

ECHOES[®]

ADULT STUDENT GUIDE

SUMMER 2026



THE TESTIMONY OF
FAITHFUL WITNESSES

DAVID  COOK[®]

ECHOES[®]

ADULT STUDENT GUIDE

SUMMER 2026

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WHAT'S AHEAD

QUARTERLY PREVIEW

This study introduces women and men who heard the call of God, responded in faith, and testified to God's trustworthiness in keeping His promises. The first unit examines four Old Testament stories that show God's faithfulness to Deborah, Hannah, Jonathan, and the prophet Amos. The second unit considers four people who saw God's grace and power: a Roman centurion, Simon Peter, Zacchaeus, and Mary. The third unit examines five famous disciples who experience the good news of Christ: Thomas, Stephen, Saul, Timothy, and Lydia

Here are some of the biblical principles that we will study and apply to situations in our lives:

Lesson 1: God delivers, but not always as we expect.

Lesson 2: God turns anguish into joy.

Lesson 3: Lean into the roles that God has for you.

Lesson 4: God empowers messengers with all that they need.

Lesson 5: Jesus recognizes and rewards great faith.

Lesson 6: Jesus restores and renews us when we fail.

Lesson 7: Jesus leads us to repentance and salvation.

Lesson 8: We can have faith, even when we do not see the big picture.

Lesson 9: Jesus meets us in our search for understanding.

Lesson 10: Nothing will stop the message of Jesus from going forth.

Lesson 11: God shows us the truth: Jesus is Lord.

Lesson 12: We learn from the wisdom of those who came before us.

Lesson 13: God expects hospitality toward the family of God.

DEBORAH, DUTIFUL JUDGE

Danica set a cup of ripe fruit beside her computer. She reached around to turn on a small fan and enjoyed the cool rush of air. She was cozy, content, and cheerful. Only a few years prior, she wouldn't have felt nearly as settled.

As a media relations specialist for the local community college, her job was to write about the school and its community. She loved to tell compelling stories. But for years, her joy was sapped by the unwelcoming culture of her department. She felt locked out of any career advancement and couldn't help but notice that she was the only Black employee in the office. Her supervisor in those days wanted her to push out new content at a breathless pace.

In the evenings, she was on her knees in prayer, pleading with God for a new opportunity and a new place to work. But with diminishing college budgets, she struggled to find a new position doing what she loved. A few interviews hadn't led to any job offers.

Then gradually, her department began to change. With a new college president came a renewed focus. After a few people retired, she found herself working on a completely new team with a healthy culture. She smiled as she thought to herself about what would have happened if she had gotten another job offer years earlier. *I wouldn't have been here, she thought, seeing what a healthy office can be.*

She picked up an index card she had written in those days and stared at it. It was from Psalm 27:13, "I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living."

1 When has a difficult season prepared you for the next chapter?

2 How do you respond when God's timing doesn't match expectations?

⁴ And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, she judged Israel at that time.

⁵ And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment. ⁶ And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedeshnaphtali, and said unto him, Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun? ⁷ And I will draw unto thee to the river Kishon Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will deliver him into thine hand.

⁸ And Barak said unto her, If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go.

⁹ And she said, I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for the LORD shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman. And Deborah arose, and went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰ And Barak called Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and he went up with ten thousand men at his feet: and Deborah went up with him.

¹⁴ And Deborah said unto Barak, Up; for this is the day in which the LORD hath delivered Sisera into thine hand: is not the LORD gone out before thee? So Barak went down from mount Tabor, and ten thousand men after him.

⁴ Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. ⁵ She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. ⁶ She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. ⁷ I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'"

⁸ Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."

⁹ "Certainly I will go with you," said Deborah. "But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman." So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. ¹⁰ There Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali, and ten thousand men went up under his command. Deborah also went up with him.

¹⁴ Then Deborah said to Barak, "Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you?" So Barak went down Mount Tabor, with ten thousand men following him.

God's Rescue Plan

The setting is a period of upheaval during the era of judges. God was with Moses during the wilderness journey and with Joshua as Israel came into the land of promise. But Joshua's death left a vacuum of spiritual and military leadership. The book of Judges describes Israel's habit of doing what is "right" in their own eyes (Judg. 17:6; 21:25). Despite their religious compromises and rampant idolatry, God does not stop responding to their prayers and sending deliverers to rescue them from the hand of enemies.

The chapter begins by noting that Israel has been oppressed by the Canaanites for two decades. Sisera commands an army of nine hundred ironclad chariots and makes a fearsome foe (Judg. 4:1–3). The leader of Israel at this time is a woman: a prophet named Deborah. The Hebrew text says that she "sits" beneath a palm tree, where she settles conflicts (v. 5). Like other prophets, she is able to share God's perspective on current events and acts as Israel's judge, as Moses had first done (see Ex. 18:13).

As the Lord's representative and mouthpiece, Deborah commands a man named Barak to assemble the army that shall defeat Sisera's powerful chariots: God shall give the victory (vv. 6–7). Instead of showing courage, Barak agrees *only* if Deborah accompanies him and risks her own life (v. 8). Deborah does go, but she prophesies that "the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman" (v. 9). Since women at the time do not fight in the army, this is an unexpected or even shameful twist: a woman showing courage where a man is not. Thus together, Barak and Deborah gather the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali and prepare ten thousand men for battle (v. 10). Deborah reassures them that Yahweh shall be at the forefront of any battle, and victory over Sisera will be theirs (v. 14).

1 Why do you think the text emphasizes Deborah's leadership role, as a woman?

2 What would cause Barak to hesitate when commanded to assemble an army?

3 When have you struggled to follow through on something that God asks?

²¹ Then Jael Heber's wife took a nail of the tent, and took an hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground: for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died.

²² And, behold, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said unto him, Come, and I will shew thee the man whom thou seekest. And when he came into her tent, behold, Sisera lay dead, and the nail was in his temples.

²¹ But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.

²² Just then Barak came by in pursuit of Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him. "Come," she said, "I will show you the man you're looking for." So he went in with her, and there lay Sisera with the tent peg through his temple—dead.

An Unlikely Champion

Readers might expect that Deborah will be heralded a victor over Sisera, as fulfillment of deliverance through “the hands of a woman” (v. 9). But Deborah isn't mentioned in the account of the battle. Sisera—arrogant and eager to face rebel leaders—amasses his force to oppose Barak, taking all of his chariots to Mount Tabor where they are camped (vv. 12–13). Instead of holding the higher ground, Deborah sends Barak and his ten thousand foot soldiers down the mountainside to attack the ironclad chariots.

The description of fighting is short, but the text says that God sent the Canaanite chariots into confusion (v. 15). Later, Deborah taunts their defeat: “swept away” in the river (Judg. 5:21). This is similar to the way that Pharaoh's army was lost (see Ex. 14–15). God is true to His word, and the chariot riders are defeated. Sisera has to climb down from his chariot to flee on foot, with danger close behind. He tries to escape to the neighboring territory controlled by a clan of Kenites, his allies (Judg. 4:17).

Right before the reading picks up again, we meet a second woman in the story: Jael, wife to the leader of this family of Kenites. These are Sisera's allies: non-Israelites who Sisera fully expects to shield and hide him from the pursuit. But Judges tells us that Moses' father-in-law was a Kenite (Judg. 1:16). At least some Kenites have been on

friendly terms with Israel in the past. We soon realize that Jael is not the ally she appears to be.

Sisera is glad to have safety and shelter, as Jael invites him to enter her tent. She gives him milk to drink, invites him to lie down beneath a thick blanket (vv. 18–19). Sisera falls asleep, thinking that this woman is standing guard to protect him.

Jael does the unexpected. She has no weapons and is clearly not a soldier. She reaches for what tools are at hand: a hammer and tent pegs. While the mighty Sisera slumbers, she drives a spike through his sleeping head and puts an end to this haughty leader who oppressed Israel. Just as Deborah prophesied, he is overcome by the hands of a woman. Barak soon arrives, too late to claim a captive (v. 22).

Later, in Judges 5, both Deborah and Barak sing of the Lord’s unexpected plan for His deliverance. They marvel at Jael’s victory, calling her blessed among women (Judg. 5:24). We learn from this song that, if Sisera and his army been the victorious, they would have taken “a woman or two for each man” as spoils of war (Judg. 5:30). Instead, it was two women—Deborah and Jael—whom God used to save His people.

1 Why are Jael’s actions surprising?

2 Why would the text emphasize that women overcame Sisera?

3 What does this show us about God?



This mallet of petrified wood was found in Egypt and comes from the same era as the setting of Judges. It’s the kind of tool that might have been used to drive tent stakes.

Museo Egizio

Clues Point Back to God

The biblical text tells us that Deborah is a prophet. We readers are waiting to see her words proved true, since this is the mark of valid prophecy (see Deut. 18:21–22). But imagine the suspense from her perspective, which we only see in bits and pieces! Deborah was courageous enough to call God’s people to the defense of their territory against the superior foe. And when the confidence of Barak wavered, Deborah’s word remained the same.

She was willing to risk her safety to accompany the army, and she gave the word for the attack. Before that day, no one would have predicted strong chariots becoming useless, or that the arrogant Canaanite commander would die by tent peg. Perhaps you have played a murder mystery game where you have tried to guess the circumstances of a person’s death. Would anyone following the clues guess, “The woman *Jael*, in a *tent*, with a *tent peg*”?

But God uses the unlikely and improbable circumstances to drive the message: victory belongs to Him. Without relying on God’s miraculous intervention, the scattered tribes of Israelites would never control or manage the important land they were possessing. It calls to mind the words of Moses to his successors: “The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; . . . Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged” (Deut. 31:8).

Sometimes we need the unexpected to wake us up to our inability to save ourselves. If Barak had summarily marched the army to a conventional victory, there would be songs written in *his* honor. Instead, the song of Deborah and Barak praises God and the people who answered His call (Judg. 5:1–31). The conclusion of God’s mighty work is this: “The land had peace forty years” (v. 31).

1 What feels different about resolving a problem with God’s help instead of on your own?

2 Where and when are you tempted to credit your own ingenuity or work ethic for success?

3 Where do you recognize the faith and courage of others who are following God into risky situations?

Following when I'm Afraid

Courage is not the absence of fear but the willingness to act in the midst of fear. Deborah and Jael were not fearless, but God was able to use them to bring deliverance. The invitation for this week is to journal about an example of God's provision in your own life.

Begin by describing a time that you stepped into an uncomfortable or risky situation, even if you were afraid. How did God provide? How did He build your faith?

Key Text

And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time. And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment. —Judges 4:4–5 KJV

Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. —Judges 4:4–5 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of June 8 through June 13

- Mon.** Ezekiel 18:5–9—Living a Righteous Life.
- Tue.** Genesis 16:1, 4–16—Trusting a God Who Sees.
- Wed.** Proverbs 6:20–22—Keeping Wise Counsel.
- Thu.** Psalm 113—Praising the Lord.
- Fri.** Isaiah 66:9–13—Comforting like a Mother.
- Sat.** Luke 1:46–55—Rejoicing in God's Deliverance.

Next Week: 1 Samuel 1:9–20, 25

We will talk about taking our concerns to God in prayer. This week, tell a friend about a time when you were desperate for an answer to prayer.

HANNAH, FAITHFUL SUPPLICANT

Shaun jumped up with a shout, bumping and nearly spilling his drink on the man sitting in the bleachers beside him.

“I’m so sorry,” Shaun said. “That’s my son who caught that pop fly!”

“I get it!” said the other father, glancing back at Shaun and wiping his brow. “He’s a good player. Not many of them would catch that one.”

The ten-year-olds were having a good time playing ball, but Shaun was possibly having the most fun of all. As he exchanged glances with the other father, he was reminded of how much older he was than the average parent at the game. But then, there was a time he was convinced he and his wife would never have kids.

They married later in life and endured years of questions from well-meaning friends and family. Everyone was curious if they were going to have children. After the miscarriages, each question was like a knife to Shaun’s heart. Other members of their church were having baby showers and celebrating births.

Shaun and his wife kept petitioning, pleading with the Lord to bless them with a child. He remembered praying, *Father, whether this happens or not, You are in control.*

“Atta boy!” Shaun hollered out as the teams exchanged sides.

1 Can you name an unfulfilled part of your life? If so, how have you taken it to God?

2 How do you handle things in your spiritual life that feel unfair?

⁹ So Hannah rose up after they had eaten in Shiloh, and after they had drunk. Now Eli the priest sat upon a seat by a post of the temple of the LORD. ¹⁰ And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the LORD, and wept sore. ¹¹ And she vowed a vow, and said, O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head.

¹² And it came to pass, as she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli marked her mouth. ¹³ Now Hannah, she spake in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard: therefore Eli thought she had been drunken. ¹⁴ And Eli said unto her, How long wilt thou be drunken? put away thy wine from thee.

¹⁵ And Hannah answered and said, No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have poured out my soul before the LORD. ¹⁶ Count not thine handmaid for a daughter of Belial: for out of the abundance of my complaint and grief have I spoken hitherto.

⁹ Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the LORD's house. ¹⁰ In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly. ¹¹ And she made a vow, saying, "LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

¹² As she kept on praying to the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³ Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk ¹⁴ and said to her, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine."

¹⁵ "Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. ¹⁶ Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

Misunderstood Grief

In Scripture, polygamy is not presented in a positive light—surely because of situations like Hannah's at the start of 1 Samuel. Hannah is one of two wives of the same man, but Peninnah has children while Hannah does not. Hannah is grieved by her infertility,

especially in the face of mockery from her rival (see 1 Sam. 1:6–7). The whole family makes an annual pilgrimage to worship at the sanctuary of Shiloh, which becomes a painful occasion for Hannah.

The reading picks up during one of these trips, when the family is gathered to eat together. But Hannah removes herself to find a more private space for prayer. In her heart, she cries out to God in desperation (v. 10). Hannah knows that God alone can give what she lacks; God alone is powerful over the biological processes of conception (see Gen. 4:1).

Begging the Lord to remember her, she vows that her son would be dedicated to the Lord’s service. Her vow goes beyond the expectations of Exodus 13:2, promising that a potential son would never cut his hair—which is an indication of a priestly office or a Nazarite vow (see Num. 6:5). Her desire for a son is not so that she might cling to him but offer him back in service to the Creator.

Hannah is misunderstood while praying. Eli, the priest acting as leader at this time, observes her lips moving wordlessly. He leaps to the conclusion that Hannah has had too much feasting and has grown drunk on wine (vv. 12–14). Hannah’s response to Eli conveys her deep anguish. Her response draws a contrast between the drinks she has not consumed, beer and wine, and the offering of her soul that she has “poured out” to God (v. 15).

1 When have you been forced to endure the teasing or scorn of someone else?

2 Do you think that Hannah’s vow spurred God to act, or something else?

3 What might Eli’s misunderstanding expose about his sensitivity and powers of perception?

¹⁷ Then Eli answered and said, Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of him.

¹⁸ And she said, Let thine handmaid find grace in thy sight. So the woman went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad.

¹⁹ And they rose up in the morning early, and worshipped before the LORD, and returned, and came to their house to Ramah: and Elkanah knew Hannah his wife; and the LORD remembered her. ²⁰ Wherefore it came to pass, when the time was come about after Hannah had conceived, that she bare a son, and called his name Samuel, saying, Because I have asked him of the LORD.

²⁵ And they slew a bullock, and brought the child to Eli.

¹⁷ Eli answered, “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.”

¹⁸ She said, “May your servant find favor in your eyes.” Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

¹⁹ Early the next morning they arose and worshiped before the LORD and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. ²⁰ So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, “Because I asked the LORD for him.”

²⁵ When the bull had been sacrificed, they brought the boy to Eli,

Rekindled Hope

Many of us experience times of powerlessness, when heartfelt prayers are all we have. Hannah’s prayers and vow are met with a blessing. Hannah never actually explains the nature of her request before God, but words of blessing are important—particularly when spoken by Israel’s spiritual leader. Eli anticipates God’s action: “may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked” (v. 17).

