




# LIFE MATTERS

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

SEPTEMBER SERMON ON THE MOUNT  
OCTOBER NO LOOKING BACK  
NOVEMBER TRANSFORMATIONAL CHURCH



FALL 2012  
LEADER GUIDE

**threads**  
by LifeWay

## THE TEST OF LIFE

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Evaluation is a process that reveals information to help with decision-making. We evaluate ourselves in a number of ways. We check our bank balance to make sure our finances are in order. We look at ourselves in the mirror to make sure our clothes look okay. We taste our food to make sure it is seasoned to suit us. But we all should do another evaluation as well—an evaluation of our need for God.

The following quiz can help you evaluate your need for a personal relationship with God. Place a check in the box beside each statement to which you can answer yes.

- I believe the Bible, God's Word, is our guide to salvation and eternal life.
- I believe the Bible when it tells me I am a sinner and that the penalty for sin is eternal separation from God.
- I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that He died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sin, and that He rose from the grave to provide new life for all who place their faith in Him.

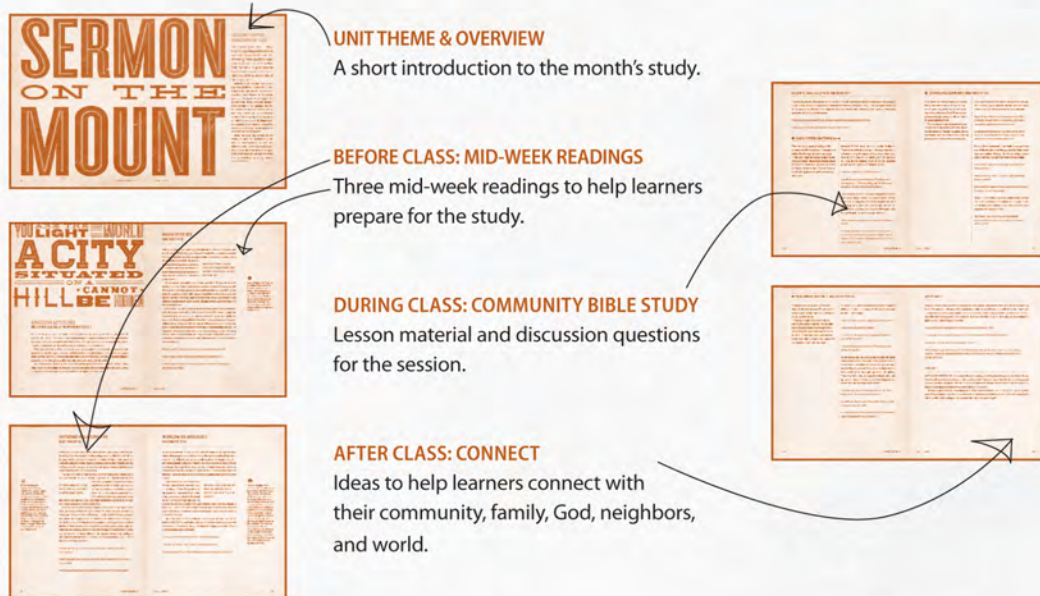
If you responded yes to each question but have not responded to what you believe, the Bible tells you how to receive God and His gift of eternal life.

- **REPENT**—Jesus said, “Unless you repent, you will all perish” (Luke 13:3). Repentance means that you turn from your sin life and yield your life to Christ.
- **BELIEVE**—The Bible says, “For you are saved by grace through faith” (Ephesians 2:8). This means that you trust only Jesus to save you. You make Him your Savior and Lord.
- **PRAY**—The moment you repent and believe, you should call on Him in prayer. Simply pray, “Lord Jesus, I confess that I am a sinner and ask You to forgive me for my sins. Please come into my heart to save me and take control of my life. Thank You for being my Savior and Lord. Amen.”

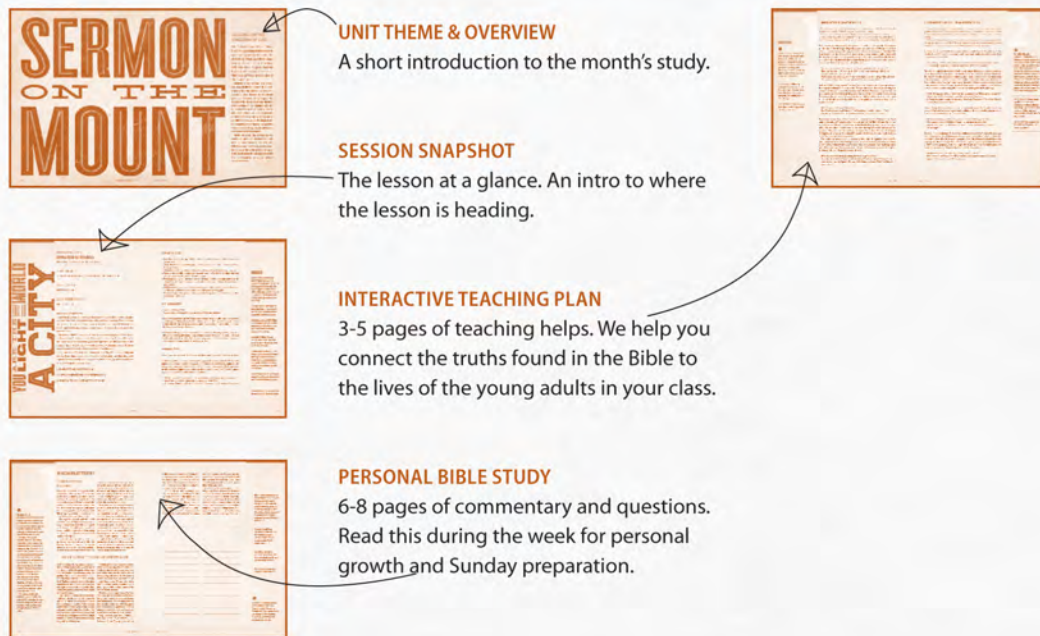
Share your decision with a pastor or Christian friend. Follow Christ in baptism and grow in Christ through church membership and service.

