a minister in America, but what truly set him apart from many of his contemporaries was his ability to apply Scripture in rather practical ways. Lemuel Haynes was one of the first preachers to oppose slavery based on theology.

In 1785, he was assigned his first pastoral charge. He was the only person of color in the church, and his congregation made it difficult for him to preach, but he did preach to them for two years. His next pastorate lasted thirty years, and he battled some of the same prejudices and hatred, yet he showed up, stood behind the pulpit, opened his Bible, and preached God’s Word to a congregation who largely did not like him, primarily because of his skin.

For Haynes, he was called to preach to people who looked just like him and to people who looked nothing like him, because we are all people for whom Christ died. Stories like we read in Acts 10 and others we read in our history books teach us that God’s grace reaches further than we can imagine. One day, by that selfsame grace, we will kneel before Jesus on His throne, and we will sing the song of the redeemed.

On that glorious day, take a good, long look around you. In front of you, behind you, beside you. You will see people from every kindred, tongue, and nation. Every skin tone, every dialect, every continent, everyone from everywhere because every one of us was created in His image, called by His name, filled with His Spirit, and redeemed by His blood. May the vision of that day fill our hearts and mouths with the same testimony now that Peter had then: “of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons.”

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to make us aware of hidden prejudices that hinder us from extending Jesus’ gift of grace to others
- For God to reveal any challenges that hinder others from coming to Jesus and to give us the motivation and direction to remove those obstacles

3.1

BROTHER SAUL

FOCUS VERSES

Acts 9:17-18

¹⁷ And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. ¹⁸ And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales; and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized.

LESSON TEXT

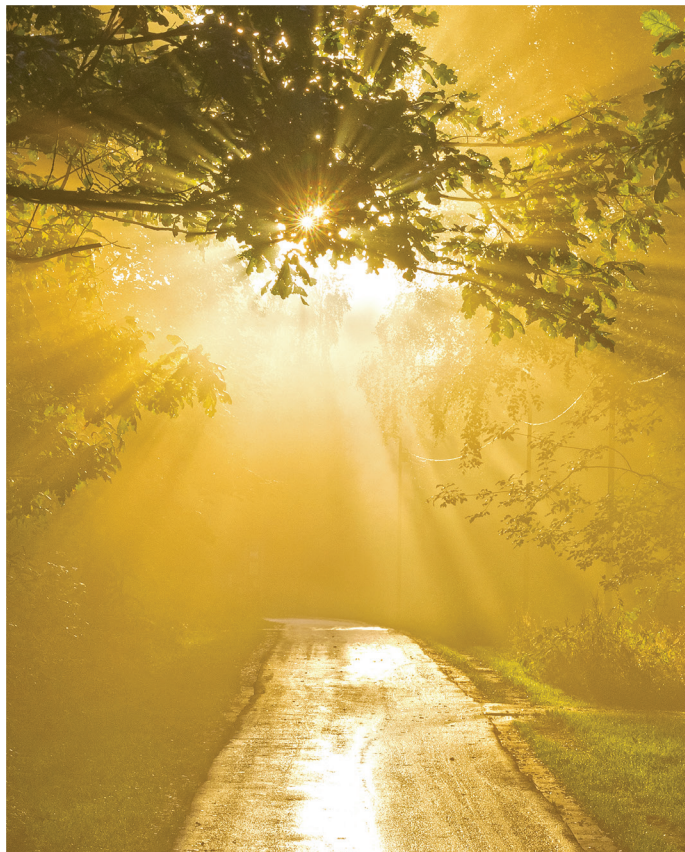
Acts 9:1-20

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God can transform a person completely.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will submit to God's transforming power in my life.



Series Overview:

Follow Paul on his murderous ride toward Damascus until God shone a light so bright it knocked him from his horse to his knees. From there, God saved Paul, called him, and used him to preach the same gospel he used to persecute. This series will challenge us to embrace sacrifice, evangelism, and ministry.

SG TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: Who is the most unlikely person you can think of to come to church?

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection. **I**

I. GOD CONVICTS IN MERCY

» *What testimony of God's mercy in your life can you share with others?*

A. God Convicted Saul on the Road to Damascus

B. Saul Obeyed What God Instructed Him to Do

C. I Will Obey and Change When God Convicts Me

» *In what areas is God convicting you and leading you to change?*

II. GOD SPEAKS THROUGH OTHERS

A. God Spoke through Ananias to Bring the Gospel to Saul

» *Whom has God used to speak to you? Whom is God calling you to speak to?*

B. Saul Obeyed Ananias's Preaching

C. I Will Obey God's Word

» *Has God ever spoken to you in a dramatic way? How did you respond?*

III. GOD WILL USE YOU IN MINISTRY

A. God Used Paul to Preach the Gospel

B. I Will Allow God to Use Me to Minister

» *Where and how has God called you to serve? Have you fully submitted to that call?*

Internalizing the Message **V**

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us see others as He sees them
- For God to help us minister faithfully, even when we do not see results

LESSON CONNECTION

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit. 

Armed men burst into her bedroom and interrogated her. She recorded those harrowing minutes in her book, *The Hiding Place*.

“Tell me now, where are you hiding the Jews?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. There aren’t any Jews here.” The man struck me hard across the face.

“Where do you hide the ration cards?”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

The man hit me again. I staggered up against the astronomical clock. He slapped me again, then again, and again; stinging blows that jerked my head backward.

“Where are the Jews?” Another blow.

That night the Gestapo arrested Corrie ten Boom and her family. They tortured her, physically and mentally, but she never relented. Eventually the Nazis tired of asking questions and transferred her to the Ravensbruck concentration camp. Corrie and her family knew a raid was coming. Her family practiced with Corrie over and over to prepare her for the night of the real raid. She didn’t know who was coming, but she knew someone was coming to look for the Jews she and her family were hiding. It was just a matter of time.

Likewise, the Christians knew a raid was coming, but they knew from whom. A holier-than-thou hotshot named Saul was rising through the ranks of the Jews. He was all too happy to travel over hill and dale to hunt down Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem to be tried and killed.

We read his résumé in Acts 8:3: “Saul made havock of the church, entering every house, dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.” Saul mangled the Christians like a wild animal mangles its prey. He stormed into their houses and houses of worship and dragged them into the street. To Saul, Christians deserved to die simply because they loved Jesus more than life. Saul cost many Christians their lives and a few of them their faith. Saul’s hands were stained with the blood of just men and just women who were just following Jesus.

Saul was the Jews’ most valuable player; Saul was the Christian’s most feared foe. But all of that changed one day on his way to Damascus. Saul was riding over one hundred miles away to sniff out and snuff out every last living Christian. With wind in his hair, warrants in his hand, Saul seemed to be unstoppable . . . until.

BIBLE LESSON

I. GOD CONVICTS IN MERCY

A. God Convicted Saul on the Road to Damascus

After a brief interlude in Acts 8 to share the joyful account of Philip and the Samaritan revival, Luke returned to the story of the villainous Saul and his maniacal quest to destroy Christians. In Luke's inspired imagination, Saul's very breath brought "threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). It is easy to imagine early Christians lying awake at night, unable to sleep for fear Saul and his compatriots would come calling. Their fear was understandable. Saul was plotting with the religious establishment, including the high priest, to expand his campaign of persecution to Damascus. Some Christians from Jerusalem had relocated to that city, and Saul wanted to root them out and bring them back in chains (Acts 9:2).

Damascus lay approximately one hundred fifty miles northeast of Jerusalem, and most of the trip proved uneventful for Saul and his companions until they drew near the city. "Suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth" (Acts 9:3-4). As Saul landed in the road, he heard a voice call his name: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9:4). The mercy of God reached for a murderer named Saul to change his life and save many Christians' lives from that day forward.