The writer of the biblical text seems to enjoy the irony: Eli blesses the coming of a child whom God will choose to replace Eli. In the following chapters, the text describes his terrible leadership and inability to hear from God (see 1 Sam. 3:1, 11–14). But here he is just a priest who missed the point and was searching for the right words to say.

Hannah knows that her situation has changed. Her posture is altered, and she feels able to eat and to carry on with her family once more (v. 18). Through Eli’s words, she recalls God’s gracious character.

To make the long journey home, the family rises early. Later when they are home, God allows Hannah to conceive (v. 19). This phrasing—God’s remembrance of a childless woman—is also used when Rachel first conceives (Gen. 30:22). Like other miraculous births in Scripture, the child is special, his role carefully prepared.

Hannah’s anguish will follow her no longer—she gives birth to a son! Names in Scripture often give clues about a person’s role. Hannah, the boy’s long-suffering mother, chooses a name to remind everyone of his origin: she *asked* for a son, and *God* granted her prayer. Thus the name “Samuel” sounds like the Hebrew verb for “ask” combined with a title for God. Samuel’s name is a reminder of answered prayers and petitions.

Many parents would not dream of giving up a precious child, but Hannah is faithful to the letter of her vow, returning him for the Lord’s service. Once he is no longer nursing, she brings him back to Eli (1 Sam. 2:25). Hannah’s desire for a son wasn’t just for her own sake, and God used her desires and prayers to bring leadership to His people—to bring them back to covenant faithfulness. This son of Hannah’s would go on to be a prophet, priest, and judge. He would go on to anoint two of Israel’s kings.

God’s blessing upon Hannah also went beyond her request for one child. Although she would visit Samuel each year, she would also have five more children (1 Sam. 2:19–21). God turned Hannah’s anguish into great joy.

1 What does the miraculous conception of Samuel demonstrate for readers?

2 What does Samuel’s name mean? Do you have a name with special meaning?

3 How does Hannah’s witness inspire you to greater faith?

How Does “Even Better” Sound?

It would be easy to apply the wrong lessons from the story of Hannah. Who among us has not sat in the position of waiting for prayers to be answered? But perhaps we are transfixed by the story of Hannah because we think God responded with a simple, “Yes.” We need to see that God’s answer was, “I’ll do *even better*.” Hannah’s desire for a son became the context for God’s restoration of leadership to Israel. Eventually, Hannah seems to have understood this greater story as she exalts God for a coming king, one anointed by God (1 Sam. 2:10). Even Hannah could not have predicted the New Testament chapter to this story, the coming of an eternal king.

In church ministry, I meet with people in all circumstances. Jesus Himself invites His disciples to a posture of continual prayer, never losing hope as we remember God’s faithfulness (Luke 18:1). Still, I often reflect on the mysterious workings of God. I would love to reassure everyone, “God will give whatever you want if you pray faithfully.” But I cannot say this. I see situations where God appears to be saying, “No,” or where the answer is not easy to see.

The Father in heaven enjoys giving good gifts (Luke 11:11–13). But it isn’t transactional! It’s not as if we can pray long and hard enough to get all the things we might want. Luke 11:13 even specifies that the good gift God *most* wants to give is the Holy Spirit. Meanwhile, I notice that all the prayers and waiting are often able to transform us, reshaping desires of our hearts to align more fully with God’s.

Sometimes we find joy when the Lord answers our prayers the way we first imagined. Other times, we find an entirely separate joy when God is present in our longing, offering more of His comfort, His peace, and His presence. It is in that way that God is always ready to transform our anguish into joy.

1 How was God’s answer to Hannah’s prayer even better than a simple yes?

2 What are some of the good gifts that God enjoys giving?

3 Why might God say no to some of our prayers?

Patient Faith

During your prayer time this week, you are invited to try a gratitude exercise. Think back to the ways God has provided: a sought-after position, a victory over a health battle, the birth of a child. While you reflect on God's answers to prayer, pay attention to the three answers God can give.

I can give thanks for God's faithfulness and trust Him.

God answered with a *"yes"* when . . .

God answered with a *"not yet"* when . . .

God answered with an *"even better"* when . . .

Key Text

Wherefore it came to pass, when the time was come about after Hannah had conceived, that she bare a son, and called his name Samuel, saying, Because I have asked him of the LORD.

—1 Samuel 1:20 KJV

So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the LORD for him."

—1 Samuel 1:20 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of June 15 through June 20

Mon. Romans 1:8–12—A Praying Friend.

Tue. 1 Corinthians 15:30–34—Choose Your Friends Wisely.

Wed. Proverbs 18:19–24—A Friend Closer than a Brother.

Thu. Ruth 1:11–18—Friends Stick Together.

Fri. John 15:9–17—Friends Love Radically.

Sat. 1 Samuel 20:16–17, 32–34, 42—Sworn Friendship.

Next Week: 1 Samuel 18:1–4; 20:16–17, 32–34, 42; 2 Samuel 1:26–27; 21:7
Our prayers can be answered in community too. Try to list the names of your closest friends in each stage of life.

JONATHAN AND DAVID, RESOLUTE FRIENDS

“You said you would never move back home,” said Jaime.

Erica steadied herself on the stool, stepping down with a stack of plates. She was packing up her kitchen for her move—something she never expected. But her older sister’s multiple sclerosis had worsened to the point of her being confined to a wheelchair. Their parents had passed a couple years back, and her sister had no one else.

“I’m sure she can find help somewhere else. Maybe home health care, or some sort of live-in facility,” said Jaime. “Besides, you said she was mean to you when you all were kids, right?”

“We didn’t always get along, but we were young,” Erica said.

It was true. Erica had not wanted to return to her hometown. And when she left, Erica put unsavory memories in the rearview mirror. She was free—free to make her own decisions, pursue her career, go where she wanted to go.

“I’ll do what the Lord has laid on my heart,” said Erica. “I’m not doing it out of guilt. I can be there for my sister. Even if we decide she can’t live with me, I need to be close enough to be available to help. And I know it’ll be challenging.”

She didn’t know how this next chapter of her life would play out—it certainly didn’t fit her plan—but she knew it was worth it. Her sister would receive the care she needed and wouldn’t be as lonely. *Who knows*, she thought, *maybe God has bigger plans than I can see.*

1 How does it feel in practice to put the needs of others first?

2 When have you had the experience of taking a supporting role to someone else?

¹ And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. ² And Saul took him that day, and would let him go no more home to his father's house. ³ Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul. ⁴ And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David, and his garments, even to his sword, and to his bow, and to his girdle.

...

¹⁶ So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, Let the LORD even require it at the hand of David's enemies. ¹⁷ And Jonathan caused David to swear again, because he loved him: for he loved him as he loved his own soul.

³² And Jonathan answered Saul his father, and said unto him, Wherefore shall he be slain? what hath he done? ³³ And Saul cast a javelin at him to smite him: whereby Jonathan knew that it was determined of his father to slay David.

³⁴ So Jonathan arose from the table in fierce anger, and did eat no meat the second day of the month: for he was grieved for David, because his father had done him shame.

¹ After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. ² From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return home to his family. ³ And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. ⁴ Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt..

...

¹⁶ So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, "May the LORD call David's enemies to account." ¹⁷ And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself.

³² "Why should he be put to death? What has he done?" Jonathan asked his father. ³³ But Saul hurled his spear at him to kill him. Then Jonathan knew that his father intended to kill David.

³⁴ Jonathan got up from the table in fierce anger; on that second day of the feast he did not eat, because he was grieved at his father's shameful treatment of David.

Unexpected Allies

Fresh from David's victory over Goliath, David is welcomed by Saul and Jonathan. David has been anointed as a future king, and God has been faithful in orchestrating the details for his future. While

God has already made known to Saul that the throne would be removed from his family, the text at this point does not indicate that Saul realizes it is David who has been anointed as the future king (see 1 Sam. 15:28).

Thus David gains favor in Saul's eyes, and his friendship with Jonathan increases. Jonathan even makes a covenant of loyalty and friendship with David, accepting David as his equal and loving him "as himself" (v. 3). The text does not describe David and Jonathan's initial agreement. But in a remarkable sign of acceptance and submission, Jonathan gifts David tokens of his own office (v. 4). Jonathan's princely clothing and soldier's armor are fitting gifts to Israel's future king.

Whenever David goes to battle, he comes back victorious. Thus Saul makes David an officer in the army, and David continues to excel and increase in popularity (see vv. 5–9). When Saul realizes that David's abilities are recognized beyond his own, Saul becomes angry. He repeatedly tries to kill this rival, without success (18:10–11, 25; 19:9–10). Even though Jonathan doubts his father will follow through, he agrees to protect David. Thus they expand their covenant agreement. Just as Jonathan promises to protect David's "house" (20:16)—which includes family and descendants—Jonathan requests David's future protection (vv. 14–15).

The two plan a test for Saul, to see whether he truly intends to kill David. As planned, Jonathan makes excuses for David's absence at a feast. This provokes the king's fury, as David has escaped a trap (20:24–31). Jonathan advocates for David, only for Saul to hurl a spear at his own, supposedly disloyal, son (vv. 32–33). With no more lingering doubts, Jonathan is "grieved at his father's shameful treatment of David" (v. 34).

1 How do Saul's and Jonathan's attitudes toward David differ?

2 How do you explain Jonathan's reaction to David's growing role?

3 Where have you observed the destructive effects of jealousy?

⁴² And Jonathan said to David, Go in peace, forasmuch as we have sworn both of us in the name of the LORD, saying, The LORD be between me and thee, and between my seed and thy seed for ever. And he arose and departed: and Jonathan went into the city.

...

²⁶ I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.

²⁷ How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished!

...

⁷ But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan the son of Saul, because of the LORD's oath that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul.

⁴² Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the LORD, saying, 'The LORD is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.'" Then David left, and Jonathan went back to the town.

...

²⁶ I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me.

Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women.

²⁷ "How the mighty have fallen! The weapons of war have perished!"

...

⁷ The king spared Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, because of the oath before the LORD between David and Jonathan son of Saul.

A Covenant Remembered

After confronting his father, Jonathan confirms David's suspicions: Saul is still seeking David's death. He needs to leave immediately. Realizing this, the pair "wept together—but David wept the most" (1 Sam. 20:41). They renew their covenant of mutual friendship. And this time, they invoke God as a permanent witness to their alliance, promising a never-ending alliance among their houses. David flees, but Jonathan cannot go with him. He returns to serve his father, the king.

Ever loyal to his father, Jonathan dies beside him in battle while they fight the Philistines. It is a tragic end to the life of a man who did not follow in his father's crimes. In the same battle, Saul dies by his own hand, falling upon his sword rather than being captured (1 Sam. 31:1–4).

In the face of this news, it is David's turn to show graciousness in

his reaction to the deaths of rival leaders. He composes a song of lament—weaving together words of tribute to Saul and Jonathan. For the man who tried to kill him, David writes, “the shield of the mighty was despised, the shield of Saul” (2 Sam. 1:21). It demonstrates respect for Saul’s kingly office; David does not speak ill of the dead.

David has even more to say over the death of Jonathan: “How the mighty have fallen,” he repeats (2 Sam. 1:25, 27). He calls Jonathan “my brother” as he grieves the loss of the closest of friends (v. 26). David’s psalm refers to Saul and Jonathan as “weapons of war” now destroyed (v. 27)—a personification of their heroic roles as defenders of the nation.

Although 1–2 Samuel is sometimes critical of David’s conduct, he is never portrayed as seeking to rule until God’s timing is fulfilled. And even after Jonathan’s death, David continues to honor their covenant. When he negotiates with the Gibeonites—whom Saul tried to annihilate—David spares the life of Jonathan’s disabled son, Mephibosheth. Any descendant of Saul could be held responsible for his grandfather’s crimes. But David spares him on account of his oath, honoring his friend one more time (2 Sam. 21:7).

1 How do David and Jonathan each defer to God’s plan?

2 How does David keep his covenant after Jonathan is gone?

3 What is a fitting tribute you have heard for someone’s life?



This spear is from the Sumerian civilization, long before the time of David, but it has an inscription dedicated to the king (probably for ceremonial use). Jonathan’s loyalty to David caused Saul to throw his spear at his son, but this did not dissuade their friendship.

Louvre Museum

Seeking God's Interests

Jonathan's enthusiastic alliance with David is staggering, even as we look at it thousands of years later. As the son of a king, Jonathan could have used his power to keep David in line, even kill him to prevent losing the throne. Instead, Jonathan does not cling to the throne of his father but submits to God's choice in the matter. Jonathan could not have known that God had a longer-term plan to renew the very meaning of kingship through David's future descendant, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14). From Jonathan's perspective, David is just God's choice—inscrutable as it might have seemed.

And yet, Jonathan saw plenty of evidence of God's favor upon David. We don't know whether David shared that he had been anointed by Samuel, but Jonathan witnessed David's heroic defeat of a giant who had stood against the God of Israel (see 1 Sam. 17). Jonathan—a heroic warrior himself (1 Sam. 14:1–14)—still was not the one whom God chose to go against the Philistine champion. Later, Jonathan's actions were driven both by genuine love and concern for David, reflecting Jonathan's support for what God was doing in and through him. Instead of protecting his own interests, Jonathan did what was best for the nation. He stood in the breach between Saul's troubled rule and David's eventual kingship.

Submitting to God's plans can contradict our self-interest or desire for recognition. We dare not expect God to endorse our plans instead of His. Jesus modeled the selfless submission to God's will when He laid aside His life (Luke 22:42). As we humbly seek God's will, we are freed from obliging our self-interest, free to choose the path that brings glory to God.

1 Do you imagine that you would have deferred to God's choice of David, the way that Jonathan did? Why or why not?

2 What does the witness of Jonathan show us?

3 Where do you struggle the most to give control to God?

A Godly Legacy

This week, reflect on the godly friends and mentors in your life, past or present. Try to name at least three individuals whom God placed beside you to give support and counsel, and hold these names before God in grateful prayer. Later, if you feel led, reach out to the surviving family of departed friends, to share what the relationship meant to you.

Lord, thank You for the legacy of godly friends, whom You used to grow my faith.

Key Text

And Jonathan said to David, Go in peace, forasmuch as we have sworn both of us in the name of the LORD, saying, The LORD be between me and thee, and between my seed and thy seed for ever. And he arose and departed: and Jonathan went into the city.

—1 Samuel 20:42 KJV

Jonathan said to David, “Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the LORD, saying, “The LORD is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.” Then David left, and Jonathan went back to the town.

—1 Samuel 20:42 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of June 22 through June 27

- Mon.** Isaiah 61:4–9—Prophecy: Toward Restoration.
- Tue.** Luke 15:1–7—A Shepherd Rejoices.
- Wed.** Amos 5:16–20—Prophecy: The Day of the Lord.
- Thu.** Amos 5:21–27—Prophecy: Let Justice Roll.
- Fri.** John 10:1–9—Know the Shepherd’s Voice.
- Sat.** John 10:10–18—The Good Shepherd.

Next Week: Amos 1:1; 2:11–12; 3:7–8; 7:10–15

We will discuss the equipping and empowering that God gives. Share with a partner about the hardest job of your life (paid or unpaid).

AMOS, COURAGEOUS PROPHET

“Can I share some advice with you?” Yvette caught her breath at the courage it took to ask that question, and she was studying her friend’s face for any sign not to proceed.

“Yes, please!” said Tanisha with an expression that showed intense curiosity. The two of them had been talking about Tanisha’s teenage daughter, who was showing so many new patterns. She was withdrawn, hardly speaking to her parents at all. She had changed her look and was wanting all new clothes. And her grades had slipped too; she seemed constantly distracted.

“Well, let me preface this by just saying that I am no expert. I didn’t do everything perfectly with my own children,” said Yvette. “Your daughter is her own person, and I don’t want to read into things. But here is what kept me going when my girls needed love and were showing the opposite in return.”