# HOW TO USE *LIFEMATTERS*

## LEARNER



## LEADER



### ICON LEGEND:



Things to listen to



Things to watch



Expanding on biblical concepts



On the Web



Fun facts and useful tidbits of information



Digging deeper into concepts from the study



Discussion questions for the Leader

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## A WORD FROM THE EDITOR



**I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU**, but I like to think the things I say and do matter. I want people to think of me as someone who works hard, is loving and giving, and loves the Lord. I care so much that a lot of my energy is focused on trying to impress other people. That's why it's hard for me to read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and watch Him shift focus away from my actions and toward my heart. I can control my actions, but the state of my heart? That's a whole lot harder to control.

Over the next three months, we'll use the word *transformation* a lot. We'll see how Jesus transforms us into people whose hearts long for Him and whose lives reflect that longing. He transforms people who have failed Him in the past (that's us) into vessels that display His grace, mercy, and love to a desperate world. And He transforms His church, full of these same broken people, into His hands and feet, tasked with the work of teaching and spreading the gospel until He returns. Those are some powerful transformations.

Most of the time, these changes are gradual, and we don't even realize how much He's working in our lives. And then, of course, we mess up and have moments when we look like our old selves. But we can't deny that Jesus is at work in us, reminding us who He is and why a relationship with Him matters more than anything. Let Him transform you, and thoughts and actions that honor Him will follow.

*Laura*

P.S. We made a few stylistic changes to the Leader Guide as part of our on-going effort to make it as user-friendly as possible. We hope you enjoy!

## NEXT ISSUE

- **DECEMBER** The names and titles of God revealed in Scripture help us understand His character and relationship with us.
- **JANUARY** This month's study focuses on the messages of four Minor Prophets from the Old Testament and the relevance that these messages have for us today.
- **FEBRUARY** The five "trustworthy sayings" in Paul's Pastoral Letters provide clues to what should matter in our lives and help us not lose sight of what's most important—our relationship with Jesus.

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We believe that the Bible has God for its author; salvation for its end; and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter and that all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. To review LifeWay's doctrinal guideline, please visit [www.lifeway.com/doctrinalguideline](http://www.lifeway.com/doctrinalguideline).

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## 6 SERMON ON THE MOUNT | JOSH KREBS

What is the kingdom of God, and what does it have to do with following Jesus? These are just a couple of the questions Jesus addresses in His Sermon on the Mount. As we'll see, being a part of God's kingdom has a lot more to do with the attitudes of our hearts than anything we say or do.

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## 68 NO LOOKING BACK | LESLIE ANN JONES

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## 118 TRANSFORMATIONAL CHURCH | MIKE HURT

The gospel has the power to change people's lives for eternity, and the church plays a key role. As we look at four church traits mentioned in the Book of Acts, we'll be reminded of what God has already done through His church and inspired by what He still can do.

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# No Looking Back





## WHAT IT MEANS TO MOVE FORWARD BY THE GRACE OF GOD

Failure, unfortunately, is something we're all familiar with. Failed classes. Failed relationships. Failed projects. Failed ideas. Failed commitments. Failed dreams. Whether we like it or not, mistakes and hiccups are a part of life, and Christians aren't immune.

The Bible never promises that the life of a believer is an easy one. Despite our good intentions and best-laid plans, we fail to live up to God's expectations. We struggle to maintain our faith. We miss opportunities to take a stand for Christ. We fall short of completing the work God has set before us. We fail to live the abundant life He has promised us.

But there's good news: our past mistakes don't define us. Believe it or not, there's life after failure. Sometimes it even takes messing up for us to realize who we really are and what we want our lives to be about. When we look closely at the lives of the people in Scripture, we see that they've all made mistakes. This means there's hope for us all. As we read specific stories from the lives of the Samaritan woman, Abraham, Miriam, and Peter, make it your goal to learn from their failures, celebrate their victories, and take their cues to move forward into a life of grace.