What testimony of God's mercy in your life can you share with others?

B. Saul Obeyed What God Instructed Him to Do

Saul recognized the divine origin of the blinding light and the accompanying voice. As Saul lay in the dust, eyes burning and mind reeling, he pensively cried out, "Who art thou, Lord?" Saul was not prepared for the Lord's response: "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest" (Acts 9:5). (Although not explicitly stated in these verses, Acts 9:17, 27, and I Corinthians 15:8 indicate Saul also saw a vision of Jesus at this time.) The one whose followers Saul had been attempting to kill was in fact the Lord of Glory. Saul thought he was fighting for God, but he was actually fighting against God.

Saul's worldview was upended by Jesus' shocking revelation, and he offered the only appropriate response: "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Jesus could have skewered Saul on the end of a lightning bolt and no one could fault Him. Saul was jailing and killing innocent Christians. Yet the Lord graciously replied: "Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do" (Acts 9:6). Though he was blind for a while, Saul staggered to his feet and asked for help to finish his journey. His destination had not changed, but his purpose had been forever altered.

C. I Will Obey and Change When God Convicts Me

Perhaps Paul had his Damascus Road experience in mind when he wrote, “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (II Corinthians 4:6). Each of us must have a personal encounter with Jesus that transforms us and gives us a new purpose in life. When “the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God” shines on us (II Corinthians 4:4), we must respond as Saul did by asking, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” If we pray this prayer sincerely, God’s Spirit will lead and guide us into all truth (John 16:13). He will direct us to people who can assist us in making the changes God requires of us.

In what areas is God convicting you and leading you to change? Are you willing to change?

II. GOD SPEAKS THROUGH OTHERS

As Saul lay blinded in the dust having a conversation with God, it is interesting that the Lord did not immediately tell the misguided young Pharisee what he needed to do to be right with God. Instead, God sent Saul on into Damascus to find a preacher, adding: “You will be told what you must do.” God could have used the moment to offer a full explanation of the gospel message and a preview of His plans for Saul’s future. But He did not. Instead, God directed Saul to a disciple who had been praying and had seen a vision of what would come next. God used a preacher to preach the gospel to the future apostle to the Gentiles.

A. God Spoke through Ananias to Bring the Gospel to Saul

The Book of Acts does not offer many details about this preacher of the gospel named Ananias, but we know he was a man of prayer who recognized the voice of God. The Lord gave Ananias an address: the house of Judas located on the street which is called Straight (Acts 9:11). When Ananias learned the person he was to preach to was Saul the persecutor, Ananias was understandably hesitant. “Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem” (Acts 9:13). Ananias knew why Saul had come to Damascus, but God assured him, “Go . . . for he is a chosen vessel unto me” (Acts 9:15).

Luke revealed that Saul had been praying since his arrival in Damascus and was ready to hear what he needed to do. God saw Saul’s sincerity and connected him with a believer who was willing to be obedient despite his fears.

B. Saul Obeyed Ananias’s Preaching

Ananias approached the house of Judas in faith. When he arrived, he greeted Saul warmly, calling this persecutor of the church “Brother Saul.” Seconds passed, maybe minutes, as those two words together hung in the air: “Brother Saul.” Saul never thought he’d hear that; Ananias never thought he’d say

Whom has God used to speak to you? Whom is God calling you to speak to?

that. But Ananias was confident the message he was about to share with Saul would be life changing. Before praying, Ananias told Saul that the same Lord who had interrupted his journey to Damascus would also restore his sight and fill him with the Holy Ghost (Acts 9:17).

God responded to Ananias' declaration of faith by instantly curing Saul's blindness. "Immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith" (Acts 9:18). In looking back on this moment, Paul recalled that Ananias also added a challenge: "Why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). According to Acts 9:18, Saul rose up and was baptized. The text also implies Saul was filled with the Holy Spirit, evidently when Ananias laid hands on him and prayed. Although Luke did not record Saul receiving the Spirit, we know he was Spirit-filled and Spirit-led throughout the rest of his life. We may surmise from this passage that this was the signal moment for Saul.

C. I Will Obey God's Word

While we marvel that Saul saw the risen Lord and heard His voice, and we rejoice at the restoration of his sight, the greater miracle was the transformation that occurred in Saul's life as a result of his faithful obedience to the gospel Ananias preached. Paul later testified to King Agrippa: "I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19). Visions and heavenly voices are of little worth if we do not respond by obeying God's Word.

Like Saul, we must obey the biblical commands to repent of our sins, call upon the name of Jesus in baptism, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Paul himself later preached this same message to both Jews and Gentiles. He saw the power of Jesus Christ transform their lives as it had transformed his (Romans 1:16).

Has God ever spoken to you in a dramatic way? How did you respond?

III. GOD WILL USE YOU IN MINISTRY

God did not save us so we could sit on a pew and pad the church's attendance statistics. Rather, He is calling each of us to be active participants in His kingdom. God still calls some to be globe-trotting missionaries like Paul, taking the gospel to settings like Mars' Hill where the name of Jesus has never been preached (Acts 17:16-34). But most of us will have a ministry closer to home, resembling Ananias, the faithful saint who took the gospel down the street. And that one service changed the preacher whose preaching and writing would forever change the world.

No matter who you are, God wants to use you to minister to others. Who knows? Your next disciple may become a modern-day apostle who shakes the nations with the message of Jesus. God will use you in ministry if you are willing.

A. God Used Paul to Preach the Gospel

After Saul was converted, he immediately preached in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God (Acts 9:20). At this early stage, Saul probably did not fully grasp all the theological implications of the gospel. It would be some time before he wrote his Epistle to the Romans, his masterpiece. He had not even stood before the church leaders in Jerusalem to receive his ministerial credentials (Acts 9:26–28). Some even questioned whether his conversion was authentic or just part of an elaborate plot to wipe out Christians (Acts 9:26). After all, it had only been a few days since Saul had secured permission from the religious establishment to persecute Christians in Damascus. Now here he was in that same city, seemingly having switched sides overnight.

It was an astonishing turn of events: the persecutor of the church had become a preacher of the gospel. “All that heard him were amazed,” Luke wrote. Those who heard Saul preach in the Damascus synagogues asked, “Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem?” They were understandably skeptical.

Late in his life, Paul demonstrated his humility. Rather than boasting of his religious pedigree as he did in other passages, Paul portrayed the younger version of himself as “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man” (1 Timothy 1:13, NKJV). (A BibleGateway.com footnote on this verse defines the word *insolent* as “violently arrogant.”) In the same passage, Paul famously described himself as the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). But this same “chief of sinners” obtained mercy through the exceeding abundant grace of our Lord. If God was willing to show mercy to a blasphemer and persecutor like him, Paul was fully convinced God would show mercy to anyone.

B. I Will Allow God to Use Me to Minister

God often uses unlikely individuals to glorify His name and preach His gospel. You are at the top of the list of people God wants to use. (We all are.) You do not have to wait until you have a complete grasp of theology or until you are officially licensed for ministry. Of course this does not negate the need for study or the requirement to submit to spiritual authority, but you can share the story of what Jesus has done for you right here, right now. Do not wait until later to share the good news with someone now.

Saul certainly grew in his theological understanding, and eventually he became known as the apostle to the Gentiles and perhaps the most significant New Testament figure outside of Jesus Christ. He preached the message of the Cross to governors and kings. He finally had the opportunity to preach in Rome, the capital of the empire. But this world-changing ministry began many years before in a Damascus synagogue with a freshly converted Saul faithfully declaring Jesus as the Son of God.