As Yvette described some of the struggles she had seen, she recounted trying to offer boundaries, even while inviting a young adult to make a few mistakes. Yvette could see the expression of her friend soften.

“I don’t know if what I am saying is helpful. But could we pray for your daughter and your relationship?” She reached across the table to clasp Tanisha’s hands.

1 What are some signs that let you know when a conversation is going to be difficult?

2 When have you been on the receiving end of unwanted advice?

¹ The words of Amos, who was among the herdmen of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

...

¹¹ And I raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazarites. Is it not even thus, O ye children of Israel? saith the LORD.

¹² But ye gave the Nazarites wine to drink; and commanded the prophets, saying, Prophecy not.

...

⁷ Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.

⁸ The lion hath roared, who will not fear? the Lord GOD hath spoken, who can but prophesy?

¹ The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—the vision he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel.

...

¹¹ “I also raised up prophets from among your children and Nazirites from among your youths. Is this not true, people of Israel?” declares the LORD.

¹² “But you made the Nazirites drink wine and commanded the prophets not to prophesy.

...

⁷ Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.

⁸ The lion has roared—
who will not fear?
The Sovereign LORD has spoken—
who can but prophesy?

A Shepherd Called to Speak

Amos is a name you might recognize, but his story and prophetic ministry are not well-known. He is among the first prophets to use a written text to record messages from God. During an age when things seemed to be going well—before the exiles of Israel or Judah—he exemplifies God’s desire to use people who are willing to speak the truth, including ideas that are difficult or unpopular.

Amos comes from Tekoa, about ten miles outside of Jerusalem. Yet most of his prophecies will address the northern kingdom of Israel, which was engaged in idolatrous worship practices in the cities of Dan, Bethel, and Gilgal (thus Israel’s residents do not need to travel to the temple in Jerusalem). It is an age of divided kingdoms, divided

loyalties, and divided people. So it is the perfect time for God to raise up a prophet to speak and to warn (Amos 2:11). The pertinent question is whether anyone will listen or whether will they reject his message as troublesome (v. 12).

Amos is but a shepherd and raiser of livestock, not from a school or tradition of prophets (1:1; 7:14). He does not have a long resume of experience. But his vision is from God and “concerning Israel” around 750 BC (1:1). You might wonder, *What makes this message controversial and unwanted? Why wouldn't Israel be eager to receive a prophetic vision from God?*

But consider what it means to live in an age where the system appears to be working. Amos's contemporaries would cheer at God's expressed judgment against foreign nations, those guilty of war crimes (Amos 1:3–2:3). But when the script is flipped, when Judah and Israel become the objects of God's judgment (2:4–16), Amos appears to be disloyal. After all, the sinful abuses of *other* nations are the real problem, right?

Instead, through the ministry of Amos, God holds His own people accountable for social injustices and religious abuses: taking bribes, trampling the poor, rampant immorality, and worshiping at every altar (Amos 2:6–8). It sure looks like Israel is Amos's main target! “The lion has roared” is a metaphor for God's fearsome authority, thundering from Zion and the place where God had chosen for His name (1:2; 3:8). Through Amos, God is confronting what disasters shall come upon those who depart from the covenant and close relationship with God.

1 What are Amos's credentials that make him able to speak for God?

2 What does God, through Amos, accuse Israel of doing?

3 What does God reveal about His character through Amos?

¹⁰ Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, Amos hath conspired against thee in the midst of the house of Israel: the land is not able to bear all his words.

¹¹ For thus Amos saith, Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel shall surely be led away captive out of their own land.

¹² Also Amaziah said unto Amos, O thou seer, go, flee thee away into the land of Judah, and there eat bread, and prophesy there: ¹³ But prophesy not again any more at Bethel: for it is the king's chapel, and it is the king's court.

¹⁴ Then answered Amos, and said to Amaziah, I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdman, and a gatherer of sycamore fruit: ¹⁵ And the LORD took me as I followed the flock, and the LORD said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel.

¹⁰ Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: "Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. ¹¹ For this is what Amos is saying:

"Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land."

¹² Then Amaziah said to Amos, "Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. ¹³ Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom."

¹⁴ Amos answered Amaziah, "I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. ¹⁵ But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'

Message Received and Rejected

Amos is confronting the complacency of God's people who are normalizing injustice. God says to him, "the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined; . . . I will rise against the house of Jeroboam" (Amos 7:9). This calls to account the religious leadership and line of kings.

Amos comes under immediate personal attack. He is in the center of worship in Israel, at the shrine of Bethel, from where he proclaims God's judgment. In return for the idolatry and immorality that God has seen, He will judge the house of Jeroboam harshly (Amos 7:17). The king will come to a foul end, the sanctuaries of Israel will be

wiped away, and the people shall go into exile, losing possession of the promised land (7:11).

Unsurprisingly, the authorities have a thing to say about this talk. Israel still has a king on the throne, one who does not intend to go quietly. And the priesthood of Bethel doesn't appreciate Amos's verbal accusations either. One priest, Amaziah, gives a deflective evaluation: "the land cannot bear all [Amos's] words" (7:10).

He accuses the prophet of supporting a conspiracy against the king. Amos's words of warning are targeted to anyone who might want to escape what is coming. But Amaziah tells him to leave Israel: "Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there" (v. 12). He implies that Amos is putting on a show in exchange for food, that he could take his message and leave. It reveals more about the corrupt mindset of the speaker who thinks only in terms of self-interest.

Amos responds calmly, but directly. He is no professional prophet as if he were born into a family of performers. He was a shepherd and a tender of "sycamore-fig trees" (v. 14). He claims a modest profession, a far easier way to support himself. But it was God who called him away from his former life in Judah to be a witness to Israel (v. 15). What Amaziah opposes is the message of God, at his peril.

1 What is Amos accused of doing?

2 What are the warnings able to do for Israelites who hear them?

3 What does the witness of Amos show us?

Called to Truth

By all appearances, Amos was a successful shepherd and cultivator of the soil who wasn't looking to become a prophet. Yet God sent him away from his homeland of Judah to the northern kingdom of Israel with a message of judgment. It isn't a recipe for outward success. While his warnings went unheeded, they did not go unheard—even the king's servants could not ignore this Judean shepherd. The king and his priesthood were unwilling to change; they wished Amos would disappear.

One important caveat is that we don't understand the full impact of Amos's words for the people who heard them. Long after Amos died, the nation of Judah would also come to understand the exile of Israel as a sign that *God does not turn away from sin and injustice*. God applies the same standards to all.

Another message is that God empowers the people whom He sends. God continues to call people today. Jesus said, "Whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these" (John 14:12). And Paul agrees that everyone saved by Christ is "created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10).

Every believer is a messenger for truth, no matter the context. It could be through a prophetic or evangelism ministry, but messengers come in all kinds of forms. In Romans 12:4–8 Paul lists spiritual gifts that are distributed among believers. But "sharing the truth in love" is not a spiritual gift: it is a shared responsibility. When we offer ourselves to be "living sacrifices" (Rom. 12:1), we are aligning with God's will and empowered to do what God sets before us—whether we saw it coming or not.

1 When has God called you to do something you weren't expecting to do?

2 How does offering ourselves fully to God prepare us to be used by God?

3 What good works might God be preparing for you, even now?

Faithful Witness

There are two ways of honoring the witness of Amos in the week ahead. Amos was a truth-teller—someone who paid a price for sharing difficult news. Second, he proclaimed judgment against idolatry or mistreating others. Choose which of these two roles stands out more to you, and put a mark next to the corresponding prayer below. If you are comfortable sharing, tell a friend what you find convicting or challenging, and why.

Father, make me a truth-teller. Show me ways I have ignored, distorted, or hid from hard truths.

Father, may Christ be at the center of my worship. Show me ways that I substitute something else, or take others for granted.

Key Text

And the LORD took me as I followed the flock, and the LORD said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel. —Amos 7:15 KJV

But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.” —Amos 7:15 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of June 29 through July 4

Mon. Isaiah 49:1–6—A Light to the Nations.

Tue. Psalm 72:1–13—A Deliverer Will Come.

Wed. Ephesians 2:1–10—Saved By Grace.

Thu. Ephesians 2:11–22—No Longer Strangers.

Fri. Isaiah 60:1–7—Nations Come to God’s Light.

Sat. Isaiah 60:8–14—Nations Bow to Zion.

Next Week: Matthew 8:5–13

We will continue to talk about God’s fairness toward all people. Can you notice anyone using the word “fair” this week? Where does the word show up in conversations?

THE BELIEVING CENTURION

Daryl and Felicia were sitting on the back patio while they enjoyed a fire at their new home. They talked about their day at work and all the things they were enjoying about a new neighborhood.

As they spoke, Felicia noticed a dim light coming from across the fence. Daryl was curious enough to peer over, and he saw a young man sitting alone and on his phone, seated in a chair.

“You say anything?” Felicia whispered in a hushed tone.

“Couldn’t without startling him,” said Daryl. “I think that’s the house the landlord mentioned with the nice neighbors.”

The next day Daryl spotted his chance at an introduction when the same teen was out at the mailbox.

“Nice to meet you! We just moved in next door,” he said with an outstretched hand. “I’m Daryl. What’s your name?”

“Hrudvick,” mumbled the boy.

“Hrudvick,” Daryl repeated. “Hey, I noticed you were outside last night!”

The boy looked surprised, but he spoke in a low tone. “I was reading the Bible. My family wouldn’t like it.”

“You’re kidding!” said Daryl with a curious look. Then he said a little quieter, “Hey, my wife and I are Christians. If you are ever looking for a group to read with, I know the perfect place. Actually we lead a Bible study.”

1 What does it mean to have faith?

2 What is your own story of faith in a unexpected place or from an unexpected person?

⁵ And when Jesus was entered into Capernaum, there came unto him a centurion, beseeching him, ⁶ And saying, Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented.

⁷ And Jesus saith unto him, I will come and heal him.

⁸ The centurion answered and said, Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed. ⁹ For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it.

⁵ When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. ⁶ “Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.”

⁷ Jesus said to him, “Shall I come and heal him?”

⁸ The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

A Man of Authority

What does anyone “deserve” from Jesus? While Jesus walked the earth, not every person met Him or experienced His healing touch. Not every person had a life transformed by an encounter with the Son of God.

Matthew tells us about a person who doesn’t deserve attention from Jesus. The man is a centurion—a Roman officer and outsider to “the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 15:24). Roman soldiers were an occupying military force, sometimes responsible for heinous treatment of Jews. It is hard to imagine a person less worthy of attention from the Jewish Messiah who inherits David’s throne.

But the centurion has a unique approach. For one thing, he gives respect to Jesus, even calls Him “Lord” (Matt. 8:6). That doesn’t fit what we anticipate a Roman officer to say. Immediately we notice another surprising detail: this powerful man is not seeking attention for himself at all. He is asking Jesus to pay attention to another person, one with lower social standing. What sent this centurion to Jesus is his servant’s suffering, physical pain that has reached a

breaking point. The centurion is showing a selfless concern for others, which is conduct in keeping with Jesus' own words: "Do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matt. 7:12).

Jesus is already sold. He seems ready to get on the road and to pay a visit to the servant in distress. But instead of leading Jesus along in a hurried fashion, the centurion squares himself up to Jesus to suggest an alternative. The commander of Roman soldiers reasons, *Would a high-ranking officer run from place to place to see his orders obeyed? Of course not!* The centurion might not be a Jew, but he knows a thing or two about rank and the way that orders are conveyed. It is Jesus who holds all authority in heaven and on earth (see Matt. 28:18).

The centurion looks upon the Lord of heaven and earth and suggests, "Just say the word, and my servant will be healed" (v. 8). He is confident that whatever Jesus ordains is certain to be followed. He does not need Jesus to visit his home, and he would rather not waste any more of Jesus' precious time. Can you hear the humility behind his thoughts?

With prudent insight, the centurion shows that he is absolutely clear about Jesus' identity and cosmic power. Jesus could merely speak a word, and that would be enough. The world's creation came through the authoritative speech of God, and Jesus is capable of no less. Thus, the person who appeared unworthy of Christ's attention turns out to be someone with great faith.

1 What is surprising about the way that a centurion decides to approach Jesus?

2 What might have happened if the centurion had said, "Sure! Please come"?

3 What prepared the centurion to grasp the meaning of Jesus' authority?

¹⁰ When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. ¹¹ And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

¹³ And Jesus said unto the centurion, Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee. And his servant was healed in the selfsame hour.

¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹ I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

¹³ Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.” And his servant was healed at that moment.

Examples of Faith

Jesus is looking for faith. It is hard to miss in Matthew’s Gospel. In the Sermon on the Mount, He remarks about tiny faith from those who listen (Matt. 6:30). When tested by storms and crashing waves, Jesus’ own disciples turn out to need more of it (Matt. 8:26; 14:31). And later, Jesus will refuse to perform signs and miracles where faith is lacking (Matt. 13:58). But the first person that Jesus commends for “great faith” is this centurion (Matt. 8:10).

The amazement of Jesus begs an important question: *Who are the ones who should have faith?* Jewish contemporaries would expect religious people—those having studied the Scriptures—to show faith in what God is doing. In contrast, many of the religious leaders organize against Jesus and force Him to warn against following their teaching (Matt. 16:11–12).

Instead of meeting listeners’ expectations, Jesus declares that “many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (v. 11). This imagery draws from the idea of a great feast and messianic banquet to include “all peoples” (Isa. 25:6). But rather than

emphasize the prime place of Israel over the nations, Jesus democratizes the vision, describing “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” as seated at the same table as a greater crowd.

Beginning with the call of Abraham, promises of God are for all who put their faith in Jesus. The patriarchs of Israel will not be shamed to share a common table with Gentiles. In fact, the legacy of Abraham is a legacy of faith! Paul makes a similar point when he says, “Abram believed God [in Greek, *showed faith*], and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Gal. 3:6). And again, “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29). By faith, Gentiles come to the banquet with Jesus, even while unbelieving Jews miss the party.

Jesus does not neglect an opportunity to speak a word of warning. He acknowledges a privileged position for Jews, “subjects of the kingdom” (Matt. 8:12). But the warning about *darkness* is, at the same time, a welcome to those who come into the *light*. These concepts are central to Jesus’ preaching ministry: “a light has dawned . . . the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt. 4:16–17). Therefore, the centurion’s faith fulfills the word of Israel’s prophets, who knew that Gentiles would turn to the Jewish Messiah.

Jesus tells the centurion, “Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.” The power of Jesus’ word accomplishes what it declares. There is no physical touch, no ritual, no further exchange—simply the divine speech of Jesus. The centurion leaves to find that his servant was healed at the very same moment.

1 Jesus seems to be looking for a certain kind of faith. What kind?

2 Do you think that Jesus is harsh in His warning about a life in utter darkness? Why or why not?

3 What do you imagine it will be like to feast beside Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

What Really Amazes Jesus

Think for a moment about all the ways we might try to puff up our chests to distinguish ourselves. Maybe we try to amaze others by our gifts, status, or abilities. Or, from a Christian perspective, we might find ourselves impressed by great learning, spiritual development, or success in ministry.

But the centurion's example demonstrates that Jesus is looking for faith. Ask yourself, do we try to present ourselves as worthy of God's favor and attention for other reasons? The message is especially encouraging for anyone who feels like an outsider. Perhaps you did not grow up reading Scripture or attending church. Or perhaps you have a past that you try not to bring up in the company of Christian friends. None of that disqualified the centurion. He lacked the right background, education, or religious experience to seem worthy of approaching Jesus. Yet his colorful past and inopportune career made his faith all the more impressive.

It should encourage our own search for faith in unlikely places and from unexpected people. To most of Jesus' followers, a centurion was a person who needed correction. From a strictly logical perspective, anyone involved in the repressive Roman army needed to be put in their place, not affirmed.