**OCTOBER 7, 2012**

## FREE FROM YOUR PAST

**Jesus and the woman at the well**

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### STUDY THEME

NO LOOKING BACK: WHAT IT MEANS TO MOVE FORWARD BY THE GRACE OF GOD

### FOCAL PASSAGES

JOHN 4:7-18,25-26,39

### BACKGROUND PASSAGE

JOHN 4:1-42

### SESSION OVERVIEW

The story of the woman at the well is a popular one, but sometimes it's the familiar stories that we need to hear the most. It's a simple story, really. A woman went to a well to draw water, where she met Jesus. After a brief conversation with Him, she walked away forever changed. Although profound failure defined her past, Jesus redefined her future. She couldn't stop telling people about the encounter she had with the living God because she knew something they didn't: They needed to meet Jesus just as badly as she did. So do we.

It's a meeting we'll all experience at one point or another, if we haven't already. How we react when we come face to face with Jesus, and our own sinfulness, determines our future. Will we respond in humility and faith and accept the salvation Jesus offers, as the Samaritan woman responded? Or will our pride prevent us from owning our failure to live up to God's standards? This story, the one we've heard so often, is first and foremost about making a choice. What will you decide?

- 1. ADMIT YOUR THIRST (JOHN 4:7-14)**
- 2. CONFRONT YOUR FAILURE (JOHN 4:15-18)**
- 3. SHARE YOUR STORY (JOHN 4:25-26,39)**



## BEFORE SUNDAY

- > **Read the teaching plan** (pp. 72-75), the background Scripture, and the focal passages several times.
- > **Study the lesson commentary** (pp. 76-81), and **contemplate** the Personal Bible Study questions.
- > **Determine which discussion points** and questions will work best with your group.
- > **Encourage** your group members to visit [lifeway.com/lifematters](http://lifeway.com/lifematters) and **purchase** the songs from the playlist. Consider downloading the songs to play each week as your group arrives.
- > **Visit the LifeMatters blog** at [threadsmedia.com](http://threadsmedia.com) for additional thoughts on the lesson and links to any Web features mentioned in this week's teaching plan.
- > **Pray** for the upcoming group meeting, your teaching, your group members, and their receptivity to the lesson.
- > **Print** or download a photo of the Twitter fail whale image to show your group. Find images to print by googling "Twitter fail whale."

## THE HIGHLIGHTS

- **Scripture:** John 4:13-14  
*<sup>13</sup> Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks from this water will get thirsty again. <sup>14</sup> But whoever drinks from the water that I will give him will never get thirsty again—ever! In fact, the water I will give him will become a well of water springing up within him for eternal life."*
- **Biblical Emphasis:** Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman at a well. He turned the conversation from His need for physical water to her need for the living water that gives eternal life. Jesus confessed that He is the Messiah, and the woman told others about her encounter.
- **Life Impact:** Regardless of our pasts, there is one universal way in which we all fail: we fail to live up to God's standards. But salvation—freedom from our sins and failures—is possible through Jesus Christ. That's when our lives truly begin.

## INTRODUCTION

Have group members turn to the "Community Bible Study" on page 52 in the Learner Guide.

If you're a Twitter user, then you're familiar with the Twitter fail whale, one of the most iconic symbols of failure today. However charming the image of eight little birds lifting the whale may be, the image only appears in moments of frustration when we realize that Twitter, once again, is over capacity. But have you ever stopped to think about the image itself? Sure, it's cute with the smiling whale and tiny birds, but it's also a bit disturbing. Whales can't live outside of water. They're made for life in the ocean, and when they're separated from water, it generally signals death.

- *Have you ever felt like that whale, separated from the life you were meant to live?\**
- *Do your past failures hold you back from embracing the freedom to truly live? Why do you think it's so hard to move beyond our pasts?\**

This week we'll see how owning up to our past mistakes gives us the freedom to live the lives we were created for.

### LEADER PACK

Use **PACK ITEM 2**, "Weekly Preparation Reminder," as a preparation tool this week. Adjust the schedule to meet the needs of your group.

Distribute copies of **PACK ITEM 3**, "Weekly Prayer Journal," so group members can write down prayer needs and remember them in prayer during the week.

Display **PACK ITEM 10**, "No Looking Back Unit Poster," and ask the members of your small group to share something that stood out to them this week as they read.

Make copies and distribute **PACK ITEMS 11 and 12**, the 2-page article "Status Quo or Wonder?" by Matt Tullos. Challenge group members to read the article and find ways to choose wonder this week.

\*Additional discussion question that doesn't appear in the Learner Guide.

## 1

## LEARNER GUIDE



*"We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."*

—C. S. Lewis<sup>1</sup>



*The Jewish opinion of Samaritans is what makes Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 all the more convicting.*

**KEY THOUGHT:** The only thing that can transform our dry and weary lives into the lush and abundant ones we long for is the living water offered by Jesus.

**KEY QUESTION:** How may we partake of the living water that has been offered?

## 1. ADMIT YOUR THIRST (JOHN 4:7-14)

<sup>7</sup> A woman of Samaria came to draw water. "Give Me a drink," Jesus said to her, <sup>8</sup> for His disciples had gone into town to buy food. <sup>9</sup> "How is it that You, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" she asked Him. For Jews do not associate with Samaritans. <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered, "If you knew the gift of God, and who is saying to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would ask Him, and He would give you living water."