Where and how has God called you to serve? Have you fully submitted to that call?

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

A supplemental video is available in the Resource Kit. 

When Bruce Howell was a boy, his family lived in Herrin, Illinois, a small rural community in the southern part of the state. His parents divorced when he was only three, and his mother remarried. Howell's stepfather turned out to be an angry alcoholic. "I know what it's like to sleep in the car at night to stay out of the reach of my drunken stepfather," he told his audience. No one in his family was spared.

First Pentecostal Church (FPC) was located only a half block from the family's home. Howell's mother began sending her children to the church's Sunday school when he was about six or seven years old. He was forced to wear itchy wool pants to church, but he also remembered Sunday school teachers who showed love and concern for him and his family. On one occasion, the church was hosting a picnic, but he was unable to attend. A lady from the church named Sister Patsy stopped by his house to see why he wasn't at the picnic. "Until this day, I have never forgotten Sister Patsy," he said, calling her "a lady who cared about me when nobody else cared about me."

When he grew a little older, Howell stopped going to Sunday school at FPC and started attending another church in the community. Nonetheless, he did not forget the message he had been taught at First Pentecostal Church or the love he felt from his Sunday school teachers. When he was thirteen, two young ladies invited him to attend a revival service back at First Pentecostal Church. He thought the two young women were pretty, so he agreed to go with them. That night, the preaching got a hold of his heart. Before the service was over, Bruce Howell received the baptism of the Holy Ghost for the first time.

After high school, he left Herrin to attend Bible college, where he met his precious late wife, Diane. The couple felt God's call to missions and dedicated their lives to preaching the gospel in Central America, especially in El Salvador, where they lived and ministered for two decades. The Howells saw tremendous revival in that nation. Brother Howell eventually became the general director of Global Missions for the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI). He served in that role for twenty-two years, during which time the UPCI experienced tremendous growth globally.

Some may have seen a hyperactive kid in itchy wool pants from a troubled home, but Sister Patsy and the Sunday school teachers at First Pentecostal Church in Herrin, Illinois, saw someone God loved and wanted to use for His glory. They probably did not recognize everything God had planned for this boy's future, but they did their best to show God's love, and God multiplied their efforts into something far greater than they imagined. When we submit to the transforming power of Jesus Christ, anything becomes possible, both in our lives and in the lives of those to whom we minister.

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us see others as He sees them
- For God to help us minister faithfully, even when we do not see results

3.2

NO MATTER WHAT

FOCUS VERSES

Acts 16:32–33

³² And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house.

³³ And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway.

LESSON TEXT

Acts 16:19–34

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God is faithful to those who serve Him faithfully.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will praise God, no matter what I am going through.



Thinking about Last Week:

Have students refer to their Daily Devotional Guide to answer the following questions:

1. What most affected you as you read through the Lesson Text and the Biblical Insights?
2. How did it shape your prayers and thoughts throughout the week?
3. Do you feel you grew closer to the Lord this past week? Why or why not?

SG TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: In what “creative” ways have you tried to understand God’s will?

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

- I. GOD’S PLAN DOES NOT ALWAYS MAKE SENSE
 - A. Paul and Silas Were Persecuted for the Gospel
 - » *Have you ever faced some form of persecution? How did you respond?*
 - B. I Will Trust God When Things Do Not Make Sense
 - » *What Bible verses comfort and encourage you when life does not make sense?*
- II. GOD WILL TAKE CARE OF HIS CHILDREN
 - » *What “mountains” are you currently facing? What are you learning from the experience?*
 - A. When Paul and Silas Prayed and Praised, God Delivered Them
 - B. I Will Praise God, No Matter What I Am Going Through
 - » *Why do you think God sometimes does not answer as we would like?*
- III. GOD WILL USE ALL SITUATIONS FOR GOOD
 - A. Paul and Silas Ministered to the Prison Guard
 - » *Have you ever faced a problem that became a ministry opportunity? Share that testimony with someone who is currently facing a problem.*
 - B. God Will Use Your Trial for Good **V**

Internalizing the Message **I**

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us face our troubles with faith
- For God to give us the strength to glorify Him in all circumstances

LESSON CONNECTION

These four words can make a Christian cry: the will of God. Every Spirit-filled, Spirit-led, Jesus' name baptized, born again believer wants to know and do the will of God. We ask where does God want me to go to college? What calling? What career? What man to marry? What woman to marry? What city, what state, what province? What house to buy?

As Jeffrey approached his high school graduation, he desperately wanted to know where God wanted him to enroll in college. He had narrowed his choices down to two schools: one in Indiana and one in Missouri. That was better than having to whittle the choice down from four thousand all the way down to one. After the whittling came the waiting. But even then, God appeared to be silent, so Jeffrey decided to find the will of God on his own. He prayed a simple prayer, "God, I'm going to reach into this bucket of alphabet magnets. I'm asking You to let me know which college You want me to go to by the letter I pull out."

If Jeffrey pulled out the letter I from the bucket, he was heading four hours west to Indianapolis. If he pulled out an M from the bucket, he was packing his bags for Missouri. He reached his hand into the bucket, shuffled the letters a little, grabbed a hold of one of them (which would reveal God's perfect plan for his life), and pulled out a Q. Apparently, he was moving to Quebec.

You could almost hear God chuckle. Finding the will of God is not a game of "go fish" with alphabet magnets. Jeffrey learned that we come to know the will of God by hearing God's voice as we walk with Him day by day. Being in the will of God is much more about relationship with Him than learning a location from Him.

Jeffrey wanted to be right where God wanted him to be, and so did Paul and Silas. They were traveling from one city to the next preaching Jesus to everyone who could hear. And if they found someone who could not hear, they prayed for God to heal them so they could hear so Paul and Silas could preach to them about Jesus.

But their story took a strange turn as they came to the entire region of Asia Minor and God said, "Not here. Not yet." They were a little surprised, but they recognized and heeded the voice of God, and they made their way to a city called Bithynia. And again, God said, "Not here, not yet." Paul was not sure what to do or where to go. He was all out of alphabet magnets, so what was he to do? Thankfully during a vision one night, Paul saw a man from the region of Macedonia cry out, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Paul and Silas had their sailing orders.

BIBLE LESSON

I. GOD'S PLAN DOES NOT ALWAYS MAKE SENSE

When they arrived in the city of Philippi in Macedonia, they deviated from their usual practice of preaching in the local synagogue because there were not enough Jewish men in the city to organize such a community. They met a lady named Lydia at a ladies' prayer meeting by the river. She was already a Jehovah worshiper, but she had not yet been born again. Paul and Silas preached the gospel of Jesus to her, and she and her family were baptized, and Paul and Silas had their founding members of Paul's beloved church in Philippi.

Besides Lydia, Paul also met a young enslaved girl who made her masters money through fortune telling. She followed Paul and Silas for a while and even heralded them as the "men of the most high God who proclaim to us the way of salvation." But Paul neither wanted nor needed the enemy to be his public relations manager. He turned to the fortune teller and cast the devils out of her. Immediately, she was delivered.

A. Paul and Silas Were Persecuted for the Gospel

When her masters saw their money maker was no longer making them any money, they had these two itinerant preachers arrested, publicly flogged, and thrown into an inner prison. Luke did not record Paul and Silas's thoughts as they languished in the inner prison, but considering they were human, they probably asked the question most of us have raised when facing the seeming unfairness of life: why me?