But Jesus demonstrates God's willingness to shower unworthy people with grace and attention. In our context, instead of demanding signs and expecting God to work in a visible way, we can look for God's attention at the margins. If we lack the outward signs of "success," we can still show faith through quiet obedience to Jesus' authority. What God is doing is what matters.

1 If you were to summarize, what does the witness of the centurion teach us?

2 What are signs of outward success that might be misleading?

3 Where have you spotted God working at the margins and in unexpected places?

Grow My Faith

Ask God to bring to mind one area of life where you need the Savior's touch. Is there a broken relationship? A dream for the future? A powerful addiction? A feeling of loss? Whether you feel like your faith is strong or weak, use this week to boldly pray for God to intervene, to show the power of Jesus and to grow your faith.

My bold request is for God to intervene in this way:

(a dream, addiction, feeling of loss, or anything else)

Key Text

When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. —Matthew 8:10 KJV

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." —Matthew 8:10 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of July 6 through July 11

Mon. Acts 2:14–21—Peter: Bold Gospel Preacher.

Tue. Psalm 34:1–9—I Sought the Lord.

Wed. Psalm 34:10–22—The Lord Delivers.

Thu. Mark 8:27–33—Peter Misunderstands.

Fri. Isaiah 41:8–13—God Will Strengthen and Help.

Sat. Mark 14:55–72—Peter Denies Jesus.

Next Week: Mark 8:27–29; Luke 22:31–34; John 18:25–27; 21:15–17

We will talk about God's restorative kindness to us. Where have you been challenged to forgive in the recent past?

SIMON PETER, RESTORED DISCIPLE

When Pastor Graham arrived at church early in the morning, another car was already parked there. It was strange, because he was usually the first person there. He walked to the back of the building, where he found a new member, Gilbert, working on the church van.

“Hey, Brother Gilbert,” Graham said, “what’s going on?”

Gilbert looked up, tools in hand. “Pastor, I heard from some parents that the church van had broken down. If it doesn’t get fixed, the youth trip isn’t going to happen. Since I’m a mechanic, I thought I’d try to fix it.”

“I appreciate all the help you give, Gilbert. This really is an answer to prayer! You know, it isn’t the first time you’ve done something without being asked. We’d love to get you involved in a ministry here.”

Gilbert lit up. “That sounds wonderful, Pastor! I’ve been wanting to give back.” Gilbert paused for a moment, shifting uncomfortably. “Before I met Jesus, I wasn’t the man I am now. I’ve changed, and I thank Jesus every day for saving me. The man I was . . . if I could go back in time and change things, I would. The least I can do is to make myself useful.”

Pastor Graham put a hand on Gilbert’s shoulder. “God has already forgiven you. You don’t need to prove that you’ve changed or try to make up for your past. When you serve, I want you to know that you are free. You don’t need to feel guilty for your past anymore.”

1 When have you tried to make up for something that you did or said?

2 Is it easier for you to forgive or to accept forgiveness from others?

²⁷ And Jesus went out, and his disciples, into the towns of Caesarea Philippi: and by the way he asked his disciples, saying unto them, Whom do men say that I am?

²⁸ And they answered, John the Baptist; but some say, Elias; and others, One of the prophets.

²⁹ And he saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Peter answereth and saith unto him, Thou art the Christ.

...

³¹ And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: ³² But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.

³³ And he said unto him, Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death.

³⁴ And he said, I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me.

...

²⁵ And Simon Peter stood and warmed himself. They said therefore unto him, Art not thou also one of his disciples? He denied it, and said, I am not.

²⁶ One of the servants of the high priest, being his kinsman whose ear Peter cut off, saith, Did not I see thee in the garden with him? ²⁷ Peter then denied again: and immediately the cock crew.

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?”

²⁸ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

²⁹ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.”

...

³¹ “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. ³² But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

³³ But he replied, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.”

³⁴ Jesus answered, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.”

...

²⁵ Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing there warming himself. So they asked him, “You aren’t one of his disciples too, are you?” He denied it, saying, “I am not.”

²⁶ One of the high priest’s servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, “Didn’t I see you with him in the garden?”

²⁷ Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow.

Do You Know Him?

Today's texts come from different Gospels, but they all reveal a developing relationship between Peter and Jesus. Before Peter was the great evangelist who persuaded thousands to be baptized into faith (Acts 2:14–41), before he spoke up to support the gospel ministry to Gentiles (Acts 15:7–11), Peter was a simple, Galilean fisherman—one whom Jesus chose as a disciple (Matt. 4:18–22).

Scene One (Mark 8)—Caesarea Philippi lies on the northwestern outskirts of Israel. While walking to a place named for an earthly king, Jesus asks what His disciples have seen. The crowds think that Jesus is a prophet; it would explain why He speaks for God and performs miracles. But even this high view of Jesus is not the whole truth. Jesus is looking for more when He asks, “Who do you say I am?” (v. 29). It is Peter who speaks first and gives the right response: Jesus is the Christ or Messiah (v. 30)—the rightful king bringing salvation. Peter really knows Jesus.

Scene Two (Luke 22)—The time is drawing near when Jesus will be arrested. He pulls Peter aside with heavy news. Satan, the enemy, is seeking to divide them (v. 31). Jesus has been praying for Simon Peter to have steadfast faith in a coming ordeal (v. 32). But Peter expresses his depth of resolve and willingness to die with his king. However, Jesus already knows this is not true. He knows that Peter will deny that he ever associated with a man called Jesus.

Scene Three (John 18)—The unthinkable has happened. Jesus has been betrayed, and while Peter was quick to defend him with a sword, now he's hanging around to see what happens. All of the sudden, he is recognized as the sword-wielding comrade of Jesus! It's Peter's moment to show the quality of his character. But fear catches him in the throat as he denies knowing Jesus; then again, and again.

1 What does Peter know about Jesus that others don't know (Mark 8)?

2 What does Jesus know about Peter (Luke 22)?

3 Why is Peter so afraid to admit that he knows Jesus (John 18)?

¹⁵ So when they had dined, Jesus saith unto Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs.

¹⁶ He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

¹⁷ He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

¹⁶ Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

¹⁷ The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”

Do You Love Him?

Wouldn't you like to have seen Peter's face when he learns that his closest friend, the one he *knew* to be the Messiah, had risen? Imagine the recognition coming over him and the waves of conflicting emotions. In John's Gospel, his immediate response is to run (John 20:3–4). He races to the tomb to be the first to enter, where he sees the strips of cloth that had covered the face of his crucified king (John 20:6–7). Yet when the risen Jesus appears, He says nothing specific to Peter. What could possibly be said? But when Jesus breathes upon Peter and gives the Holy Spirit, do you imagine that Peter can meet His gaze (John 20:21–23)?

Scene 4 (John 21)—The reading picks up some time later; the exact date we don't know. Peter has returned to his fishing lifestyle, setting out with others in a boat upon the Sea of Galilee. And then the risen Jesus comes to them, again.

When Peter realizes it is Jesus, he leaps from the boat and swims

to the shore to reach his friend. Jesus is hungry and ready to share breakfast. As they eat, everyone is struggling to know what to say. They have returned to the beginning.

When Jesus is through eating He turns and addresses “Simon son of John,” suddenly sounding formal (John 21:15). It’s the moment that Peter has been dreading, when Jesus seems ready to bring up what he had done. But Jesus just says, “Do you love me?”

It feels like a strange test, but Peter knows the answer. Of course, he loves Jesus; and he reminds Jesus, “You know” (v. 15). But Jesus seems to deflect by saying, “Feed my lambs.” It’s like Jesus is saying, *Be that leader I knew you were. Be the one who looks after others.*

Then Jesus repeats the same question all over again! Maybe He wants a different response or some kind of assurance like, *I will try harder.* But Peter gives the same answer, “You know that I love you” (v. 16). When Jesus says “Take care of my sheep,” Peter has to be wondering where this conversation is going (v. 16).

As Jesus repeats His question a third time, Peter understands. Just as Jesus—who knows all things—was wounded by three denials, Peter needs to hear Jesus repeat the lesson three times. It’s true: Jesus already *knows* Peter’s heart. It’s true: Peter put his own safety ahead of loyalty to his king. But he cannot repeat the pattern.

Once Jesus is gone, and Peter is in a position of leadership, he’ll be tempted time and again to hide. Jesus is saying to Peter, *You are that rock and pillar I knew you to be—a shepherd who looks after others.* Jesus, the Great Shepherd, is about to leave Peter in charge of the sheep. And because He knows that Peter loves Him, He also knows that Peter will be the selfless leader others desperately need.

1 Do you love Jesus? And how does it feel to be asked?

2 If you love Jesus, how do you show it?

3 What does the witness of Peter teach us about loving Jesus?

Grace to Restore

No one is beyond God's redemption. Over and over, God seems to delight in bringing back those who have lost their way. But like Peter, perhaps we worry that the past determines how Jesus includes us. Perhaps, we shudder to remember that God knows us completely.

Reading about Peter reminds me of the testimony of the great hymn writer, minister, and abolitionist, John Newton. Before Newton would write some of the most famous hymns of all time, he was a captain of a ship transporting African slaves. In his youth he was hard to manage, known for crude behavior, and his Christian conversion at sea did not immediately change everything about him. For instance, it is well-known that he made three additional trips across the Atlantic as a slave-ship captain *after* 1748 (the year of his Christian conversion). When he would later write the words about a "wretch" who had been lost, he knew them better than anyone.

The amazing grace that Jesus shows is not to count our failures as disqualifying. Notice that Peter did not hide from Jesus or offer excuses. Jesus didn't need to hear Peter express remorse, but He wanted Peter to look to his future role as a leader. Jesus offers the grace that a friend would offer. He doesn't ask Peter to try harder, bury his face in shame, or go to the back of the line. Jesus just wants him to love as he had been loved.

I like to think that Peter's favorite verse of "Amazing Grace" (by John Newton) might be this:

The Lord hath promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

1 What is your testimony of God's amazing grace?

2 What self-doubt or unhelpful narratives might hold us back from receiving the grace of Jesus?

3 What does God want in response to the grace you have been shown?

Never Too Far Gone

Jesus' reinstatement of Peter is an incredible encouragement to us. No matter how far we may have strayed from God, through repentance we can still be used for His kingdom. What parts of your story—past or present—make you feel unworthy to be used by God? Take the opportunity to review the words of Amazing Grace as you offer this prayer in the week ahead.

*Jesus, even though I _____,
I believe You can use me. I believe you have good in store for me.*

Key Text

He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep. —John 21:17 KJV

The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.” —John 21:17 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of July 13 through July 18

- Mon.** Exodus 22:1–6—God Calls for Restitution.
- Tue.** Isaiah 58:3–7—Let the Oppressed Go Free.
- Wed.** Luke 6:20–26—Blessings and Woes.
- Thu.** Hebrews 13:1–6—Love, Hospitality, and Contentment.
- Fri.** 1 John 3:14–18—Put Love Into Action.
- Sat.** Psalm 37:1–5, 18–22—Commit Your Way to God.

Next Week: Luke 19:1–10

We will continue to talk about redemption, but this time through the story of Zacchaeus. What do you predict might be similar or different about Zacchaeus's testimony?

ZACCHAEUS, REPENTANT TAX COLLECTOR

Antonio seemed to have the perfect life: a decent job, a nice house, a reliable car. But he focused so much on climbing the corporate ladder and golfing with friends that he didn't make time for family. He hadn't spoken with his parents in months when his brother reached out to him.

"Hey man, you should come visit. The parents miss you."

"They'll be fine," Antonio had said. "Besides, I have a golf outing next weekend." His response became a pattern.

Antonio knew about Christianity, but he was never close to anyone who claimed to be a Christian. His new coworker talked about faith in a way Antonio had never heard. He talked about Jesus' love for the poor, the hurting, and the people who had messed up.

Antonio was a curious for the first time. Maybe the Bible had more to it than he had assumed. So one day after work, Antonio picked up a Bible from a bookstore. He had no idea where to start or what to expect, so he started from the beginning. He was shocked when Cain killed Abel, outraged when Judas betrayed Jesus. Somehow through it all, he saw God's involvement in every detail. But Antonio still had so many questions.

It took some time to build up the courage, but eventually Antonio decided to ask his coworker some of his questions. He fumbled through it, not really sure what he was asking.

1 What makes you curious about other people's faith?

2 What behaviors, habits, or words invite others to know Jesus?

¹ And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. ² And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich. ³ And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature. ⁴ And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way. ⁵ And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house. ⁶ And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully.

¹ Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. ⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

A Lost Man in a Tree

Jericho is the last stop before Christ’s entry into Jerusalem. In this stunning chapter of Luke, Jesus saves a man steeped in the corrosive power of the enemy.

In worldly terms, Zacchaeus has it all. He is the wealthy and influential chief tax collector of an important city and hub of commerce. Fellow Jews may hate him, but they are under his thumb. He can extort others—steal from them—without consequence. Why is it any concern what Rome does with these great levies he collects? Doesn’t he have a right to make a living like everyone else?

It is surprising that Jesus involved Himself with a tax collector, but it’s equally surprising that Zacchaeus is drawn to Jesus in the first place. Jesus taught, “Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort” (Luke 6:24). In a parable, He warned about a rich fool who hoards wealth (Luke 12:13–21). And Jesus said, “Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples” (Luke 14:33). The way that Jesus speaks about wealth makes even His disciples uncomfortable, and they ask, “Who then can be saved?” (Luke 18:26). What happens soon after as they encounter

Zacchaeus helps to give an answer to the question. It is a testimony to the power of the kingdom that even a man at the top is *curious*.

The image of an adult who climbs trees is undignified, or perhaps even comical. Unlike the wealthy ruler who came right up to Jesus in Luke 18:18; Zacchaeus keeps his distance. Luke explains that he wanted to “see who Jesus was” (19:3). Zacchaeus shows the childlike humility that works like an antidote to the temptations of pride. Since curiosity and humility prepare us to be open to God, it is no surprise that Jesus encourages us to “receive the kingdom of God like a little child” (18:17).

The scene is set, the characters all in place. When Jesus looks into the tree, He spots not only a lost man, but a man willing to look foolish just to catch a glimpse. Jesus knows the name of Zacchaeus without any introduction, and He calls out to honor him with a visit to his home (19:5). Luke doesn’t say how much this curious man knows about Jesus yet, but we see an immediate effect Jesus has upon him. He is eager to open his house and to share a table with this Jewish teacher: “[Zacchaeus] welcomed him gladly” (19:6).

Like Jesus called to Zacchaeus, He calls to us by name, asking us to examine our attachments to wealth, status, and comfort. And, like Zacchaeus, we are invited to respond with humility as we seek Jesus—even before we know the answers to all of our questions.

1 Can you picture yourself in the crowds in Jericho? What would you have felt as you watched this scene?

2 What temptations do we face to take advantage of others?

3 If Jesus were coming to your house without any time to prepare for Him, how would you react?

⁷ And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner.

⁸ 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.

⁹ And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house, forso-much as he also is a son of Abraham.

¹⁰ For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.

⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

⁹ Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

A Lost Man is Found

It is only human to feel anger or jealousy when those who have wronged us receive attention. The crowds who are observing Jesus while He interacts with Zacchaeus are some of the same people who have been cheated by this man. Luke says the people “mutter” when they refer to Jesus’ association with sinners (19:7). *Surely*, they must think, *Jesus could have found another place to share a supper*. As a respected Jewish teacher, Jesus is honoring the wrong person with His presence.

But appearances can be deceiving. And what appeared to be an unlikely person to welcome Jesus turns out to be someone highly receptive to Jesus’ kingdom message. Notice that Luke actually skips mention of the meal and its conversation. Luke is focused on the transformation, rather than the process.

Zacchaeus does an about-face in his entire pattern of life. Whereas he had supervised the extortion of taxes and amassed great wealth, he now wants to return his hoarded wealth to the poor people whom he harmed. He boldly promises, “I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount” (Luke 19:8). Compare that to the rich man who became sorrowful and gave up the invitation to follow Jesus

(Luke 18:22–23). Zacchaeus is responding the way that Jesus desires, by relinquishing his wealth.