<sup>11</sup> "Sir," said the woman, "You don't even have a bucket, and the well is deep. So where do You get this 'living water'?" <sup>12</sup> You aren't greater than our father Jacob, are You? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and livestock."<sup>13</sup> Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks from this water will get thirsty again. <sup>14</sup> But whoever drinks from the water that I will give him will never get thirsty again—ever! In fact, the water I will give him will become a well of water springing up within him for eternal life."

Jesus didn't have to be in Samaria that day. Cutting through Samaria was the shortest route between Judea and Galilee (John 4:1-6), but most Jews took the long way, skirting around Samaria. Popular opinion held that Samaritans were second-class citizens, a mixed race of Jews and foreigners who inhabited the land after the Assyrian conquest (2 Kings 17:24), and who were unclean and unfit for worship in the temple. Their "uncleanness" was thought to be passed through physical contact, so most Jews avoided them entirely.

- Does our society consider anyone "unclean"? If so, what are some characteristics that lead to that opinion?\*
- What cultural or religious barriers may prevent you from sharing the gospel with others?\*

Jesus wasn't like most Jews, though, and He knew His message of salvation includes Gentiles just like the Samaritan woman. But not only did Jesus ignore Jewish tradition by entering Samaria, He also spoke to the woman when she approached the well (v. 7). In those days, Jewish men didn't speak to women in public. Requesting a drink of water from her hand was out of the ordinary, and it set the tone for the rest of their conversation (v. 9). When we only associate with people who are just like us, we miss the opportunity to reach the lost in our midst.

Jesus met the woman where she was—doing a mundane chore in her community—and He used her desire for water as the starting point for transforming her life. He had something better than well water to offer her. He knew her soul was deeply parched, so He challenged her to admit her thirst, knowing He alone could quench it.

- What does this passage show us about Jesus' concern for the outcast?
- Do you expect non-Christians to come to you? Or do you go to them?
- Who comes to mind when you think about lost people in your midst?
- What are some conversation starters you can use in your interaction with non-Christians?

We're born with a thirst for life—the kind of life that's deep, meaningful, and full to the brim. We may try to quench that thirst with an endless string of relationships, ambition, the accumulation of material wealth, or other temporary pleasures. But no matter what we do, the thirst always comes back, because the only thing that can transform our dry and weary lives into the lush and abundant ones we long for is the living water offered by Jesus—spiritual life, satisfaction, salvation in Him, and God's Spirit with us always.

- Other than Christ, where or to whom do you turn to quench your thirst?
- How may we partake of the living water that has been offered?\*

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980), 26.

## 2

## 2. CONFRONT YOUR FAILURE (JOHN 4:15-18)

<sup>15</sup> “Sir,” the woman said to Him, “give me this water so I won’t get thirsty and come here to draw water.”

<sup>16</sup> “Go call your husband,” He told her, “and come back here.”

<sup>17</sup> “I don’t have a husband,” she answered.

“You have correctly said, ‘I don’t have a husband,’” Jesus said.

<sup>18</sup> “For you’ve had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.”

Jesus’ offer was appealing. In a world without running water, never returning to the well would’ve been a luxury indeed (v. 15). But Jesus wasn’t interested in simply making her life easier. He was interested in changing it from the inside out. When the woman expressed interest in the living water Jesus mentioned, He exposed the sin in her life—a necessary step toward salvation.

The Samaritan woman’s reputation wasn’t a good one, and she knew it. This is likely the reason why she was alone at the well at noon (v. 6, “the sixth hour”), when most women fetched water in the morning and the evening. It was unusual for a woman to have more than two husbands in a lifetime, and she’d had five and now was inappropriately involved with her boyfriend. Jesus commended the woman’s honesty (v. 17), and He tactfully let her know that He was aware of her transgressions.

- *What do our reputations say about us? Why do reputations matter?*
- *Are you a tougher judge of yourself or others? Explain why you think this is.*
- *Why might Jesus have forced the woman to admit she wasn’t married?\**
- *Why was Jesus’ intimate knowledge of her important?\**

The woman was probably caught off guard by how much Jesus knew about her, but she finally understood that He was no ordinary man (vv. 19-20). The problem in the Samaritan woman’s life wasn’t simply that she was living an immoral lifestyle. Her problem was that she was a sinner; her immoral lifestyle was a manifestation of her sinful life apart from God. We share that same underlying problem. But as we see from this woman’s story (and countless others in Scripture), our sins aren’t too big for Jesus to handle. We don’t have to pretend to be perfect; we won’t shock or surprise God by being honest with Him.

- *What does Jesus’ interaction with the woman reveal about Him (see vv. 21-24 also)?*
- *If you had been at the well that day, how would you have responded if Jesus pointed out your sins?*

Before we can sip from the living water Jesus offers, we must recognize and admit we need His forgiveness and grace. This is called repentance. Jesus saw the woman for who she was, but that wasn’t enough. She also had to see it for herself, and meeting Jesus brought her face to face with her emptiness and her need for a Savior (John 4:42). Acknowledging our sin can be a painful experience, but it’s a good thing when it leads us to Christ. Once we take an honest look at ourselves and admit to God our failures, we can dive headlong into the river of life that flows from Jesus’ hand.