That is a valid question. Paul and Silas had seen results from their ministry in Philippi, but Paul's invocation of the name of Jesus unintentionally brought him and Silas into conflict with the economic and political powers of the city, as well as the spiritual forces that governed the area. No matter the setting, the message of the Cross and the name of Jesus bring believers into conflict with the forces of darkness and the societies and systems controlled by those powers.

As a whole, today's Christians in the West have not faced much in the way of severe persecution, but this is a historical anomaly. We do not need to travel far back in Western history to find examples of Christians who were persecuted for their faith. North America was largely founded by believers fleeing religious persecution in Europe and hoping to find protection in a distant wilderness. Those of us who live in the nations they established must not forget the Christians who are currently being persecuted for the sake of the gospel in other nations.

Have you ever faced some form of persecution? How did you respond?

B. I Will Trust God When Things Do Not Make Sense

God's people of all ages have wrestled with the question of why the Almighty allows godly people to endure trouble while ungodly people appear to triumph, at least in the short term. The prophet Habakkuk asked God this question and received this reply: "The just shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). Paul found comfort in these words, because he quoted them in two of his letters to New Testament Christians (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11). The writer of Hebrews also quoted Habakkuk when writing to persecuted Jewish Christians. Perhaps Paul meditated on Habakkuk's words as he and Silas sat in the darkness of the Philippian jail. Or maybe he reflected on the closing verses of Habakkuk's prophecy, which paint a grim picture of the judgment that was coming on Judah for their sins.

Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places. (Habakkuk 3:17-19)

What Bible verses comfort and encourage you when life does not make sense?

When life does not make sense, we can turn to God and find strength and direction.

II. GOD WILL TAKE CARE OF HIS CHILDREN

The Bible repeatedly reminds us God is our Father, and He loves us and wants the best for us. But what is best for us and what is easiest for us are usually not the same. Many Bible passages such as Proverbs 13:24 remind us trouble and chastening are life's most effective teachers. Good parents do not bail their children out of every difficulty. Instead, they see struggles as opportunities to learn and grow.

Paul certainly faced plenty of hardship and trouble throughout his ministry, but he also saw God provide and deliver in miraculous ways. Consequently he became a man of great faith. If you have ever asked God to give you mountain-moving faith (as we see in Matthew 17:20), He may put a few mountains in your path to give you practice.

What "mountains" are you currently facing? What are you learning from the experience?

A. When Paul and Silas Prayed and Praised, God Delivered Them

We would understand if Paul and Silas's initial thoughts after being cast into prison were less than faith filled. They had been beaten with many stripes, according to Acts 16:23, and verse 33 indicates they received no medical attention for their resulting injuries prior to being locked in stocks. In the *New International Commentary on the New Testament*, F. F. Bruce notes: "These stocks had more than two holes for the legs, which could thus

be forced apart in such a way as to cause the utmost discomfort and cramping pain.” Bruce further speculates that the jailer “was possibly a retired soldier, and while service in the Roman army developed many fine qualities, these did not include the milk of human kindness.”

Paul and Silas were in a predicament, but they responded in an unexpected way: “And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God.” Neither their prayers nor their songs were whispered, for Luke added, “and the prisoners heard them” (Acts 16:25). As Paul and Silas worshiped, God performed a miracle. “Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one’s bands were loosed” (Acts 16:26).

B. I Will Praise God, No Matter What I Am Going Through

Paul and Silas did not realize it then, but their faith-filled response to a terrible situation has encouraged Bible readers for nearly two thousand years. By reading Acts 16, believers from all backgrounds have been inspired to respond to problems with prayer and praise. Many have received deliverance and seen God work in miracles.

While we certainly believe God can deliver, we know He does not always send an earthquake to free us from our problems. The same God who delivered the apostle Peter from prison in Acts 12:3-11 chose not to intervene when Herod decided to execute James, one of Jesus’ closest followers (Acts 12:1-2). Why God delivered Peter while allowing James to die is beyond our comprehension. All we can do is pray for deliverance and trust God with the outcome. He knows what He is doing.

Hebrews 11 has been called “Faith’s Hall of Fame,” and it includes many notable examples of individuals “who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions,” and many more great exploits. However, “others were tortured, not accepting deliverance,” while still “others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, . . . being destitute, afflicted, tormented” (Hebrews 11:35-37). Nonetheless, whether the individual “turned to flight the armies of the aliens” or “were slain with the sword,” they were still counted among those who “obtained a good report through faith” (Hebrews 11:34-39). God gave them an “A+” in the class because they trusted Him, not because everything worked out the way they hoped.

III. GOD WILL USE ALL SITUATIONS FOR GOOD

Paul’s words in Romans 8:35-39 resonate with readers because of his firsthand experience with the subject matter. Paul offered a list of dilemmas, and it is noteworthy that he did not promise his audience their faith in Christ would spare them from enduring

Why do you think God sometimes does not answer as we would like?


these difficulties. Instead, he offered them this hope: “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (Romans 8:37).

A. Paul and Silas Ministered to the Prison Guard

Although he was in jail, Paul wrote to the Philippians, “I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.” Such was the case in Acts 16. Paul and Silas’s unjust imprisonment turned into an opportunity to reach an entire family with the message of Jesus.

The keeper of the prison awoke with a start and presumed all the prisoners had escaped. He drew out his sword to take his own life but Paul and Silas stopped him. They were unlikely candidates to show kindness to the jailer who had beaten and abused them only hours before. Shaken by their unexpected kindness, the jailer was eager to hear their message. Falling at Paul and Silas’s feet, the jailer asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). The Philippian prison had suddenly become a preaching point for a fledging church plant. In an unexpected plot twist, the jailer washed Paul and Silas’ stripes, and God washed away the jailer’s sins when he and everyone in his household were baptized.

Teacher Option:

A supplemental video is available in the Resource Kit. 

Have you ever faced a problem that became a ministry opportunity? Share that testimony with someone who is currently facing a problem.

B. God Will Use Your Trial for Good

These kinds of moments helped Paul to later write: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). Paul did not say all things that happen to believers are good. No honest person would classify being beaten and wrongfully imprisoned as good. Yet Paul did not give in to despair. Instead, he turned mistreatment and injustice into a ministry opportunity.

God is faithful, but His faithfulness does not mean He is obligated to rescue us from every crisis. God could have sent an earthquake while Paul and Silas were standing on trial in front of the magistrates. Had God intervened then, Paul and Silas would have been spared a severe beating and a night in prison. But God did not. Nonetheless this missionary duo trusted God to use their unfair circumstances for good. They chose to pray and sing praises while stretched out in stocks.

What about you? Will you trust God to use your trial for good? He may not respond exactly as you would prefer, but He will show up, perhaps to sit beside you in your moment of need and remind you He loves you and is using the moment to shape you into the person He wants you to become.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit. 

One of the first recorded Christian martyrs following the close of the New Testament was Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna (present-day Turkey). He also was reported to be a disciple of the apostle John. Persecution broke out against the church in Smyrna in AD 155. Following the martyrdom of their beloved leader, the church in that city wrote an account of the incident, which survives.

According to the story, Polycarp had a vision of his impending death a few days earlier. Though he had been forewarned, he did not make a great effort to escape. Instead, authorities arrested him at a farm outside the city. After ordering that his captors be served a meal, Polycarp asked for an hour to pray. His request was granted.

The aged bishop was offered an opportunity to escape punishment by swearing allegiance to the Roman emperor and acknowledging Caesar as supreme. Polycarp declined. His captors then dragged him off to the arena to meet his end. As he was entering the arena, he heard a voice from Heaven say, “Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man.” Inside the arena, authorities again urged Polycarp to deny his faith and proclaim Caesar as lord. “Take the oath,” said the Roman proconsul overseeing the execution, “and I shall release you. Curse Christ.”