For Zacchaeus, it is not as simple as transferring the contents of a bank account. He has to reverse-engineer the system that has profited him. He pledges to support those he exploited, offering more than repayment: extravagant restitution. When he promises to pay back four times as much, he is calculating high interest on the debts he now considers himself to owe. It helps to understand that, during this time, those who cannot pay taxes often borrow at terrible rates—much like predatory payday loans work today. Zacchaeus’s promise reveals a repentant heart seeking the benefit of others. He is determined to repair the injustices he caused.

Jesus welcomes sincere repentance and announces that, “Salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham” (19:9). It means, although Zacchaeus looked like a traitor to the Jewish people, he was actually a member of the “lost” Jesus has come to save (v. 10). It wasn’t Zacchaeus’s ancestry that made Jesus say this; it was his response of faith. Zacchaeus has enough faith to realize that any ill-gotten wealth he has accumulated will mean nothing under Christ’s rule. Abraham was counted righteous for his faith—an active and radical trust in God that drove a life of sacrifice. Because of his faith in God, Zacchaeus becomes a true child of Abraham by laying aside wealth and privilege.

Everyone except Jesus sees Zacchaeus as a treacherous ingrate who should not receive any grace. Jesus doesn’t deny his past (calling him “lost” in v. 10). But Jesus’ mission is to find the lost and to restore them to a close relationship with God. We can never be too lost to be found by Him.

1 When might we be tempted to “mutter” about the love Jesus lavishes on certain people?

2 Is God calling you to offer restitution or extravagant kindness to anyone you have wronged?

3 Where in our lives do we need to hear Jesus say that He saves the lost?

Seeking the Lost

Last week we discussed the restoration of Simon Peter as a leader of the early church. You might think to yourself that, of course, Jesus was going to find a way to restore one of His closest friends, an *insider* and a disciple who had stumbled. Today's lesson about Zacchaeus is on an entirely different level. Zacchaeus's starting point is as an *outsider* to Jesus' movement. He and people like him are the direct targets of criticism for being too bound up in the ways of the world—where might makes right and taking from the weak is normal.

But appearances can be deceiving. Sometimes we impose rigid formulas when we look at people like Zacchaeus or the thief on the cross (whose entry into paradise depended on a simple plea and confession of faith). We might have a rigid understanding of how people need to meet God to have their salvation approved. We like to hear specific phrases, or we want them to have an experience that mirrors our own. Luke doesn't even share with readers the conversation that Jesus must have had with Zacchaeus over a meal. We only get the result, and we see that Jesus was pleased.

Jesus came to lead lost people back to repentance and salvation. And the change that came over Zacchaeus was profound and life-altering. Instead of tracking people down to extract payment, he would be tracking people down to make restitution. The same skills of calculating interest that he had learned from his trade he could apply to himself—his was the largest of debts. Zacchaeus's change shows us the remarkable insight of Jesus, who knew that a curious man in a tree was ready to hear the message of the kingdom. As we turn and look around (and up into the trees), may we also find that “the harvest is plentiful” (Luke 10:2).

1 Are there Christians with conversion narratives that you're tempted to doubt? Who?

2 How can we remember to trust Jesus for salvation?

3 Where do you have to look to find the plentiful harvest of people curious about Jesus?

Salvation Potential

Although Zacchaeus was written off by his peers as a hopeless sinner, Jesus saw salvation potential when He looked up into the sycamore tree. Who have you written off as an irredeemable sinner? It may be someone who has deeply hurt you, offended your faith, or acted in an especially selfish manner. Ask Jesus to bring that person to mind as you pray.

I once was lost, but now am found. It was Jesus who found me.

God, I need help seeing the salvation potential in . . .

Key Text

And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house. —Luke 19:5 KJV

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” —Luke 19:5 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of July 20 through July 25

- Mon.** Genesis 3:14–20—Consequences for Sin.
- Tue.** Mark 3:31–35; Luke 11:27–28—Spiritual Family.
- Wed.** Psalm 119:97–104—Meditating on God’s Law.
- Thu.** Luke 1:26–38—Mary: the Lord’s Servant.
- Fri.** Luke 2:15–19—Keepsakes and Treasures.
- Sat.** Isaiah 9:3–7—To Us a Child is Born.

Next Week: Luke 2:15–19; John 2:1–5; 19:25–27

We will talk about Jesus’ own mother and the transformation in her perspective. How did your relationship with parents change as you grew?

MARY, LOYAL MOTHER

“It’s so much bigger and more beautiful than the pictures show,” Ryan said to his mother as he slowly flipped through images. “We kept coming back to the Sea of Galilee, and a few of our group even did some fishing. Look at the sunset there!”

As Carla glanced at her son, she noticed how much older and more grown up he seemed after returning from a trip to Israel. She didn’t try to hide how jealous she was that he had walked in many of the same places and eaten the kinds of food that Jesus would have eaten two thousand years ago. But she was even happier that he had these experiences.

“I mean, there’s something about being right where Jesus could have given the Sermon on the Mount that made me feel closer to God than I’ve ever felt before,” he continued.

“I see what an impression it made,” she noted. “I can’t begin to describe how proud I am of you. Look how far you have come.”

With a grin, he said, “Well I never would have gone if you didn’t encourage me to try. I’ve got a lot of people at the church to thank for helping me raise the funds.”

“I mean it, Ryan. I feel like you’ve come back with all these new things to teach me.”

1 In what ways do relationships change as children grow?

2 When is a time you have been shocked to notice how grown up a person seems, all of the sudden?

¹⁵ And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

¹⁶ And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

A King for the Lowly

Today’s readings follow one important character in the Gospels and the life of Jesus: His mother, Mary. Like all mothers, Mary had the opportunity to know her child longer than any other person. Mary’s enduring faith and the variety of her experiences have something to teach anyone who wants to know Jesus.

Scene One (Luke 2)—The first Gospel reading comes from Luke, who tells us more about Jesus’ birth than any other evangelist. Luke tells how God used poor shepherds as the Messiah’s welcome party.

But, of course, the birth of a special son did not surprise Mary, who had first been visited by the angel Gabriel. The angel had said, “The Lord God will give [Jesus] the throne of his father David, . . . his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:32–33). Later, perhaps Mary and Joseph were taken aback to face unexpected responsibilities in the weeks before the heavenly king’s arrival. The current king in those days, Caesar Augustus, required the engaged couple to journey to Bethlehem—unwittingly fulfilling the prophecy of Micah 5:2.

Once in Bethlehem, the couple would seek a place to stay with

Joseph's extended family. But because they were displaced and unable to find a private room, Mary faced the uncomfortable reality of giving birth out in the open, beside an animal feeding trough (Luke 2:7). Thus the eternal king was born in the most humble of circumstances.

Shortly after this event is when the reading starts, just after a myriad of angels has appeared to nearby shepherds, urging them to seek a baby lying in a manger (Luke 2:12). Shepherds of the first-century were typically uneducated, lower-class working men who spent a lifetime outdoors. Their arrival brings another unexpected twist for Jesus' young mother. But once they find the newborn king exactly as the angel announced, they go forth announcing His birth. The text says, "All who heard it were amazed" (Luke 2:18).

Yet Mary's response is slightly different. She "treasured" and "pondered" this memory as a mother would (Luke 2:19). The situation may have been inconvenient and surprising, but Mary began her role as Jesus' mother by accepting that she is God's servant (Luke 1:38). Whatever twists and turns may come after, whoever shows up to praise her son, Mary knows that God's plan of salvation is being accomplished through Him. And at Jesus' arrival, words spoken by the angel become true in a new way: "The Lord is with [her]" (Luke 1:28).

1 When Mary first heard that she would give birth to the Messiah, how much of what happened next would she have been able to predict?

2 What message does it send for a king to be placed in a feeding trough and announced by shepherds?

3 What sort of emotions do you expect were part of Mary's memory of this occasion?

¹ And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there: ² And both Jesus was called, and his disciples, to the marriage. ³ And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine.

⁴ Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come.

⁵ His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it.

...

²⁵ Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! ²⁷ Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.

¹ On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, ² and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

⁴ "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."

⁵ His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

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²⁵ Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," ²⁷ and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

A Mother Knows Her Son

Scene Two (John 2)—The occasion is a Galilean wedding celebration, perhaps extended family of Jesus' mother, which would be why they are both in attendance. In Scripture, wine is a frequent sign of God's blessing and abundance (see Deut. 7:13; 11:14; 33:28). At weddings, which could last as long as seven days, running short of wine would be a disaster for the hosting family.

When Mary makes a simple observation to Jesus, "They have no more wine" (John 2:3), she may already have some inkling of her son's power and authority. But in response, Jesus distances Himself from obligations to His mother—calling her simply "woman"—and to anything that distracts attention from the coming "hour"—which

is when Jesus' full identity and role is revealed (John 2:4). Yet Mary isn't perturbed. She knows her son's heart and has the faith to say to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you to do" (John 2:5).

The resulting miracle demonstrates the abundant life made possible through Jesus. God is turning water into wine through the ongoing blessings of creation, and Jesus can turn water into fine wine in an instant (John 2:7–10). It becomes a sign of His glory and of the restoration of God's people through their connection to "the true vine" (John 2:11; 15:1).

Scene 3 (John 19)—Mary's love for her son has not wavered, even when the religious authorities mobilized to oppose Him. If the death of a child is the hardest thing a parent can endure, the unjust execution of Jesus means unimaginable pain for Mary. Once Jesus is sentenced to death and is in the hands of the Roman executioners, most of His disciples are nowhere to be found.

But Mary, together with a few other women and Jesus' beloved disciple, is committed to staying near to Jesus, even while He hangs on the cross (John 19:25). While Jesus is enduring the horrific torture, He has enough breath in His lungs to speak. And what Jesus asks is that His disciple would look after His mother—presumably widowed by this point (John 19:27). By welcoming Mary into his home, the disciple is accepting a role of caring for Mary as if she were his own family.

1 What do you suspect that Mary wanted Jesus to do about the wine running short?

2 What do you think was running through Mary's mind as she was asked to treat another man as her replacement son?

3 Why do you think Jesus distanced Himself from His mother, even as He looked after her?

Family of Faith

In our own walk of faith, we will face some of the same kinds of interactions with God as Mary faced. None of us will be asked to be a parent to Jesus, but we will face moments of profound calling and treasured contemplation, or joy and blessing beyond wildest expectations. We will also have moments when our mundane needs go unmet, and we plead with our beloved Lord. And—true enough—we face moments at the foot of the cross, when questions of “Why” and “How” sear our souls and when grief feels overwhelming. We might feel like we are losing all that we hold dear.

Yet God will always be with us; Mary experienced this truth too. She treasured God’s words and the promises she received. She endured to see the glory of resurrection. Mary’s insight and understanding of Jesus also grew over time. The longer that she was with Jesus, the better she was able to understand what God was doing through Him.

Perhaps you have experienced something like this. You might start out thinking that God’s solution to a problem is so obvious, only to find yourself waiting and wondering. Over time, we can find a new understanding of the depths of God’s love. You might find yourself relating to different parts of Mary’s story:

- Joyful at words of salvation and a message from God
- Curious about ways that God configures the details of your life
- Expectant for God to act to do great and miraculous things
- Grief-stricken by injustice or pain and struggling to comprehend what God is doing

Like Mary, we should be prepared to be with Jesus through all of these times. Mary welcomed the invitation to be God’s servant before she knew all that would be required. She would tell us to make the same choice.

1 What part of Mary’s story draws your attention, perhaps because you relate to the emotions she was experiencing?

2 How has your understanding of Jesus stayed consistent over time?

3 How have you come to know Jesus better?

Trusting God to See Me Through

Mary was present for Christ's birth, His first public signs, and His crucifixion. We have the advantage of hindsight to know the miraculous outcome of each of these scenes, but Mary only had her trust in God to give her hope. In what area of your life are you relying on God's power to see you through? Share with a partner what it means to be with Jesus and trust Him at this time.

I choose to trust that God will provide in _____.

Key Text

But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.
—Luke 2:19 KJV

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.
—Luke 2:19 NIV

Quiet Hour[®] and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of July 27 through August 1

Mon. Isaiah 55:6–11—Seek the Lord.

Tue. Jude 20–25—Wait for Christ's Mercy.

Wed. John 14:1–7—Jesus is the Way.

Thu. Psalm 50:7–15—Call on the Lord.

Fri. Deuteronomy 4:27–31—God is Merciful.

Sat. John 20:19–23—Jesus Appears to the Disciples.

Next Week: John 11:14–16; 14:5–8; 20:24–29; 21:1–2

You might be surprised to find that Thomas appears in three chapters of John's Gospel. What do you know about his character and faith?

THOMAS, HESITANT BELIEVER

Destiny sat in her growth group meeting as she listened to another young woman share about troubles with a coworker. Destiny tried not to compare herself to all the people around her, but she couldn't shake the feeling that so many of them seemed secure and settled, with families who attended church together and problems that seemed manageable.

When her turn came to give a prayer request, Destiny had a big one. She cleared her throat and began, "Well, you all know that my husband doesn't come to church with me. It's been years that he has felt too angry to be in church. He calls himself an outsider, and I can't tell you how often I've asked Jesus to do a work in him."

She could see kindness in the faces who were listening, and she continued. "Well, this week I need more prayer than ever. We've been talking a lot more, and David has agreed to come to church on Sunday."

Amid interjections of "Hallelujah!" or "Thank you, Jesus!" Destiny felt the need to add a word of caution. "Now, this doesn't mean he's changed his views. I think David's just reached the point where he doesn't mind coming. I hope you all know what it means that he's going to meet some of you for the first time. He carries a heavy load, but I feel like Jesus is working in him."

"He sure is!" said another person across the room.

1 What are some of the hardest questions that you have had to bring to God?

2 How do you think that Jesus reacts to our honest questions?

¹⁴ Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him.

¹⁶ Then said Thomas, which is called Didymus, unto his fellowdisciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him.

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⁵ Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?

⁶ Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. ⁷ If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him.

⁸ Philip saith unto him, Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us.

¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

¹⁶ Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

...

⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

⁶ Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

⁸ Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

Thomas Seeks the Way

If you know the disciple named Thomas, you probably know him by his unflattering moniker, “Doubting Thomas.” Thomas shows up in four chapters of John’s Gospel. Together, they paint a portrait of a fiercely loyal disciple who was willing to voice his honest thoughts.

Scene One (John 11)—Lazarus, a close friend, has died (v. 14). The disciples had misunderstood Jesus and assumed that Lazarus was merely sick and resting. But when Jesus says, “I am glad I was not there” (v. 15), He is acknowledging His own ability to have prevented Lazarus’s death. He isn’t *glad* Lazarus has died, but glad for an opportunity to grow the faith of His disciples.

And this is the moment when we get the first line of dialogue from Thomas. In John 11:16, Thomas is responding to Jesus’ plan to return to Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, which is the area that is increasingly hostile to Jesus. A few verses earlier, the group of disciples had

discouraged Jesus from going back (John 11:8). Now that Jesus is willing to return to where opponents had tried to stone Him, Thomas communicates a reluctant resolve: “Let us . . . die with him.” Already, Thomas understands enough to know that following Jesus is risky; but he is willing to encourage the group to go along.

Scene Two (John 14)—We are skipping past the miraculous resurrection of Lazarus, a sign that leads many people to believe and also makes Pharisees and chief priests hate Jesus all the more (John 11:45–48). Jesus and His disciples are entering Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, right before Jesus will be arrested and killed.

He tries to comfort the disciples with assurances that He is going ahead of them to “prepare a place” in the Father’s house for them to join Him (John 14:1–4). As before, Thomas speaks up to express what the other disciples must have felt. How can Jesus expect them to understand? How can Jesus expect them to follow if He does not describe where He is about to go and the “way” to get there (John 14:5)?