- *What do you see when you look at yourself? Can you admit that you’ve failed God?*
- *What’s holding you back from honesty with yourself and with God today?\**



### **For further thought:**

Read the following Scripture passage to dig deeper—Romans 3:21-26. In your own words, write a paraphrase of these verses, and your response to this truth, in the space below.



Listen to the song “All Who Are Thirsty” by Kutless from the album Strong Tower, available for purchase on the Fall 2012 iMix, listed under “Additional Resources” at [lifeway.com/lifematters](http://lifeway.com/lifematters).

**KEY THOUGHT:** Before we can sip from the living water Jesus offers, we must recognize and admit we need His forgiveness and grace.

**KEY QUESTION:** *If you had been at the well that day, how would you have responded if Jesus pointed out your sins?*

## 3

## 3. SHARE YOUR STORY (JOHN 4:25-26,39)

<sup>25</sup> The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When He comes, He will explain everything to us."

<sup>26</sup> "I am He," Jesus told her, "the One speaking to you."

<sup>39</sup> Now many Samaritans from that town believed in Him because of what the woman said when she testified, "He told me everything I ever did."



*I am Second is a movement meant to inspire people of all kinds to live for God and for others. Actors. Athletes. Musicians. Business leaders. Drug addicts. Your next-door neighbor. People like you. At iamsecond.com, you can watch remarkable, authentic testimonies from people whose lives were changed by God. These are stories that give hope to the lonely and the hurting, help from destructive lifestyles, and inspiration to the unfulfilled.*

**KEY THOUGHT:** When we encounter Jesus, our lives are instantaneously transformed, and we're left with a need to tell others about Him.

**KEY QUESTION:** *What keeps you from sharing your testimony with others?*

As the conversation unfolded, it shifted from the personal details of the woman's life to the Messiah, whom Jews believed would rescue them from the overpowering Roman rule to which they were subject. The woman admitted she didn't know everything, but she expressed faith in the notion that the promised Messiah would make clear the unclear and explain everything she didn't understand (v. 25).

Ironically, the woman didn't understand that she was speaking with the Messiah Himself. But for the first time during His ministry (and the only time before His trial), Jesus clearly identified Himself as the chosen and Anointed One of God (v. 26). Rather than responding in disbelief, the Samaritan woman responded in faith. It was easy for her to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, because He had already demonstrated His uniqueness from everyone else in His knowledge of secret details of her life. His words rang with truth.

- *What's your reaction to Jesus' admission in verse 26?*
- *What does the woman's reaction tell us about the urgency of meeting Jesus?*
- *Have you ever felt such an urgency to share the gospel?*

The words scarcely had time to sink in before the woman literally dropped what she was doing and ran back into town to tell everyone about her conversation with the stranger at the well (see vv. 28-29). Her abrupt departure—she abandoned her water jar—shows her excitement over meeting the Messiah. Her story must have been convincing, because a number of Samaritans came to meet Jesus and also believed in Him (vv. 39-42). The woman knew she had been in the presence of the Messiah, and she couldn't help but share the news with others.

- *Jesus made it a point to veer off the normal path to meet the Samaritan woman. Where might you need to go to help someone see his or her need for Jesus?*

When we encounter Jesus, our lives are instantaneously transformed, and we're left with a need to tell others about Him. Whether we're new believers or seasoned ones, we would do well to take a cue from this woman. She didn't stop to wonder what people would think of her. She didn't take time to count the cost. She didn't let feelings of inadequacy crush her spirit. Instead, she took what she knew, and she shared it. She knew that she had met the Messiah, and her life would never be the same.

- *What keeps you from sharing your testimony with others?*
- *Who needs to hear your story today?*
- *Take a few minutes to write out your personal testimony of how the gospel has transformed your life. The more often we remind ourselves of our testimony, the more effortlessly we can share it with others.\**

## AND FINALLY

Introducing people to Jesus is one of the greatest responsibilities we have as believers, and one of the best ways to do that is by emulating His ways and actions. In this week's lesson, we learned that Jesus didn't sit on His heels waiting for people to come hear His message. Instead, He took His message to them. Jesus offers abundant, overflowing life to those willing to confront their sinfulness and surrender to Him. Before we can pass that message along, we must first apply it to our own lives, confessing our sinfulness and seeking His forgiveness. Then we can carry that offer to the people who need it most, even if we have to break through social and cultural barriers along the way.

- *Practically speaking, how can you emulate Jesus' ways in your everyday life?*
- *Do you recognize that you're a sinner in need of the saving grace of Jesus? Have you ever confessed your sinfulness to God? If not, what's stopping you?*
- *Are you willing to leave your comfort zone to share the gospel with others? With whom can you share your testimony this week?*

## LEAD YOUR CLASS TO CONNECT

Direct group members to turn to page 55 of the Learner Guide. Go over "Connect with Your Neighbors" with the class as a whole and discuss ways to connect with the lost community around you.

## WITH YOUR NEIGHBORS

Sometimes the hardest part about sharing the gospel is figuring out how to broach the subject. When Jesus met with the woman at the well, He started the conversation with something familiar and practical and then guided the conversation to deeper levels. As you converse with non-Christians around you, look for opportunities to turn ordinary conversations into extraordinary ones. As relationships with your neighbors deepen, you'll have the chance to show them what Jesus was like through your words and actions. All relationships have to start somewhere. Here are some suggestions to get things going:

- Bake some cookies or homemade bread to share with your neighbors over a cup of coffee.
- Offer to help neighbors working in the yard, and talk with them as you work side by side.
- Start a walking/jogging group. As you spend time together and share tidbits of your lives with one another, be open and honest about your faith.