But Polycarp famously and faithfully replied: “Eighty-six years I have served Him, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” The proconsul then threatened the elderly bishop with wild beasts. “I shall throw you to them, if you do not change your mind,” he said.

“Call them,” Polycarp responded. “Repentance from the better to the worse is not permitted us.” Apparently feeling lenient, the proconsul again delayed, threatening, “I shall have you consumed with fire.”

“The fire you threaten burns but an hour and is quenched after a little,” the old bishop said, “for you do not know the fire of the coming judgment and everlasting punishment that is laid up for the impious. But why do you delay? Come, do what you will.”

Frustrated, his executioners lit a fire around him to burn him alive. Miraculously, Polycarp was spared from the effect of the flames. His executioners then stabbed Polycarp, eventually ending his life. Polycarp’s example of faithfulness in the face of death became an inspiration to every Christian who hears the story.

Most of us will not be called upon to face the executioner for our faith in Christ. However, we will all face trials and troubles. We can meet them with a grumble and a groan, or we can lift our voices and thank God for the opportunity to grow in faith and patience. He may miraculously rescue us from our situation or He may not. Regardless, we can praise Him for His faithfulness, knowing we win in the end.

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us face our troubles with faith
- For God to give us the strength to glorify Him in all circumstances

3.3

PAUL ON TRIAL

FOCUS VERSES

Acts 26:28–29

²⁸ Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

²⁹ And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds.

LESSON TEXT

Acts 24–26

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God will be with us through our trials.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will point others to Christ through every trial.



Thinking about Last Week:

Have students refer to their Daily Devotional Guide to answer the following questions:

1. What most affected you as you read through the Lesson Text and the Biblical Insights?
2. How did it shape your prayers and thoughts throughout the week?
3. Do you feel you grew closer to the Lord this past week? Why or why not?

SG TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: What is the strangest court case you have ever heard of?

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection. **I**

I. PAUL ON TRIAL

- A. Charges against Paul
- B. Paul Trusted God, Even in a Heathen Court
 - » *Have you ever been unjustly accused of wrongdoing? What happened?*
- C. I Will Trust God, Despite My Circumstances **V**
 - » *How does the hope of the resurrection change a Christian's outlook on life's problems?*

II. FELIX, FESTUS, AGRIPPA

- A. Felix, Festus, and Agrippa Were Secular Rulers in Paul's Day
- B. Paul Was Unafraid to Testify in Any Arena
 - » *How does a promise from God help you when your present situation seems to forecast a different outcome?*
- C. I Will Be Unafraid to Tell My Story
 - » *Consider the oft-repeated question: if you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? What evidence would you offer?*

III. THE VERDICT

- A. Agrippa Found No Fault in Paul
- B. Paul Wanted to Testify before Caesar
- C. I Will Point Others to Christ through Every Trial
 - » *Think of a time when you witnessed to someone who did not respond as you had hoped. What did you learn from the experience?*

Internalizing the Message **I**

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us be faithful in trials
- For God to help us point others to Him, even in our trials

LESSON CONNECTION

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit. 

On November 27, 1978, Dan White had had enough. Just a year earlier he was serving as a county supervisor on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. However, after several clashes with his colleagues and superiors, he resigned from office. He put all his efforts into a new business, a baked potato bar at Pier 39, but the business never turned a profit. Several of White's supporters urged him to ask the mayor for his old job back, and the mayor agreed at first but later reversed his decision.

That's when Dan White crawled through a basement window into San Francisco City Hall, carrying a revolver and ten rounds of ammunition. He first visited Mayor Moscone's office and pleaded for his job back. The mayor refused, and Dan White fired off five rounds, fatally wounding the mayor. White then walked to Harvey Milk's office and fired off the remaining five rounds at him, ending Harvey Milk's life.

White was charged with voluntary manslaughter, and his trial was set to begin in the spring of 1979. His defense became a proverb for an unconventional defense: it was known as the "Twinkie defense." His attorneys argued that he was steeped in deep depression because he had been eating so many sugary foods. However, after all deliberations and evidence, the jury was not convinced. They found Dan White guilty, and the judge sentenced him to serve seven years in prison.

There have been some strange cases throughout the centuries of jurisprudence. The apostle Paul's case should be listed among them. Paul's accusers couldn't settle on a charge against him. One group shouted one thing, another group shouted another, and the authorities could not figure out what to charge him with. The commander in charge of keeping Paul alive until his trial still did not know what Paul had done wrong. He did not even know who Paul was. Paul's trial before the Sanhedrin had started off strange and in Acts 24, it got even stranger.

BIBLE LESSON

I. PAUL ON TRIAL

Perhaps his accusers were confused because Paul's mission seemed to be making sure as many Christians as possible ended up facing their own trials for their faith in Jesus. (See Acts 8:3; 9:1-2.) But after Paul was born again, he frequently found himself standing before religious and civic tribunals to give an account for his own faith in Jesus. The persecutor had become the persecuted.

But Paul seemed to take it all in stride. When addressing the Judean procurator Felix, Paul said: "Forasmuch as I know that thou hast been of many years a judge unto this nation, I do the more cheerfully answer for myself" (Acts 24:10). Most Christians probably would not find anything cheerful about standing trial for their faith in a secular courtroom, but Paul had put the outcome in God's hands. He trusted God's will would be done.

A. Charges against Paul

Acts 24 opens with a recitation of the charges against Paul by a renowned Jewish lawyer named Tertullus. The Jewish religious leaders accused the apostle of trying to desecrate the Temple by bringing a Gentile into the sacred precincts. If true, this act would have been a gross violation of Jewish law. According to Tertullus, this and other abominable acts made Paul a troublemaker who was constantly stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world (Acts 24:5). More than a trace of an accusation of treason against Rome was in this allegation (F. F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament*).

According to Acts 24:5, the religious authorities even considered Paul to be a "plague." They believed Christianity was a disease, Paul was the carrier, and the protectors of Judaism had taken it upon themselves to administer the appropriate treatment. An entire band of forty men had vowed to not eat or drink until they had killed Paul. However, their violent plot was interrupted by the chief captain Claudius Lysias, who saved Paul's life. In the eyes of Tertullus and his associates, justice had been thwarted. They were urging Felix to right such an egregious wrong.

B. Paul Trusted God, Even in a Heathen Court

After hearing the charges against him, Paul offered his defense. He explained to Felix: "They neither found me in the temple disputing with any man, neither raising up the people, neither in the synagogues, nor in the city: neither can they prove the things whereof they now accuse me" (Acts 24:12-13). But Paul did not run from the charge that he was "a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes," a reference to the fact that Christians worshiped Jesus of Nazareth as God incarnate. Paul boldly confessed: "After the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers." Paul readily defended himself against

Have you ever been unjustly accused of wrongdoing? What happened?

every false accusation, but when it came to his Christian faith, he freely admitted he was guilty as charged.

C. I Will Trust God, Despite My Circumstances

How could Paul be so bold when he knew his accusers aimed to end both his ministry and his life? He explained to Felix that he had “hope toward God . . . that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust” (Acts 24:15). Paul was quite clever. In his earlier testimony to the Council, Paul mentioned his belief in the resurrection, and he divided the room. The Pharisees—who believed in the resurrection and other miraculous signs—suddenly took Paul’s side. However, the Sadducees—who did not believe in the miraculous, especially the resurrection—were outraged.