Thomas’s frank question gives Jesus the opportunity to declare, “I am the way. . . . No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). It is a gracious response and confirmation that, questions or not, abiding with Jesus draws all people closer to God. Jesus is the embodiment of truth and the giver of life. He raised Lazarus in Bethany, and soon He will triumph over the grave.

Jesus explains that to know Him is to know the Father (John 14:7). Anyone following Jesus is, by definition, following God. Jesus shows exactly what God is like. Those who know Jesus “know [the Father] and have seen him” (John 14:7). Now it’s Philip’s turn to chime in to ask Jesus to “show us the Father,” hoping for a display of God’s glory (John 14:8).

1 Why was Jesus glad in John 11:15?

2 What sorts of things does Thomas’s question in John 14:5 reveal about him?

3 What does Jesus’ response in John 14:6–7 reveal about Him?

²⁴ But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord.

But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.

²⁶ And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. ²⁷ Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.

²⁸ And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God.

²⁹ Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

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¹ After these things Jesus shewed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise shewed he himself. ² There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of his disciples.

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

²⁸ Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

...

¹ Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together.

Thomas Seeks Confirmation

Scene Three (John 20)—Thomas is unfortunately not present when the risen Jesus first appears to His gathered disciples (see John 20:19–23). Thomas had to hear from them secondhand, “We have seen the Lord!” (v. 25). But their testimony wasn’t enough for him. He wanted to experience what they had experienced. He wanted physical evidence—opportunity to touch the nail marks and Jesus’ side, which was pierced by a Roman spear. It’s the one story about Thomas that gets told again and again.

We should not project a view that Thomas’s requests for evidence are somehow ridiculous, or that his disbelief is unwarranted. None of the disciples clearly understood that Jesus would return to resurrected life, and belief in ghosts was common in those days (and even today). Thomas was demanding the same experience as the rest of the disciples, so be kind to him.

He had his chance a week later. While they were together and the house’s doors were locked, Jesus appears and says, “Peace be with you!” (John 20:26). Exactly as He had appeared a week earlier, Jesus returns. He gives Thomas an answer to his questions and the proof he requires, inviting him, “Stop doubting and believe” (John 20:27).

Thomas reacts to the risen Jesus by making an incredible declaration of faith: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28)—words that recognize the deity of Christ. In verse 29, Jesus offers a blessing upon all who believe—whether through sight (as with Thomas) or without sight (as with readers). The words encourage every believer who was not able to witness the risen Christ.

Scene Four (John 21)—Finally, in the last chapter of John, Jesus appears again to His disciples. Thomas is among them, a witness to the resurrection and a disciple whose faith grew beyond his initial skepticism.

1 Why do you think Thomas wanted to see and touch Jesus for himself?

2 How would you describe Jesus’ response to Thomas’s doubts?

3 How should Thomas be remembered?

He Carries Us Along

I was listening to an interview with a well-known New Testament scholar. He was asked, “How much does a person need to understand about Jesus and the cross to be a Christian?” The answer surprised me! He said, “Very little.” He paused to explain that a Christian confesses Jesus as Lord and believes God raised Him from the dead (Rom. 10:9). A Christian trusts that what Jesus did on the cross somehow overcomes death to restore a relationship with God. But understanding the mechanics of how all that works? That’s not a requirement. Faith is what matters, childlike faith.

I was a little taken aback, coming off the heels of a seminary education. I remember slogging through systematic theology textbooks in a library basement. I felt overwhelmed by the complex ways of describing precisely how Jesus saves—what theologians call theories of *atonement*. I still want to know how it all works, or at least be a pastor with informed opinions! But my self-assurance is not what makes me a Christian. Faith in Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life—that is what makes me His follower.

By all means, let us seek an ever-deepening understanding of who Christ is and what He has accomplished. But let us not despair if there are things about God that we don’t understand. Jesus meets us in our quest for understanding. When given the opportunity, He graciously carries us along, if only to surprise us from time to time.

A teacher told me, “God doesn’t always display the big picture. God gives us just enough light for the next step. Faith grows when we see that next step, and we take it.” I think of Thomas as he followed Jesus around, listening, watching, struggling to wrap his mind around it all. Jesus eventually answered Thomas’s questions when the time was right. He gave Thomas exactly what he needed.

1 How much did you understand about Jesus early in your faith journey?

2 How does Jesus meet people who are trying to understand?

3 Share a time when you had enough light for the next step of faith.

More than a Label

Thomas has gone down in history as nothing more than a doubter, but he was also a person of great courage as a faithful companion of Jesus. What times have you experienced doubt in trusting the Lord? Meditate in the truth that you are fully forgiven as a beloved child of God. Your misgivings are separated “as far as the east is from the west” (Ps. 103:12).

I don't want to be known for this:

Instead, may the love of God shine through these characteristics of my personality:

Key Text

Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. —John 20:27 KJV

Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” —John 20:27 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of August 3 through August 8

Mon. Revelation 7:9–10, 13–17—A Great Multitude.

Tue. Revelation 12:7–11—The Word of Their Testimony.

Wed. Acts 6:7–14—Stephen's Arrest.

Thu. Psalm 116:1–9—Delivered from Death.

Fri. Psalm 116:10–19—Precious Deaths.

Sat. Acts 7:1, 44–53—Stephen's Bold Message.

Next Week: Acts 6:7–10; 7:54–60

Thomas and Jesus' other disciples faced persecution later in life. Before we talk about Stephen next week, name a time that following Jesus felt unpopular.

STEPHEN, UNWAVERING MARTYR

Trenton was at the Salvation Army with a group from his church's outreach ministry. He adjusted the microphone, but he was focused on the men in the back of the room who looked like they might be homeless.

"Good afternoon, everyone," Trenton began. "I want to start out by sharing how I came to know Christ. I had been out of prison for seven months when I met Curtis. At first I looked past Curtis, because he was in a wheelchair and all, but he didn't let that stop him.

"I was homeless and living by the riverfront, and I was not looking for help at all when Curtis's wife showed up. She was handing out sandwiches and bottled water while Curtis rolled himself around, talking to people about Jesus. I didn't want to hear any God stuff.

"But Curtis was patient with me. The second time he came, he shared his story. The injury that put him in a wheelchair didn't seem to slow him down.

"The way Curtis talked, you just knew that he saw what was going on with me. He shared the gospel through kindness. Somehow, I would keep running into him, and he would ask how I was doing and offer to pray for me. When I saw that genuineness, I wanted to know the Lord he talked about.

"That was two years ago, and it pains me to say that Curtis went to be with the Lord about a year ago. But he left me with great faith in God, and that's what I want for all of you."

1 When have you seen someone respond to anger or insults with unexpected kindness?

2 Is the message of the gospel dependent on your delivery style? Why or why not?

⁷ And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

⁸ And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. ⁹ Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen. ¹⁰ And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

Disciple of Jesus

That's a good problem to have. Maybe you have faced a similar situation that is not truly a problem but requires you to strategize about handling success. In a growing church, a pastor might ask, “Should we schedule multiple Sunday morning services? Do we need a larger space? Should we hire more staff?”

That's comparable to the situation facing Stephen and the church of Jerusalem, which is growing in leaps and bounds after Jesus' ascension. At the very beginning, followers of Jesus are predominately Aramaic-speaking Jews. But at the beginning of Acts 6, we learn about newcomers to the family of faith, including many Greek-speaking people. These additions to the Christian community strain the benevolence ministry of caring for widows. Some are being overlooked, and more workers are needed (Acts 6:1). But Stephen is the sort of person so overwhelmingly gracious and beyond reproach that he is selected to be responsible for the distribution of food—and, probably, the calming of tensions (Acts 6:3).

Stephen (who has a Greek name) is distinguished among the select group of seven workers as “full of faith and of the Holy

Spirit” (Acts 6:5). He performs miraculous signs in the name of Jesus (Acts 6:8). Luke even describes a “large number of priests” who become followers of Jesus at this time (Acts 6:7).

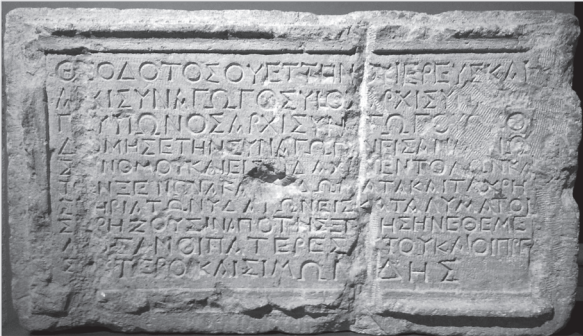
You might expect that working miracles and showing great faith would endear Stephen to everyone, but that is not the case. Luke describes a hub of opposition from a synagogue of “freedmen”—former Roman slaves who had returned to Jerusalem. They probably have an important political voice from their Greek and Roman social connections, and these Jewish worshipers find offense with Stephen. They begin to argue with him in public settings (Acts 6:9). Stephen outmatches them with the wisdom that God has given (Acts 6:10).

In the verses that follow, these opponents resort to spreading rumors about what Stephen is proclaiming. They accuse him of speaking “blasphemous words against Moses and against God” (Acts 6:11). Luke tells us that the accusations of attacking the Jewish law and temple are false (Acts 6:13). These false witnesses give similar testimony to the rumors that were spread against Jesus (Luke 23:1–2).

1 How should we respond when God brings growth to our ministries?

2 What does is say about the nature of discipleship to read about *opposition* to a person like Stephen?

3 How might we respond when fellow believers oppose us in a work that God calls us to do?



This first-century inscription from a priest named Theodotes dedicates a synagogue in the city of Jerusalem to the study and reading of the law of Moses.

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⁵⁴ When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. ⁵⁵ But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, ⁵⁶ And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

⁵⁷ Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, ⁵⁸ And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

⁵⁹ And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. ⁶⁰ And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Disciple Like Jesus

Stephen is a disciple of Jesus because he is like Jesus: his words and actions remind us of things that Jesus had said and done. We saw that Stephen performed signs and wonders and was full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:5; compare Luke 4:1). The opposition and false accusations also recall Jesus' opposition. But in Acts 7, we spot more similarities in the manner that Jesus and Stephen die.

Before Jerusalem's highest religious authorities, Stephen gives a speech that sounds like an introductory class in Old Testament 101 (Acts 7:2–53). He tells of Abraham, who received from God a “covenant of circumcision” (7:8); he describes the leadership of Moses and the expectation of a future prophet (7:37); he describes Solomon's construction of a temple (7:47). At the same time, Stephen refers to the hardness of God's people, those who “in their hearts turned

back to Egypt” (7:39). Stephen connects this history to those actively resisting the Holy Spirit and failing to observe the law right before him (7:51–53). He raises doubts about the ongoing importance of a physical temple now led by those who persecuted the prophets and conspired to kill the Messiah, the Righteous One (7:48–50, 52).

The reaction comes swiftly. Even as members of the Sanhedrin are ready to pounce, Stephen announces a vision of heaven, with “the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (7:56). He has the kind of vision that his Jewish opponents are unable to see. As a way to show their unwillingness to listen, they cover their ears to what else he might say as they drag him from the city (7:57–58).

This is not a cheery text as we read of Stephen’s experience while the stones begin to strike him. Like Jesus before him, Stephen commends his spirit to God (Acts 7:59; compare Luke 23:46). Just as Jesus had done, Stephen uses his last moments to request forgiveness on behalf of his persecutors (Acts 7:60; compare Luke 23:34).

Stephen is often called the church’s first martyr. Luke doesn’t use that word here, since in Greek, the word for *martyr* first means “witness.” Only after the deaths of witnesses who point attention to Jesus would that word take on the special meaning we know for it: a witness who is willing to suffer.

1 How important is imitation in discipleship?

2 What did Stephen say that unsettled the Sanhedrin?

3 Why might the Greek word for “witness” have given rise to the English word “martyr”?

More Than Results

“What a waste!” Can you remember a time that you heard or said these words? Perhaps it was about an unwise purchase or some unused food being thrown away.

Sometimes we say things like this about a human life when tragedy strikes. We might be tempted to look at Stephen’s horrific death and say, “What a waste!” He had so much potential. He was selected as a leader in the church in Jerusalem. He was recognized for his ability to serve others in desperate need. And he was killed before his time by opponents who made up false charges. They should have recognized the source of his wisdom was from God!

Our society is often driven by bottom lines and the question “What have you done for me lately?” But the story of Stephen encourages us to ponder more deeply. If Stephen’s encounter with the Sanhedrin were evaluated for its immediate results, then we would consider it a failure. He preached the sermon of his life, but to what end? No fanfare—not even a single convert. His audience murdered him for bearing witness to the truth. If results were the only criterion, then “failure” could be the only reasonable judgment.

But in God’s eyes, Stephen’s life and testimony are not a waste. God values virtue, not only results. God sees our character, even when we fail to achieve the results that we expected. Stephen’s witness has value apart from whatever consequences came. Sometimes people full of faith, grace, and the Holy Spirit are still overcome by their enemies. “You shall receive power”—Jesus’ promise in Acts 1:8—does not mean, “You will always win.” The gospel does not depend only on the results we achieve.

1 How can we know if we are preoccupied with the results of our actions in an unhealthy way?

2 How can we encourage others to trust God to redeem situations that seem like a total waste?

3 Where can we find courage to proclaim the truth when it is unlikely that others will respond positively to the message?

I Choose to Trust

In the midst of painful seasons, we may be tempted to assume that God has abandoned us. This is just what Satan wants us to believe. But God has not left us! He is with us and He is working. This truth can be hard to believe when we're feeling especially hopeless and when God seems especially quiet, but a simple prayer can be a powerful step to build our faith during those times.

I *choose* to trust that You are working in _____.

Key Text

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. —Acts 6:8 KJV

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. —Acts 6:8 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of August 10 through August 15

Mon. Psalm 36:1–9—No Fear of God.

Tue. Galatians 1:13–24—Called By God's Grace.

Wed. Philippians 3:3–9—No Confidence in Flesh.

Thu. Exodus 34:5–9—A Stiff-Necked People.

Fri. 2 Corinthians 5:17–21—A New Creation in Christ.

Sat. Psalm 32—Rejoice in God's Forgiveness.

Next Week: Acts 22:3–15

We will discuss one of Stephen's chief persecutors. When have you made an unlikely friend?

SAUL OF TARSUS, UNLIKELY APOSTLE

Rashona was in the library, signing copies of her first published children's book. There were a handful of people in line, but she noticed one young girl was standing off to the side with her head down.

There was just something in her demeanor, the way she held her head, the way she occupied her space—or tried not to. Rashona wondered if the girl had faced some of the same messages she had internalized as a Black child, teen, and young adult.

When she was young, she had been called names because of her skin color, by both Black and white people. And as she grew, Rashona was often slighted too. She noticed that people often spoke first to her white coworkers or seemed not to hear her. As she looked around at the world—advertising, culture, and her own experiences—the message often portrayed Black skin as something short of “pretty.”

Over time, the Lord showed her that He was with her in the pain. Other women spoke words of life and healing to her as they guided her through Scripture. It was God who had made her, His creation was good, and His creation was beautiful.

It is why Rashona wrote her children's book. It was about her experiences and discovering her worth as God's beloved daughter. Rashona signed a book for the little girl, and sent a silent prayer to God. Maybe God would use the book to speak to the girl.

1 How has God reshaped your identity and the messages you might hear about what makes you valuable?

2 Since we have been talking about witnesses a lot this quarter, who has been your role model for this kind of expectant faith?

³ I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day.

⁴ And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women. ⁵ As also the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders: from whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus, to bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem, for to be punished.

⁶ And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me. ⁷ And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

⁸ And I answered, Who art thou, Lord? And he said unto me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest. ⁹ And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me.

³ “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. ⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, ⁵ as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶ “About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. ⁷ I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’

⁸ “‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked. ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. ⁹ My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.’”

That’s One Way to Meet Jesus . . .