It's easy to isolate ourselves, never interacting with the people who live around us, but God has placed us in our neighborhoods for a reason. Take a cue from Jesus and simply talk to the people around you. Sometimes, that's all it takes.



### Conclude the Lesson

*Wrap up the discussion by addressing the personal application questions listed in the And Finally section. If your group is too large, split them into smaller groups. Allow enough time to process the lesson and application.*

*You can include discussion of the Connect section during the session or during their small-group time.*

### Pray with Your Group

*Your group may be comprised entirely of believers, but it may not be. Use today's lesson as an opportunity to pray over the salvation of the people in your group. Thank God for the gospel and salvation, and ask for the Holy Spirit to move in the lives of anyone present who doesn't have a personal relationship with Jesus.*

## 1

## FREE FROM YOUR PAST

## 1. ADMIT YOUR THIRST

John 4:7-14

Jesus and His disciples left Jerusalem for Galilee, traveling by way of Samaria. Jewish folks in those days tried to avoid the Samaritan route because they considered the people in the region to be unclean. Jesus led His disciples toward the Samaritan town of Sychar, where they stopped at Jacob's well, a religious landmark as well as a source of water (4:1-6).

Don't overlook the helpful insight that Jesus gave us about reaching people for Him. With Jesus' example, He showed us the need to go where people who have not met Him can be found. Sometimes we tend to take the opposite approach. We tend to believe that unsaved people need to come to us, but He demonstrated that we should go to them.

In due time, a woman from the town made her way to Jacob's well to draw some water. According to the HCSB, she got there

her could have been seen as better for Him—talking with her would have required Him to forego His rest and make the effort to engage in conversation. He could have chosen to pass on the opportunity.

But Jesus didn't make that choice. Instead, He decided to talk with her. His conversation began with asking her to share a drink of water with Him (v. 7). She replied with a note of surprise and perplexity. She couldn't imagine that Jesus would try to talk with her. Usually, Jewish men in those days didn't talk to women in such a setting. Neither did they want to talk with Samaritans (v. 9). But Jesus did not have a problem with talking with her. By taking the initiative in the conversation, He departed from the cultural restrictions of the day.

Jesus initiated the conversation with the woman for one specific reason. For the same reason, He engaged in conversations with other people in His ministry. He could tell she had a spiritual thirst that only the living water He alone could offer would quench.



The following articles relate to this lesson and can be found in the Fall 2012 issue of *Biblical Illustrator* or on the Fall 2012 *Biblical Illustrator Plus* (CD-ROM):

- "Who Were the Samaritans?" (Winter 2007-2008)
- "Sychar and Jacob's Well" (Winter 2004-2005)
- "Jesus, Breaking the Rules" (Fall 2012)
- "Samaritan Beliefs About the Christ" (Fall 1989)

*Biblical Illustrator* is available for purchase at [lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator).

## WE TEND TO BELIEVE THAT UNSAVED PEOPLE NEED TO COME TO US, BUT JESUS DEMONSTRATED THAT WE SHOULD GO TO THEM.

"about six in the evening" (literally, "the sixth hour"), which would have been the Roman way of measuring time (v. 6). Many interpreters understand "the sixth hour" to reflect Jewish time calculation, which would indicate she arrived at noon. Either way, she came to the well at the perfect time for Jesus to talk with her about her need for living water.

At the well, Jesus sat down to rest while His disciples went on into town so they could buy some food. As the woman approached the well, He could have chosen to sit in silence. By not saying anything to her, she probably would have come to the well, filled her container with water, and returned to her home. Saying nothing to

As He continued to talk with her, He brought up God's gift (v. 10). By referring to living water in that way, He signaled to her that God had taken the initiative to give it. Furthermore, He suggested that the gift He offered her could not be purchased. The Samaritan woman could not buy it even if she tried. By mentioning God's gift, Jesus took an important step in directing her to see her deep spiritual need and her inability to meet it on her own. God alone could give her what she needed, but she would have to turn to Him in order to receive it.

Helping someone see their deepest spiritual need can be challenging. When we share the good news of Christ with the lost, we can grow frustrated because we cannot

get them to see they need Him. Because of their spiritual blindness, they have difficulty with the reality that they need what Christ alone can give them. As Jesus demonstrated, therefore, talking with people so they can see their spiritual need becomes a critical step in reaching them for Christ.

Jesus introduced the Samaritan woman to the truth about God's gift of living water. Immediately she showed interest in what He said, although she didn't quite understand what He meant (vv. 11-12). Jesus had in mind her spiritual thirst that would be quenched when she received God's gift of eternal life He offered. However, she thought He was talking about literal water. That's why she wondered where He could get that kind of water for her. He didn't have a bucket, so she wondered how He would

draw such water from Jacob's well. And besides, the well that Jacob dug seemed to have been adequate to supply water for everyone in the region for quite a while. She must have doubted Jesus could find a better source of water in the region.