Teacher Option:

A supplemental video is available in the Resource Kit. [V]

Paul also knew that even if he were found guilty of the charges against him and then executed, he would be resurrected. As he would later tell believers in Philippi: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). When our lives are in God’s hands, we need not fear what earthly powers can do to us. It is impossible to threaten someone who is not afraid of death itself.

How does the hope of the resurrection change a Christian’s outlook on life’s problems?

II. FELIX, FESTUS, AGRIPPA

Paul’s trial before Felix in Acts 24 was just the beginning. Over the final chapters of the Book of Acts, Paul ran a legal gauntlet all the way to Rome, the capital city of the imperial empire. Acts 24–26 outline Paul’s defense before three successive secular rulers: Felix, Festus, and Agrippa. Paul transformed each trial into an opportunity to share his testimony of what Jesus had done in his life. These accounts provide previously unknown details of Paul’s life and conversion. More importantly they have shown Christians of every succeeding century how to respond when their faith is challenged by the powers of their day.

A. Felix, Festus, and Agrippa Were Secular Rulers in Paul’s Day

As we already have seen, the first ruler Paul faced was Felix, the governor of the Roman province of Judea. Felix was married to a Jewish woman named Drusilla (Acts 24:24). Luke made it clear that while the governor was moved by Paul’s testimony, he was far from impartial. Felix wanted to do the Jews a favor, so he left Paul bound rather than release him. Felix hoped Paul would grow weary of being in chains and be persuaded to buy a pardon with a bribe. Felix clearly did not understand the godly character of the man he was called to preside over.

Paul remained incarcerated for two years before Porcius Festus replaced Felix as governor. The Jewish authorities seized the opportunity to reopen their case against their hated adversary. Like Felix, Festus also wanted to curry favor with these influential leaders, so he requested Paul be transferred to Jerusalem for trial (Acts 25:9). Exasperated, and perhaps sensing the danger

a return trip to Jerusalem would pose, Paul appealed to testify before Caesar himself.

Before Paul could be granted his wish to defend himself before Caesar, he was given one more opportunity to testify before a regional authority. This time it was King Agrippa and his sister, Bernice. King Agrippa was the son of Herod Agrippa I, the ruler responsible for beheading James and subsequently imprisoning Peter. (See Acts 12.) The rulers of the Herodian dynasty had a long association with Palestine and were familiar with Jewish laws and customs. Festus was eager to hear King Agrippa's thoughts on the accusations against Paul.

B. Paul Was Unafraid to Testify in Any Arena

But Paul was not intimidated by any of these rulers, regardless of the power they wielded. He may have remembered the promise God gave Ananias before Paul was even converted: "He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). As he prepared to give his defense before Felix, Festus, and King Agrippa, perhaps Paul quietly marveled at the fulfillment of prophecy. God had foretold this moment, and God was in control, no matter the stakes.

How does a promise from God help you when your present situation seems to forecast a different outcome?

C. I Will Be Unafraid to Tell My Story

Jesus told His disciples: "Ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles" (Matthew 10:18). As followers of Christ, we will sometimes be forced into challenging circumstances and situations for which we feel unprepared. But Jesus offered these words of comfort: "When they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak" (Matthew 10:19).

We usually do not get to choose the time and place of our testing. However, when opposition arises, we can rest in the fact God has placed His Spirit inside us and He will speak through us. The message we communicate may not even be verbal: our witness may be a quiet, faithful Christian life amid turmoil and chaos. As Christians, our faith is on trial every day. What testimony does your life offer?

Consider the oft-repeated question: if you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? What evidence would you offer?

III. THE VERDICT

Paul had been unjustly imprisoned for two long years. He was not going to miss an opportunity to redeem the time. He told Festus, King Agrippa, and the rest of the courtroom audience: "Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great" (Acts 26:22). Festus responded by crying out: "Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad." The cry of our world is not much different. Even today many still dismiss Christianity as nonsense or worse. But even when we face opposition, we must continue to follow Paul's lead and speak the truth.

A. Agrippa Found No Fault in Paul

Festus may have seen Paul as a religious lunatic, but King Agrippa, who was well-versed in Jewish teaching, could not so easily dismiss Paul's words. The apostle pressed the issue: "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest. Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian" (Acts 26:27-28).

This was not the outcome Paul wanted. He hoped to persuade his captors that he was innocent, and for them to believe and obey the gospel message he preached. Nonetheless, after a long examination, neither Festus nor King Agrippa could find any fault in the man who stood before them. King Agrippa confessed: "This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar" (Acts 26:32).

We may not always convince others with our words. Our witness may seem to fall short in the moment. However, we should not underestimate the influence our godly life has on others long after we have left the room.

B. Paul Wanted to Testify before Caesar

Paul had been unable to convert Felix, Festus, and Agrippa, but God was not finished with Paul. Much hardship lay ahead, but Paul eventually would make it to Rome. Acts does not record his defense before Caesar, but an angel assured Paul it would happen (Acts 27:24). Extrabiblical sources indicate Paul indeed stood trial before the supreme ruler of the Roman empire and testified on behalf of the Supreme Ruler of the universe. The apostle's defense was apparently sufficient to gain him freedom, albeit temporarily.

C. I Will Point Others to Christ through Every Trial

Aside from Paul's shipwreck on the island of Melita, the final chapters of Acts are not as fast-paced or dramatic as some of the earlier chapters. Luke took time to share the details of Paul's defense before three Gentile kings. However, as far as we know, the apostle Paul was unsuccessful in converting any of the three to Christianity.

Perhaps Luke wanted his readers to know that no matter what trial we find ourselves in or the outcome, God is faithful and we can remain faithful as well. Through it all, Paul could testify: "I would to God, that . . . all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds" (Acts 26:29).

God will be with us through every trial, but that does not mean every trial will end the way we would like. Sometimes God asks us to trust Him with our uncertain future. Even if we are chained in circumstances beyond our control, let us live in such a way that even our trials point others to Jesus.

Think of a time when you witnessed to someone who did not respond as you had hoped. What did you learn from the experience?

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit. 

William Carey (1761–1834) has been called the “father of modern missions” for his lifelong efforts to promote evangelistic endeavors outside his home country of England. In 1792 he organized a missions society. Shortly afterward he and his family sailed for India to preach the message of the Cross in that nation. The venture turned out to be much more difficult than Carey had anticipated. Carey contracted malaria and his son died of dysentery. Unable to cope with the grief, Carey’s wife, Dorothy, lost her mind.

Despite these setbacks, Carey persevered. He eventually translated the Bible into multiple languages, including Bengali. Then disaster struck again. In 1812 Carey’s printshop burned, destroying much of his life’s work. Carey admitted, “The loss is heavy.” But he added, “Traveling a road the second time is usually done with greater ease and certainty than the first time, so I trust the work will lose nothing of real value. . . . We are cast down but not in despair” (365Christianmen.com, “William Carey, England, Missionary to India”).

Carey’s positive attitude and faith in God carried him through every trial, and the devastating fire was no exception. News of the destruction of the printshop spread, and financial contributions and volunteers began pouring in. More importantly other Christians were motivated by Carey’s example of faithfulness. He became an inspiration for a new generation of missionaries, including notable figures such as David Livingstone and Hudson Taylor.

In his inaugural sermon to the missionary society he founded, Carey famously preached, “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God!” (wmcarey.edu, “Expect Great Things; Attempt Great Things”). He probably did not realize how much those attempts would cost him personally, but Carey was faithful anyhow.

You may not be a missionary laboring in a faraway land, but we all still need perseverance to endure the trials life inevitably throws at all of us. Whatever the trial, God will be with you. Keep persevering, remembering that your faithfulness serves as a testimony to others to point them to Jesus Christ.