Paul finds himself in the midst of an uproar in the temple of Jerusalem (Acts 21:27–32). It is exactly what God had revealed would happen, but Paul went to Jerusalem fully aware that it might mean his death (Acts 21:10–14). The crowd seizes him for supposedly preaching against the law and temple. The crowds drag Paul from the temple courts, shut the gates, and plan to kill him.

Ironically, it is a Roman commander who arrives to stop the beating (Acts 21:32). As the soldiers prepare to take Paul to the barracks, Paul asks for the privilege to speak and to address his fellow Jews (Acts 21:39). Paul speaks to them in Aramaic, the common language of Judea. Hearing this, the crowd grows silent to hear his defense.

Instead of giving a point-by-point denial of the charges, Paul builds rapport with his audience and wants them to understand his Jewish credentials: raised in Jerusalem, a student of one of the finest rabbis of the day, an expert in the law. Paul uses the word “zealous” to describe his devotion to God (Acts 22:3). It means that he was willing to go to whatever lengths were necessary to defend what is right.

But that very tenacity and zeal is what led Paul to persecute followers of “this Way”—a nickname for followers of Jesus (v. 4). With permission from the high priest, Paul sent men and women to prison and sought their deaths. He was there, supervising the stoning of Stephen from last week’s lesson (Acts 7:58).

All of this setup helps listeners understand what a change and a turnaround had happened. On the way to obtain more prisoners, Paul was confronted by a light that shone from heaven (Acts 22:6). What he heard next was the voice of Jesus—the very person he had opposed. Jesus spoke to him saying, “I am . . . whom you are persecuting” (Acts 22:8). To show that this message was for him, Paul’s companions on the road are able to see the light but can’t understand the voice (v. 9).

1 Why does Paul emphasize his Jewish background when telling his story?

2 Why would Jesus say that Paul was persecuting Him and not just His followers?

3 When has God needed to send a proverbial blinding light to get your attention? How did you respond?

¹⁰ And I said, What shall I do, Lord? And the Lord said unto me, Arise, and go into Damascus; and there it shall be told thee of all things which are appointed for thee to do. ¹¹ And when I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of them that were with me, I came into Damascus.

¹² And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews which dwelt there, ¹³ Came unto me, and stood, and said unto me, Brother Saul, receive thy sight. And the same hour I looked up upon him.

¹⁴ And he said, The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldest know his will, and see that Just One, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth.

¹⁵ For thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard.

¹⁰ “What shall I do, Lord?” I asked. “Get up,” the Lord said, “and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.” ¹¹ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me. ¹² “A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. ¹³ He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him.

¹⁴ “Then he said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. ¹⁵ You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard.’”

Meeting Jesus Changes Everything

Paul continues his testimony of meeting Jesus in verses 10–15. His humble question of “What shall I do, Lord?” marks a transformation from persecutor to disciple. The simple plea reveals the heart of true change through submission to Christ’s authority. Like Abraham before him, Paul will “go” in accordance with God’s plan and to a place that God directs him (compare Gen. 12:1).

The Messiah whom Paul had been persecuting gives him directions to continue into Damascus (v. 10). But Jesus asks him to wait to receive word of what he shall do next. Paul had been operating with what might be called “blind zeal” for God’s reputation. Thus, the bright light from heaven had left him physically blind and dependent upon others to guide him (v. 11).

As a reminder, since Paul is retelling this story from Acts 9, he is selecting critical details that demonstrate the validity of his message

to Jewish listeners. Ananias, the man who came to him in Damascus, is “a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there” (v. 12). And it is by the power of “the God of our ancestors” that Paul will be commissioned (v. 14). Paul is undercutting the false accusation that his ministry would encourage people to ignore the law (see Acts 21:28). At the same time, Paul is describing why Jesus—whom he calls “the Righteous One” (v. 14; compare Isa. 53:11)—is the fulfillment of what Israel had longed to find. The Righteous One of Israel was able to call Paul to a new life and a new direction. What zeal for God had led him to oppose Jesus’ followers would give way to a courageous ministry as Jesus’ apostle.

But back to Paul’s retelling. He remains physically blind in the city of Damascus when Ananias comes to him. From Acts 9:10–16, readers know that Ananias received a vision of his own from Jesus. When he arrived to greet Paul, Ananias addresses “Brother Saul,” which uses Paul’s Jewish name (v. 13). Paul says it is that moment that his sight was restored. For the first time, he is looking with eyes attuned to what he had been too blind to see.

It is a fellow Jew and faithful follower of Jesus who welcomes Jesus’ newest witness. With a remarkable show of grace to a previous enemy, Ananias alludes to Paul’s new role as a witness for Jesus. Paul has been chosen to “know [God’s] will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth” (v. 14). Paul’s testimony will be heard far and wide, as the good news of Jesus goes forth. No doubt, Paul hopes this message would grip the hearts of his current listeners.

1 Why is it important for Paul to connect his message to the hope of Israel?

2 What does Paul’s temporary blindness show about him? And what does it show when his sight is restored?

3 When have you witnessed someone make a dramatic turnaround after becoming a follower of Jesus?

The Lord of All

The hardest year of my marriage came while I was in seminary. My wife and I were both working full-time jobs, trying to balance all the things of life: work, children, commutes, studies, and you name it. Many days she and I felt like ships passing in the darkness. But worst of all, she was facing a boss who was driving her to the breaking point. This person was demanding, demeaning, even cruel—not at all what we needed. We shared some desperate prayers about this person who had become almost like an enemy to us. *Lord, if you reign over all, you can turn this person around.*

It's probably not too far off from the kind of desperate prayers that early Christians might have prayed about Saul, the persecutor. The Lord shattered Paul's hatred for followers of Jesus. He turned the murderous persecutor into an exceptional missionary. Paul's encounter with Jesus proves that no person is beyond reaching. At the same time, what stands out in Paul's own testimony is the theme of blindness and misdirection. Paul was doing what he thought was right and good, and he discovered that he had been persecuting God's Son in the process. What was the key that unlocked this new understanding? It was a clear understanding of Jesus as lord.

You might respond to Paul's testimony the way that I do, taking comfort that Jesus can change enemies into allies. Or perhaps you respond to his testimony by examining yourself for any ways that you have been misdirected and blind to spiritual realities. Whether in your relationships, your commitments, or your presentation of yourself, make room to ask the question that Paul asked when he saw what he had done: "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10).

1 What changes in us when we are able to confess that Jesus is Lord?

2 How did Paul stay the same, and how did he change?

3 How might we gain new vision to see realities that we might have been missing?

Unlikely Apostles

Saul was the least likely candidate for helping to spread the gospel, but the Lord had great plans for this one-time opponent of the faith. Who are some people in your life that seem too antagonistic, too close-minded, too wounded to find Jesus? Pray for them by name, asking the Lord to break down whatever walls are preventing them from receiving the gift of salvation.

Jesus, I confess that you are Lord.

I trust that You can save not just me, but those I see as enemies.

Key Text

And he said, The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldest know his will, and see that Just One, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth. For thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard. —Acts 22:14–15 KJV

“Then he said: “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard.” —Acts 22:14–15 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of August 17 through August 22

Mon. Acts 16:1–5—A Protege with Promise.

Tue. Proverbs 1:1–9—Receive Instruction.

Wed. Proverbs 23:22–25—Learn from Your Parents.

Thu. Philippians 2:19–24—A Worthy and Trusted Minister.

Fri. Deuteronomy 4:9–13—Teach Your Children God’s Ways.

Sat. 2 Timothy 1:1–16—A Father’s Message.

Next Week: 2 Timothy 1:1–6; 3:14–16

Paul’s legacy includes followers who looked up to him as much as a biological parent. Pray for the young leaders of your church community as you prepare to discuss Timothy.

TIMOTHY, LEADER WITH A LEGACY

“Girl, I don’t know how you made it to your silver wedding anniversary,” said Gabrielle’s coworker.

Gabrielle had shared with her coworker that she and Calvin were foregoing a party and taking a one-week cruise to celebrate twenty-five years of marriage. Her mind went back to her early married days. They had been rocky. She and Calvin were two young people beginning to navigate life together. He had idiosyncrasies and irritating ways. And so had she. During those early years, Gabrielle would complain to her friends at church about how Calvin had made her mad that week, and told them all about his flaws. But one day, as Gabrielle was beginning her rant, an older woman who was passing by asked her if they could speak privately.

“Baby,” the woman said, “I overheard your conversation. It’s not good to talk bad about your husband to others. I understand you’re newly married. There is going to be some frustration with one another. It’s natural. But whatever you want to say about your husband, tell the Lord. Because He can keep all our secrets. When you talk bad about your husband, you are tearing down his reputation and his value. If you are not in harm’s way, keep your marriage business between you and Calvin.”

It was good advice. That woman continued to mentor Gabrielle in her marriage until she and Calvin moved. Gabrielle was so grateful for this woman, and now had the opportunity to pass the woman’s wisdom down to her coworker.

1 What spiritual parent in the faith has been a good, godly influence on you? Why?

2 What ordinary acts of faith have strengthened you through difficult seasons?

¹ Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, according to the promise of life which is in Christ Jesus,

² To Timothy, my dearly beloved son: Grace, mercy, and peace, from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

³ I thank God, whom I serve from my forefathers with pure conscience, that without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day;

⁴ Greatly desiring to see thee, being mindful of thy tears, that I may be filled with joy; ⁵ When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also.

⁶ Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands.

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, in keeping with the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

² To Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

³ I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. ⁴ Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵ I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

⁶ For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

A Legacy Burns Brightly

The apostle Paul stands ready to meet Jesus in death when he writes to his son in the faith, sharing great love and admiration. Unlike the letter of 1 Timothy, which gives a great deal of attention to false teachers, 2 Timothy expresses hopes and concerns for a young pastor. *Young* is relative, since Timothy could be forty years old at this point.

Paul writes as an “apostle of Jesus Christ,” an apostle “by the will of God” (2 Tim. 1:1). In last week’s lesson, we discussed Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Jesus Himself spoke to Paul and commissioned him (compare Gal. 1:15–16). While he is imprisoned for the gospel, Paul continues to draw strength from the “promise of life that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:1). Paul already anticipates giving up his earthly life; he says in 4:6, “My departure is near.”

It’s no surprise that, at the end, Paul’s thoughts go to Timothy.

Paul first met Timothy during his second missionary journey (see Acts 16:1–4). In Acts we learn that Timothy has a Greek father and a Jewish mother. We don't know if he is estranged, absent, or dead, but Timothy's biological father is never mentioned.

Paul points to the legacy of Jewish faith that he and Timothy share. Paul sees following Jesus as a continuation of the faith of Jewish ancestors, who also served God (2 Tim. 1:3). He encourages Timothy to draw from this heritage too: Timothy's mother and grandmother are notable for "sincere faith" that they passed on to him (2 Tim. 1:5). Timothy has a legacy that Paul compares to a hot ember, ready to burst into flame and throw off heat if he but fans it and keeps the memory alive (1 Tim. 1:6). The result of the Spirit's work is able to leave Timothy with confidence to speak into difficult situations, showing love and devotion to others with a consistency of character (2 Tim. 1:7).

At the same time, Paul talks about Timothy as his own son—the one to continue Paul's ministry work. Timothy's gift came when Paul laid hands upon him in prayer, sharing with him the commission to leadership (2 Tim. 1:6). That's one reason why they desperately want to see one another again, perhaps for the last time. In some ways, their bond is closer than biological family.

1 Why does Paul call Timothy his dear son?

2 What does Paul recall about Timothy's history?

3 What does Paul instruct Timothy to do with his faith?

¹⁴ But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; ¹⁵ And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

A Resource Ready to Be Used

Timothy learned the gospel, biblical ministry, and compassion from those whom God placed in his life. He didn't need more teachers but encouragement to remain steadfast in the work of the Lord. The apostle Paul, in writing to his son in the faith, knows that those who follow Jesus face hardship. He says, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). This type of pressure could lead even the strongest Christian to throw in the towel. But Paul encourages Timothy, despite the presence of detractors and impostors, to "continue" in the faith (v. 14). The Greek word for *continue* means to stay, persist, or abide. Jesus uses the same verb when He says that we will bear fruit only by abiding in Him (John 15:5–6).

Paul has already called attention to Timothy's legacy of family and mentors, but Timothy has other resources at his disposal. Timothy was fortunate that he was reared in the faith "from infancy" (2 Tim. 3:15). From Lois and Eunice, no doubt, Timothy has also been introduced to Scripture. Paul refers to "Holy Scriptures," which are founts of wisdom leading a person to "salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).

There is an important clarification to make about what Paul means by this. When Timothy was an infant, he couldn't have been learning from the canonical Bible as Christians now understand it, since

the New Testament had not even been written! Paul has to mean what Christians call the Old Testament. In all of Paul's letters, he is constantly going back to the Old Testament (for Paul, just "Scripture"), where he draws strength from what he finds. Paul is masterful at demonstrating the gospel of Jesus from texts like Habakkuk 2:4, "The righteous person will live by his faithfulness." Paul writes that Scripture is "God-breathed," meaning that it is entirely useful and reliable (2 Tim. 3:16). It comes from God, and Scripture will never steer Timothy in the wrong direction or fail to lead him in righteous paths.

Even the Old Testament, without mentioning Jesus by name, is revealing the need for faith in Jesus Christ. This is very close to what Jesus says in Luke 24:27, that all of Scripture, including the writings of Moses and the prophets, is pointing to Jesus. Paul is affirming the divine origin of Scripture while focusing on the practical application.

Paul calls Scripture "useful" above all, and he lists a variety of ways to apply Scripture in ministry: "teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). *Teaching* from the Word instructs the servant of God in right belief and action. And *training* and *rebuking* are for enhancing the character of God's people. In one short verse, Paul summarizes the purpose of Scripture as equipping leaders for whatever they might need, so that God's servant—Timothy especially—is fully prepared. Paul's encouragement is that, with a legacy of faithful people behind him and Scripture always before him, Timothy can walk in "every good work" that God has prepared (1 Tim. 3:17).

1 What is an Old Testament verse that points you to Jesus?

2 How do you most commonly make use of Scripture? How is it useful to you?

3 How would you extend what Paul is saying to include the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments?

We Need One Another

Our culture boasts of social connections through technology, apps and social media. Yet loneliness has become an epidemic. This epidemic has affected the local church, as many people adopt an individualized approach to Christian faith. But among the body of Christ there should be constant opportunities to connect and to come alongside one another. The work of Christ welcomes us into a global family of believers, all who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. Those connections can be stronger than any biological relationship.

As the apostle Paul disciplined Timothy and encouraged him to fan the flame—making abundant use of the Word of God—we should be encouraged to do the same. In a local church, we find ourselves at different stages of spiritual maturity. But every Christian has the opportunity to pour into the life of a brother or sister in the Lord and to encourage lasting faith. If you have been following Jesus for a year or more than fifty years, you can look back on your journey and give thanks for someone who encouraged you to press forward.

When I was at the lowest point of my walk with Jesus, the Lord sent a “Paul” into my life. An older Christian took the time to pour into me more encouragement than I had ever received before. I was a young man who struggled to stand on the truth of the Scriptures, but we met weekly for lunch. Mostly, he listened. Then he would point me back to Scripture and pray over me, putting his hand on my shoulder. It’s the kind of witness that I needed.

1 How does loneliness go unnoticed in church?

2 How does the gospel of Jesus transform the way that we look at relationships and family?

3 Do you feel more like a “Paul” or a “Timothy” in this season? Are you in a position to give or to receive encouragement?

My Heritage of Faith

Timothy's upbringing in the faith by his grandmother, mother, and mentor—Paul—reminds us that, in most cases, people learn to find and follow Jesus through the loving, patient training and modeling of others. Who were the spiritual mentors who led you to faith in Jesus? Who are the mentees whom God has placed in your circle of influence for you to pour into spiritually? Pray for them.