Because she did not understand, Jesus took the time to talk more about living water. He noted that living water alone could quench a person's spiritual thirst eternally. He also assured her that the source of living water would never run dry (vv. 13-14).

The story so far displays for us the value of spending time with people and helping them to see their spiritual need. It fosters an interest in the living water that Christ offers to everyone who turns to Him.

- *How have you been guilty of avoiding the people who most need to hear the gospel?*
- *In what ways has the living water changed your life?*
- *Have you tried to satisfy your thirst for the living water with something else? How did that turn out?*
- *What did it take for you to realize how much you needed Jesus?*

## 2

## 2. CONFRONT YOUR FAILURE

John 4:15-18

With her interest turned to receiving living water, the Samaritan woman continued to talk with Jesus. Her remarks about living water, however, confirmed that she still did not have a grasp of what Jesus had in mind.

Immediately she mentioned two advantages of getting some of the water that Jesus described to her (v. 15). First, she would never get thirsty again. For her as well as other people living in that desert climate, constant thirst posed a dangerous threat. For that reason, a constant supply of fresh water close at hand would have been considered a tremendous convenience. She could live in the assurance that she would never have to worry about having enough water.

Second, she would never have to return to Jacob's well. By not returning there every day, perhaps she had in mind the inconvenience of her daily trips to the well. But maybe she thought about something else too. In her day, the women usually gathered at the well early in the morning to draw water and to visit with each other

her situation. Accordingly, He guided her to confront her failure. In order to receive God's gift of living water, she had to admit she had failed in her attempt to meet her deepest spiritual need by herself. Making such an important admission meant coming face to face with the failures in her life.

In her reply to Jesus about not having a husband, she told only part of the truth. Obviously, she did not want to tell Him of her series of failed relationships with men. Neither did she want Jesus to know that the man who lived with her at the moment was not her husband. But as Jesus pointed out to her, He already knew the whole truth about her situation (v. 18).

By instructing the Samaritan woman to come back with her husband, Jesus led her to confront her failure. Of course, coming to terms with her failure probably caused her tremendous pain. However, joy would have awaited her on the other side of her pain. She would have been able to rejoice in the blessing that would come her way because she received God's gift of living water. Her failures would be placed behind her, and she would never be spiritually thirsty again.

- *What are the failures that you try to hide from others?*
- *How does confronting your sinfulness feel? Is it worth it? Why?*
- *In what ways may you gently help others face the sin in their lives?*
- *How has your relationship with Jesus fulfilled your deepest needs?*

## CONFESSING OUR SIN MEANS SEEING IT FROM THE LORD'S PERSPECTIVE.

for a while before getting to work in their homes. Remember that when she met Jesus, she had come to the well much later in the day. She may have come to the well at that time in order to avoid the other women. But going to the well at a time when she wouldn't have to face the other women posed another problem. All alone, she would have to face the failures in her life she would like to have forgotten. Maybe that's why she never wanted to return to the well again.

Jesus knew about her failures. He drew her attention to them by bringing up her husband (v. 16). He had a strategic reason for asking her to return to her home and bring back her husband. With His request, Jesus wanted her to get honest with Him about

The well of living water God would place in her heart would provide her with an eternal source of spiritual fulfillment.

Instead of denying our failure, we do well to confront it by confessing our sin to the Lord. Confessing our sin means seeing it from the Lord's perspective. When we see our sin through His eyes, we recognize that we've been going in the wrong direction. That's when we can decide to make an about face and turn to Him. The first step toward Him involves confessing our sin. When we make that critical step, the pain of our sin will be replaced with the peace that comes with His forgiveness. The guilt over our sin fades away; the joy of eternal life fills us.



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## 3

## 3. SHARE YOUR STORY

John 4:25-26,39

As Jesus continued to talk with the Samaritan woman, their conversation turned to worship. She brought up a debate that fumed between the Jews and the Samaritans regarding the proper place to worship God. Jesus replied by saying that the key issue in worshiping God did not involve a location on a map but the attitude of a worshiper's heart. God's people worshiped Him "in spirit and truth" (vv. 19-24).

In that context, the Samaritan woman began to talk with Jesus about the Messiah. (See this lesson's word study on "Messiah.") Like the Jews at that time, the Samaritans had developed an anticipation of the Messiah who would come. They almost certainly did not have all of the information and expectations Jewish people had regarding the arrival of the Messiah. Even so, they apparently had enough insight into Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah to join the people of Israel in looking forward to the day He would come.

looking into the eyes of the Son of God who would pay the price for her sin on the cross. There at the well, the conversation with Jesus had taken her from His request for a drink of water to His announcement that He was the Messiah (v. 26). He made the announcement so she would turn to Him and receive the living water He alone could give to her. She could turn from her failed attempts to manage her life on her own and give herself to Him as her Savior and Lord.

When people believe Jesus wants to save them from sin, they can begin to taste living water for themselves. They can move beyond miserable lives of failures to intimate walks with Him who makes life complete and fulfilling. The transformation starts by embracing Jesus. By receiving Him as Savior and Lord, a person can know what it's like to drink in living water that springs forth eternal life.