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us be faithful in trials
- For God to help us point others to Him, even in our trials

3.4

A STORM AND A SNAKE

FOCUS VERSES

Acts 27:23–25

²³ For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve,

²⁴ Saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee.

²⁵ Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me.

LESSON TEXT

Acts 27–28:5

TRUTH ABOUT GOD

God will sustain us because of His plan.

TRUTH FOR MY LIFE

I will trust God's plan.



Thinking about Last Week:

Have students refer to their Daily Devotional Guide to answer the following questions:

1. What most affected you as you read through the Lesson Text and the Biblical Insights?
2. How did it shape your prayers and thoughts throughout the week?
3. Do you feel you grew closer to the Lord this past week? Why or why not?

SG TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: Recount a time God helped you keep calm while others around you were panicking.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection. **I**

I. GOD'S PLAN FOR PAUL

- A. God Confirmed His Plan to Paul through an Angel
 - » *Has God ever given you a promise during a difficult time? How did that help you endure?*
- B. Paul Boldly Testified of God's Plan to the Passengers
 - » *How can you comfort someone else today, possibly in a similar way you have been comforted?*
- C. I Will Trust God's Confirmed Plan
 - » *Is God calling you to "ride out" a particular storm? If so, how can you demonstrate trust in Him during this time?*

II. SHIPWRECK AND A SNAKEBITE

- » *Are you currently enduring a crisis? If so, how can you minister to someone who is also in a crisis?*
- A. Paul Survived a Shipwreck, Just as God Promised **V**
- B. Paul Survived a Snakebite because God Was with Him
- C. I Believe God Will Sustain Me because of His Plan
 - » *Has God ever turned a bad situation into something good? Share your testimony with someone who is facing a similar situation.*

Internalizing the Message **I**

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us trust Him in the storm
- For God to help us encourage others who are enduring a storm

LESSON CONNECTION

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit. 

Nineteenth-century Prussian field marshal Helmuth von Moltke the Elder wrote, “No plan of operations extends with certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy’s main strength.” The former heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson said it a little less eloquently: “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” Over the years, Moltke’s observation has been shortened to the pithier: “No plan survives first contact with the enemy.” The history of warfare has repeatedly confirmed this adage.

The Normandy Invasion during World War II was one of the largest and most extensively planned military operations in history. It was overseen by some of the world’s most brilliant strategists, including Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, Dwight D. Eisenhower. But despite months of planning, the invasion encountered problems from the beginning.

The attack was originally planned for May 1944 but was pushed to the following month due to a lack of landing craft. In June the weather failed to cooperate. Allied troops were scheduled to make their historic landing on the beaches of Normandy, France, on June 5, but Eisenhower was forced to call a delay of twenty-four hours.

When the attack finally began shortly after midnight on June 6, cloud cover hindered visibility. As a result, the bombardment of German positions by Allied aircraft did not cause as much damage as the Allies had hoped, which meant the troops landing on the beaches faced stronger-than-expected resistance. To complicate matters, some of the landing craft were blown off course. Partly because of these unexpected setbacks, the Allies suffered approximately ten thousand casualties on the first day of the attack while failing to achieve any of their planned objectives (nationalww2museum.org, “D-Day and the Normandy Campaign”; obamawhitehouse.archives.gov, “Normandy Landings”).

By late June, the Allies had overcome these initial setbacks and achieved their objectives.

You may not be planning anything as complicated as an invasion of Europe, but even simple plans are often frustrated by unexpected setbacks and the failure of others to cooperate. Perhaps that describes you. You had life planned out, but now you are lying on the canvas, flattened by the unexpected—a divorce, a terrible diagnosis, a company downsizing, or the death of someone you loved.

King Solomon observed: “We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps” (Proverbs 16:9, NLT). An old Yiddish proverb quips: “Man plans and God laughs.” If God is laughing, it is not because He does not love us; He just has a better plan than ours. We need to trust Him and follow His plan, wherever He may lead.

BIBLE LESSON

I. GOD'S PLAN FOR PAUL

Acts 27 opens with the words: "And when it was determined." Paul was in the custody of Roman soldiers, and he was traveling by ship to stand trial in Rome. Few things are as regimented as soldiers and ships. Soldiers follow predetermined orders, and ships sail according to predetermined schedules. Paul's life seemed to be mapped out for the foreseeable future. He was on his way to Rome where he hoped to be granted the opportunity to preach the gospel to Caesar himself.

The New Testament hints that Paul was the kind of person who saw value in planning and organization. He was responsible for overseeing churches and ministers in many different cities and provinces, and this feat would have taken some degree of coordination. He also wrote letters sharing his plans with others. We know he was determined because he stuck to his plan to visit Jerusalem despite repeated warnings it would not go well for him there. (See Acts 21:4-14.) In response to his friends' objections, Paul answered: "I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13). Paul did not abandon his plans on a whim.

Neither the soldiers nor the sailors who accompanied Paul and his companions anticipated their carefully crafted schedules were about to be blown off course. Storm clouds were gathering on the horizon. The storm would shape events in ways none of them expected.

A. God Confirmed His Plan to Paul through an Angel

Paul was an experienced traveler who had spent much time aboard ships. He undoubtedly had acquired some knowledge of sailing from these previous voyages. In II Corinthians 11:25, Paul noted he had been shipwrecked three times. Although we are not certain of the timeline of these incidents, the apostle may have endured shipwrecks prior to his voyage in Acts 27. (Some scholars date the writing of Paul's second Epistle to the Corinthians prior to his voyage in Acts 27, so this may have been his fourth shipwreck) (blueletterbible.org, "Timeline of the Apostle Paul"). Consequently, Paul may have recognized the ominous weather patterns developing over the Mediterranean Sea, which may be why he issued this warning to the ship's officers: "Sirs, I perceive that this voyage will be with hurt and much damage, not only of the lading and ship, but also of our lives" (Acts 27:10).

The ship's captain and its owner ignored Paul's advice and proceeded with their travel plans because the weather forecast appeared favorable to them. "When the south wind blew softly," they set sail for Phenice (Phoenix), a port on the coast of Crete, where they hoped to spend the winter. They had not sailed far

when that soft wind mushroomed into a fierce storm. The ship and its passengers were “exceedingly tossed with a tempest,” so “all hope that [they] should be saved was then taken away” (Acts 27:18, 20). The sailors desperately began trying to save the ship and their own lives from destruction.

Amid the chaos, God sent an unexpected visitor. An angel boarded the ship with a message for Paul. “Fear not,” the angel said calmly, “thou must be brought before Caesar” (Acts 27:24).

B. Paul Boldly Testified of God’s Plan to the Passengers

Paul was reassured by the angel’s promise that despite appearances, everything was proceeding according to plan—God’s plan. Paul gathered his fellow shipmates so he could share the message with them, and he could not resist opening with “I told you so.” (See Acts 27:21.) But Paul astounded them all when he continued, “I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of any man’s life among you.” No one on board felt any cheer, but those who knew Paul well knew everything would be all right.

In times of uncertainty and fear, the world needs to hear from those who have heard from God. “Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God” (II Corinthians 1:4). With this outlook, trials and tests become opportunities for ministry, not reasons to despair. With Paul, we can face the storm and declare to others: “Be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me” (Acts 27:25).

C. I Will Trust God’s Confirmed Plan

Despite Paul’s words of assurance, the storm still raged. He told the assembled crew, “We must run aground on a certain island” (Acts 27:26, NKJV). The danger was far from over because a ship run aground was vulnerable to pounding waves and would eventually break apart. But Paul trusted that God’s plan and promise would prevail over any immediate dangers.