My Spiritual Mentors:

My Spiritual Mentees:

Key Text

When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also. —2 Timothy 1:5 KJV

I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. —2 Timothy 1:5 NIV

Quiet Hour[®] and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of August 24 through August 29

- Mon.** 1 Peter 4:7–11—Use Your Gifts to Serve.
- Tue.** 2 Kings 4:8–17—God Rewards Hospitality.
- Wed.** Proverbs 31:10–22—A Capable, Entrepreneurial Woman.
- Thu.** Matthew 25:14–23—Good and Faithful Servants.
- Fri.** Matthew 25:24–30—The Wicked Servant.
- Sat.** Job 31:16–28—The Righteous Provide for Others.

Next Week: Acts 16:11–15, 40

We will end the quarter by discussing Lydia and her hospitality. If you are engaged in a mentoring relationship, how do you give or receive hospitality?

LYDIA, GENEROUS HOST

“This spread was simply too much, my man!” said Reginald Lewis as he pushed back from the table.

Reginald, his wife, and his two children were at the home of his friend, Ernest Mitchell. Reginald and his family were passing through town, and Ernest had insisted that they stay with his family for the night.

“How does your daughter like the lasagna? We know she doesn’t eat meat,” Ernest’s wife said. Ernest had grilled a variety of meats and vegetables, and had even made sure to make a meatless lasagna. And now, Reginald was stuffed.

As the two families chatted over the meal, Reginald found himself looking around at the house. It was modest, though in good condition. Ernest wasn’t very well-off, but he was beyond generous. They hadn’t asked the Mitchells to make something special for their daughter, but they did anyway. And he was already so generous in cooking such a lavish meal for everyone else!

When the evening was drawing to a close, and everyone was shuffling to bed, Reginald pulled Ernest aside. “Thank you,” he said. “I’m so glad to have friends like you and your wife who are always supportive, hospitable, and loving. It’s been overwhelming.”

1 When have you experienced the kind of hospitality that makes someone feel truly seen?

2 Where might God be calling you to disrupt routines to extend hospitality?

¹¹ Therefore loosing from Troas, we came with a straight course to Samothracia, and the next day to Neapolis;
¹² And from thence to Philippi, which is the chief city of that part of Macedonia, and a colony: and we were in that city abiding certain days.

¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis.
¹² From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

Paul's Second Journey

Paul's mission beyond southern Galatia—often called his second missionary journey (Acts 15:36–18:22)—began with a series of setbacks. Paul and Barnabas had ended their partnership when Paul refused to let Barnabas's nephew, Mark, rejoin their mission (Acts 15:36–39). Paul regrouped, selecting Silas as his new partner. Together they revisited the churches Paul had helped found and recruited Timothy to their team (Acts 15:40–16:5).

And setbacks continued. Paul and Silas first tried to head west into the Roman province of Asia (modern Turkey), which had the major city of Ephesus as its capital. However, as the author tells us, the Holy Spirit prevented them from preaching the gospel in Asia (Acts 16:6). The author does not explain what this roadblock looked like: it may have been an audible voice, a spiritual sense, or a set of circumstances that hindered them. Nevertheless, Paul and Silas shifted their sights to Bithynia (northwestern Turkey), a province located north of Galatia. They journeyed through the nearby province of Mysia, but the Holy Spirit blocked their entry into Bithynia (Acts 16:7). Uncertain of their next steps, Paul and Silas traveled through Mysia to the city of Troas, a port located on the Aegean Sea.

In Troas, Paul and his team had their breakthrough. Paul received a vision of a man from Macedonia (modern Greece, North Macedonia, and Albania), a Roman province with its capital at Thessalonica. In the vision, the Macedonian man pleaded with Paul to come preach, so Paul and his team immediately made arrangements to leave for that destination (Acts 16:9–10).

In verse 11, Paul and his companions set sail from Troas.

Surprisingly, the author refers to the team as “we,” suggesting that he was with Paul on this journey. There are several “we” passages in Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–8; 27:1–28:16). Scholars debate whether the author claims to be an eyewitness *himself* or used the diary of one of Paul’s traveling companions to write these accounts. Regardless of their source, the “we” passages show that the author relied on eyewitness accounts in composing his narrative.

The team sails straight to the island of Samothrace in the northern Aegean Sea. While faster and more convenient than other types of travel, sailing was highly dangerous; and sailors often stopped frequently at ports on the way to their destinations. With its more than five-thousand-foot mountain aiding visual navigation and a thriving, independent city, Samothrace served as a natural stop for sea journeys.

After spending the night, Paul and his companions sail to Neapolis, a port city on the Macedonian coast. As a port, Neapolis connected Asia to Macedonia. It also served as the start of the *Via Egnatia*, the famous road linking Rome to its eastern territories. Paul likely walked this road to Philippi, Thessalonica, and the other cities he visited in Greece (see Acts 16:12–18:18).

In verse 12, Paul’s team heads to Philippi, a city located roughly a day’s journey from Neapolis. Luke mentions two things about it. First, the province of Macedonia was divided into four districts; and Philippi was one of the most important cities in the eastern district. Secondly, Philippi was a Roman colony, a city founded primarily to settle and reward veterans of the Roman army. When Philippi was founded, Rome awarded it the rights of self-governance and freedom from paying taxes. The church that Paul starts in Philippi remains loyal to him throughout his ministry, providing him with financial support when other churches in Macedonia did not (Phil. 4:15).

1 What setbacks did Paul face when he started his second missionary journey?

2 How did God show Paul where to travel and preach the gospel?

3 What do the “we” passages of Acts tell us about the book’s author?

¹³ And on the sabbath we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted thither. ¹⁴ And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul. ¹⁵ And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us.

...

⁴⁰ And they went out of the prison, and entered into the house of Lydia: and when they had seen the brethren, they comforted them, and departed.

¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. ¹⁵ When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

...

⁴⁰ After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.

Lydia Hears God's Call

After staying in Philippi for several days (v. 12), Paul and his companions walk to the river on the Sabbath. When he entered a new city, Paul followed a principle of preaching to his fellow Jews before sharing the gospel with Gentiles (Acts 28:17–31; Rom. 1:16). Paul usually visited the synagogues, Jewish places of prayer and study (Acts 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8). These meeting houses would give Paul the opportunity to find lodging among his fellow Jews. However, synagogues were expensive to build, and towns with smaller Jewish populations often used other spaces to gather.

In Philippi, the Jewish community gathered by the bank of a river on the Sabbath (v. 13). Paul immediately strikes up conversation with women there. Luke does not say whether these women were Jews or Gentiles; the group likely included both. What the author does make

clear is that one woman listens to Paul. Her name is Lydia, and Luke mentions several important things about her (v. 14). First, Lydia was a merchant of purple cloth. This luxury item was usually dyed with a pigment extracted from the glands of Mediterranean sea snails. The process was difficult, so such cloth was expensive. Lydia was thus probably a person of significant wealth. She also hailed from Thyatira, a city famous for its purple textiles. Thyatira was also located in the Roman province of Asia, the very place that the Spirit had prevented Paul from entering (Acts 16:6).

Secondly, Lydia was a God-fearer (Acts 10:2, 22; 13:16, 26), a Gentile worshiper of the God of Israel. Though not a Jew herself, her interest in Judaism prepared her to receive the gospel. Lydia listens to Paul, and God opens her heart to believe in his message (v. 14). After she and her household are baptized, Lydia invites Paul into her home (v. 15).

Hospitality was a virtue highly valued in the first century AD. Surprisingly, Paul's fellow Jews do not welcome or listen to him. In the midst of a Jewish gathering, it is the Gentile Lydia who listens to God's call and offers Paul a place to stay. She becomes Paul's patron, using her wealth to support him and his ministry. Moreover, Lydia remains loyal to Paul. When Paul and Silas have been beaten, thrown into prison, and released (Acts 16:19–39), Lydia does not refuse to associate with them. Rather than feeling ashamed of Paul and his team, she welcomes them into her home (v. 40). Her hospitality shows that she has truly joined God's people.

1 Where did Paul go to preach the gospel when he arrived in new towns?

2 What does Lydia's occupation as a purple-cloth dealer tell us about her?

3 How does Lydia show that the gospel has transformed her?

Living Hospitably

My father passed away in 2017. After earning his Master of Divinity, he devoted three decades of his life to coaching youth swim teams. Many of his swimmers went on to win national championships and even Olympic berths. Many more gave their lives to Christ through my father's ministry. Hundreds of people attended his funeral, far more than we had anticipated. My mother, sister, and I saw many people with whom we had lost contact over the years. What my father's former athletes mentioned most was not how effective he was as a coach or the scholarships they won under his training. Instead, they talked about my father's generosity and hospitality.

One recalled the year he spent living with us after his alcoholic father kicked him out of his home. Another remembered the times my dad bought her gas when she couldn't get to work. One after another, they shared memories of the ways my father had helped them in times of need. Whether it was with his money, his time, or his love, my father was always generous. That generosity was the way he showed the love of Christ to others. My father not only shared the gospel but also lived it.

Lydia's generosity and hospitality, like my father's, reflected Christ's love. Jesus told the Twelve, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Lydia showed such love to Paul: she invited him into her home, supported his ministry financially, and remained loyal to him when society stood against him. Her belief in the God of Israel was shown in her actions.

God expects hospitality from His children today. As we give generously to others, we preach the gospel by our deeds, strengthening some in the faith and inviting others into God's family.

1 What examples of hospitality and generosity have you experienced in your life?

2 Do you find yourself more comfortable showing generosity or receiving it, and why?

3 What are some practical ways that you can extend hospitality to others?

Creative Hospitality

In an age of increasing isolation, the art of hospitality is an incredible way to show the love of Jesus to others. Brainstorm a list of hospitable actions below (bringing someone coffee, inviting a neighbor over for dessert, babysitting, etc.). Then ask the Lord to bring to mind a person to whom you can put one of those hospitable activities into practice in the next few weeks.

I can show the love of Jesus through my hospitality by:

Key Text

And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us.

—Acts 16:15 KJV

When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.

—Acts 16:15 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of August 31 through September 5

Mon. Romans 8:31–39—More Than Conquerors.

Tue. Genesis 13:14–18—See What God Has Promised.

Wed. Deuteronomy 34:1–12—The Promised Land Revealed.

Thu. Hebrews 4:1–11—God’s Promised Rest.

Fri. Hebrews 10:14–18—God’s New Covenant.

Sat. Psalm 27—Whom Shall I Fear?

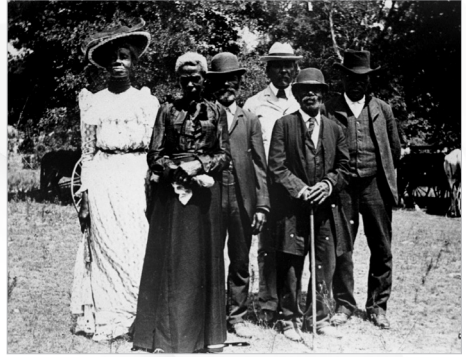
Next Week: Joshua 1:1–11

We will be turning to the book of Joshua and the era when Israel entered the land of promise. What kinds of places make you want to welcome God to be with you?

Juneteenth:

Good News Must Go Forth!

By Victoria McAfee



When people talk to me about Juneteenth, I use the occasion to talk about the freedom Christ came to bring. I say, “Freedom from slavery was a good thing. I’m thankful for all the people who have fought against all the injustices we’ve encountered as a people. But I’m a Christian, and I’m overjoyed about the freedom Christ came to bring when He died on the cross. Now that’s real freedom for me.

When the apostle Paul describes God’s plan for the gospel to spread, he asks, “How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Rom. 10:14). The slaves who worked the fields and handled their masters’ affairs during the Civil War faced a similar dilemma. On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which granted freedom in every state. Some former slaves heard the news immediately.

However, it took two and a half years for Lincoln’s proclamation to reach the enslaved people in Galveston, Texas. On June 19, 1865, General Granger rode into Galveston and made a public declaration to a quarter of a million enslaved people. Until the messenger arrived, the former slaves had no idea they had been freed. Juneteenth Day, observed on June 19, is now a national holiday to commemorate this moment. . .

Find the text continued at this link:



International Sunday School Lessons
Bible Study Plan
 For 2024–2027

	Fall	Winter	Spring	Summer
2024– 2025	Worship in the Covenant Community Genesis, Exodus, 2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Isaiah, Psalms, John	A King Forever and Ever Ruth, 2 Samuel, Psalms, Matthew, Luke	Costly Sacrifices Exodus, Leviticus, 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Matthew, Hebrews, 1 John, Revelation	Sacred Alters and Holy Gifts Genesis, Matthew, Luke, John, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Hebrews, 1 Peter
2025– 2026	Judah, From Isaiah to Exile 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel	Enduring Beliefs of the Church Exodus, Psalms, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Ephesians, 2 Timothy, 1 John, Revelation	Social Teachings of the Church Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Nehemiah, Psalms, Isaiah, Daniel, Jonah, Gospels, Acts, Pauline Epistles, Hebrews, James	The Testimony of Faithful Witnesses Judges, 1 Samuel, Amos, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, 2 Timothy, Philemon
2026– 2027	Generations: From Canaan to Jerusalem Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel	Power to the People 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude	Written that You Might Believe John	Just a Closer Walk Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon

COMING NEXT QUARTER

September 2026 – November 2026

Generations: From Canaan to Jerusalem

Beginning in Unit 1 with a study of Joshua, this quarter looks at ancient Israel's entry into the promised land. Becoming established in Canaan is as much a spiritual task as a military or political one. In Unit 2, three lessons on Judges, highlight Israel's propensity to ignore God and His ways. Their lack of unity in service to God meant that "everyone did as they saw fit" (Judg. 17:6). In Unit 3, lessons begin with Samuel, whose faithfulness to the Lord as prophet and judge plays a pivotal role in Israel's success. He sets the stage for the reign of Israel's greatest king, David, who unites the people under God and establishes his capital in Jerusalem.

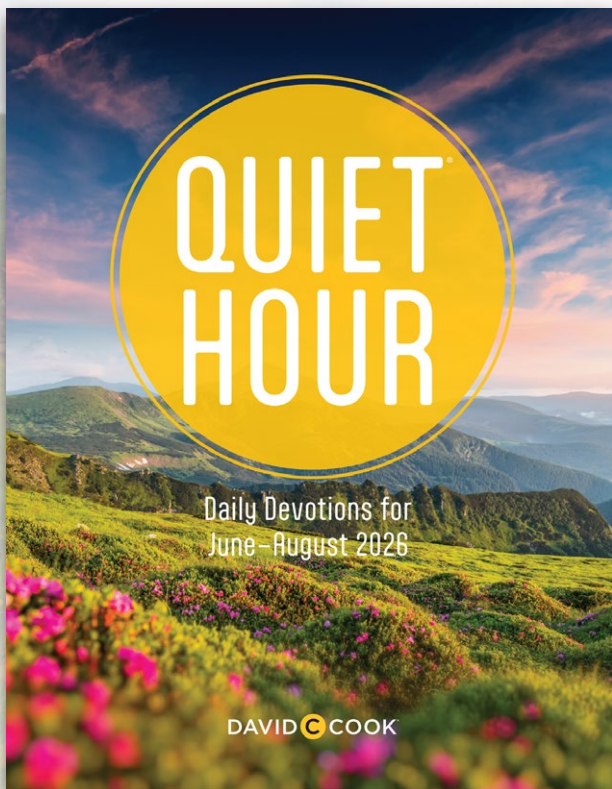
Texts for study include: Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel

Lessons of this Student Guide are organized according to a thematic study of the Bible, following the International Sunday School Lessons series (ISSL). In six years, this cycle will touch on the Bible's key themes through studies of books in both Old and New Testaments.

**YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES IN JERUSALEM, AND IN ALL
JUDEA AND SAMARIA, AND TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.**

—ACTS 1:8





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