God could have allowed Paul to rebuke the storm and command it to cease, just as Jesus did in all three of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25). However, God chose to let Paul and his companions endure the storm, while providing them with a promise from an angel that they would be safe. Paul and his fellow travelers undoubtedly would have preferred a quick rescue from danger, but that was not God’s plan. Instead, they rode out the storm, confident God would keep them safe.

We usually prefer quick solutions and immediate resolution to our problems. But in many instances, God allows us to face the storm. The only way we can do this successfully is to trust that His plan will prevail in the end. We will survive. We may run aground, but God will be with us in all circumstances.

Has God ever given you a promise during a difficult time? How did that help you endure?

How can you comfort someone else today, possibly in a similar way you have been comforted?

Is God calling you to “ride out” a particular storm? If so, how can you demonstrate trust in Him during this time?

II. SHIPWRECK AND A SNAKEBITE

When danger threatens our safety, our survival instincts kick in—“everyone for themselves” becomes our rally cry. This proved to be the case on board the ship on which Paul was traveling. When it appeared the ship would be crushed on the rocks, the crew prepared to escape. They lowered a lifeboat as if they were going to lower the anchors, but Paul recognized their true intentions and warned the centurion: “Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved” (Acts 27:31).


While the crew members were thinking only of saving themselves, Paul was looking out for the good of all those around him. He encouraged everyone to eat because they had gone two weeks without food. He promised: “There shall not an hair fall from the head of any of you” (Acts 27:34). Having made this promise, he offered a prayer of thanksgiving and began to eat. His attitude of calm assurance proved to be contagious, for Luke wrote: “Then were they all of good cheer, and they also took some meat” (Acts 27:36).

Are you currently enduring a crisis? If so, how can you minister to someone who is also in a crisis?

A. Paul Survived a Shipwreck, Just as God Promised

As Paul warned, the ship ran aground and began breaking apart in the crashing waves. Fearing the prisoners on board would seize this opportunity for escape, some soldiers decided to kill them all to prevent it from happening. But the centurion wanted to save Paul’s life, so he called off the mass execution. Before this fateful voyage, the centurion ignored Paul’s counsel, but watching him maintain calm and peace likely caused him to respect and listen to Paul. There was certainly something special about him. The soldiers heeded the centurion’s order, and Paul and all the prisoners with him were spared.

We do not always see the immediate benefits of faithfulness, but trusting God does pay off in the long run. More is riding on our response to adversity than just our own future. The moment of crisis is often our greatest opportunity to minister to others. Because of Paul’s faith, all 276 people aboard the ship were spared. It is doubtful anyone on board that ship ever forgot Paul or his testimony about the God he served. Paul’s faith and trust in God’s plan became a witness to those around him.

Teacher Option:
A supplemental video is available in the Resource Kit. 

B. Paul Survived a Snakebite because God Was with Him

Acts 27:44 opens up with the beginning to a happy ending: “And so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land.” But that was not the end. Three verses later, disaster struck again, this time in the form of a venomous viper. Paul was gathering sticks for a fire (for he understood ministry is serving), when the heat from the flames caused a snake to lash out at the nearest living target, which happened to be Paul’s hand.

Surviving a shipwreck only to be bitten by a poisonous snake would feel like the ultimate act of divine justice. The natives of the island immediately assumed Paul was a murderer who was only getting what he deserved. Keep in mind, they did not know who the prisoners were or what they had done. They watched and waited for Paul to drop dead at any moment. But once again, God had a plan. Paul shook the viper off and remained unharmed. God used this seeming disaster to bring revival to the island of Melita.

C. I Believe God Will Sustain Me because of His Plan

Most of us would prefer to live the rest of our lives without enduring either a shipwreck or a snakebite. For Paul, it was all in a day's work. Yet he trusted God would have the final say in all circumstances. When we allow God to call the shots in our lives, we can expect to face the unexpected. We also can expect He will work all things for our good (Romans 8:28). After Paul shook off the snake in the fire, having suffered no harm, the residents on Melita changed their tune and started to worship Paul as a god. Obviously, he rejected their worship, but he did pray for the father of a man named Publius, and God healed him. Then God healed many more on the island of Melita.

Only God can turn a shipwreck and a snakebite into an opportunity for miraculous healing. After a while Paul and his traveling companions left Melita with everything they needed for the remainder of their journey, as well as "many honours" (Acts 28:10). More importantly, they left the island with increased confidence that the God who had saved them from a shipwreck and had delivered Paul from a venomous viper's bite would surely fulfill His purpose in them and bring His plans to completion.

Has God ever turned a bad situation into something good? Share your testimony with someone who is facing a similar situation.

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.
("Amazing Grace" by John Newton)*

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

A supplemental image is available in the Resource Kit. 

The shipwreck in Acts 27 was not the last nautical disaster in Christian history. The conversion of hymnist and former slave trader John Newton also has become a well-known part of Christian tradition. Newton was born in London in 1725. His mother was a pious Christian, but she died when Newton was only seven. At age eleven, Newton joined his father, a merchant ship captain, at sea. In time Newton became engaged in the transatlantic slave trade. He eventually was pressed into service in the British Royal Navy, but he loathed the rigid discipline of military life and eventually deserted. (He was soon captured and flogged for his desertion.)

Newton became a habitual, unrepentant sinner, admitting to being “exceedingly vile.” He wrote: “I not only sinned with a high hand myself but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion.” Ironically, this slave trader was briefly enslaved himself on the African coast, an experience that apparently did little to change his thinking about the institution of slavery.

Contrary to popular lore, Newton was not converted in a single flash of divine inspiration. Instead, several influences led him back to his mother’s Christian faith, the most famous being an incident that occurred on March 10, 1748. Newton was sailing aboard a British ship, the *Greyhound*, when it encountered a severe storm. At least one sailor was swept overboard by the fierce waves, and the ship quickly filled with water. Scared for his life, Newton recognized he was not ready to meet God. He repented of his wicked lifestyle and habits and vowed to change. For the rest of his life, Newton celebrated March 10 as the date of his conversion.

Despite his change of heart, it took time for him to come to terms with the sinfulness of the slave trade. But as the years passed, he began to see he was helping perpetuate a great evil. He eventually returned to England and became an Anglican clergyman. During this season of life, he penned the words to “Amazing Grace,” perhaps the most popular hymn in the history of modern Christianity.

In his later years, Newton became a spiritual advisor to the famed abolitionist William Wilberforce. Newton also wrote *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* in which he expressed remorse for his former occupation and the hope “this stain of our National character will soon be wiped out.” Thanks in large part to Wilberforce’s influence, slavery was abolished across the British empire in 1807, not long before Newton’s death (Britannica.com, “John Newton”; ChristianityToday.com, “John Newton”).

God sometimes allows storms to blow into our lives, not to sweep us off course but to push us in the direction He has planned for our lives. When storms arise, we must look to God and submit to His purpose and plan. If we do, we may find the storm is the turning point in the story He is writing for our lives.

Prayer Focus

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us trust Him in the storm
- For God to help us encourage others who are enduring a storm



SERIES 1: JESUS MINISTERS THROUGH US

In His grace, Jesus has chosen to minister through His people to other people who need Him. Watch as Jesus sent disciples to work miracles and even used them to serve lunch to a hungry city. Open your heart to ask Jesus to use you as He used them.

SERIES 2: FAITH PASSAGES

Faith is requisite to please God. Witness faith exemplified through the lives of heroes of faith who got it right and even some who got it wrong, encouraging us that we all have a place in God's kingdom.

SERIES 3: LAST THINGS

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