Not long after Jesus shared with her that He was the Messiah, the Samaritan woman left the well and returned to the town. She wanted to tell others there about Jesus and her encounter with Him at the well. Even though she had just met Him for the first

**Messiah (John 4:25)**

*The term "Messiah" comes from the Hebrew language and means "anointed one." The term "Christ" comes from the Greek word equivalent. In the Old Testament, a person who had been commissioned for a special task would have his head anointed with olive oil. For instance, a king would be anointed in a ceremony that would mark the official beginning of his reign. The prophets used the term as they described God's Anointed One who would deliver His people. In the days of Jesus' ministry, people everywhere seemed to have eager expectations of the Messiah's arrival.*

## WHEN PEOPLE BELIEVE JESUS WANTS TO SAVE THEM FROM SIN, THEY CAN BEGIN TO TASTE LIVING WATER FOR THEMSELVES.

For the Samaritan woman, the arrival of the Messiah would mark the day when all of the debates about spiritual matters would come to an end. For example, the debate between the Jews and the Samaritans about the proper place of worship would be completely resolved. When the Messiah came, He would give the final word on which mountain would be the right place for people to worship God. She trusted Him to be wise enough to explain everything people considered to be confusing or controversial (v. 25).

Little did she know she had been carrying on a conversation with the Messiah Himself. The Stranger resting by the well turned out to be the long-awaited Savior. She had been

time, she did not hesitate to tell people in town about her conversation with Him.

Pay close attention to the Samaritan woman's decision to go into town immediately and tell people she met about her encounter with Jesus. Her eagerness to share her testimony reminds us that meeting Christ results in our enthusiasm over telling others about Him. Sometimes we might think we do not yet have qualifications to share our testimonies about how Christ changed our lives until we have grown in our Bible knowledge or our communication skills. The Samaritan woman helps us to see that we can begin to talk about Jesus with other people as soon as we receive Him as Savior and Lord.

Like the Samaritan woman, we become eager to bear witness to Jesus once we have met Him personally. Having experienced His love, mercy, and grace for ourselves, we can hardly wait to tell others about Him. The character of Christ fosters our eagerness to introduce others to Him. He personifies God's love in a way that transforms the people who receive Him. When we introduce others to Him, we know for certain He can change their lives.

We can never overestimate the power of a testimony about Christ. While people may take issue with what we say about the Bible or what we believe about doctrine, they have more difficulty denying what we experienced when we met Jesus for ourselves. A Christian's testimony serves as a most useful tool in sharing the good news of Christ with others. We can rest assured that it will have a beneficial effect on the people who are open to hearing it.

The Samaritan woman's testimony made a positive impact on people in town. After

hearing her stirring testimony about her encounter with Jesus, they rushed to the well to meet Jesus for themselves. Once they met Him, many of them placed their trust in Him (v. 39). They could see for themselves why the Samaritan woman testified about Him.

The story of the woman who met Jesus at Jacob's well declares a life-changing message. Christ will save you if you turn to Him. He knows you, and He will set you free from your sins and deliver you from your failures. When you receive Him as your Savior, you will experience for yourself what it's like to drink in living water. For that reason, do not hesitate to give your life to Him. If you are a Christian, bear witness to others regarding the eternal difference He can make. Share your testimony with people in your life so they can hear the life-changing message of Christ.

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- *Have you shared your testimony with someone recently? Why or why not?*
- *Who do you need to tell about Jesus? What's stopping you from broaching the subject?*
- *How may you weave your faith into ordinary, everyday conversations with your neighbors?*
- *Spend time this week praying for the salvation of the people in your group, especially anyone who you know is not a believer in Jesus Christ.*

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**OCTOBER 14, 2012**

## BEYOND A SHADOW OF A DOUBT

**Abraham, Sarah, and a promise from God**

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### STUDY THEME

NO LOOKING BACK: WHAT IT MEANS TO MOVE FORWARD BY THE GRACE OF GOD

### FOCAL PASSAGES

GENESIS 15:4-6; 16:1-5; 17:3-6,15-19

### BACKGROUND PASSAGES

GENESIS 15:1-6; 16:1-5; 17:1-22

### SESSION OVERVIEW

Arguably, the most popular story of Abraham's life is his faithful and obedient journey to sacrifice his son Isaac. But long before God tested Abraham's faith in that way, Abraham and his wife struggled through years of infertility. God had promised them an heir, a son of their own flesh and blood, but as the months and years dragged by, the promised heir hadn't arrived, and the waiting took its toll on them.

God's promises are worth waiting for, but that feat is easier said than done. When it feels like we've been waiting for an eternity, and we think God's forgotten about His promises, it's tempting to take matters into our own hands and determine our own outcomes. When those moments of uncertainty and doubt arise, we must remember that our God keeps His word. He never breaks His promises, and He never forgets His children. Do you trust Him enough to relinquish your own plans to seek His instead?

- 1. TRUST GOD (GENESIS 15:4-6)**
- 2. AVOID TAKING CONTROL (GENESIS 16:1-5)**
- 3. REFOCUS ON GOD'S PLAN (GENESIS 17:3-6,15-19)**

## BEFORE SUNDAY

- > **Read the teaching plan** (pp. 84-87), the background Scripture, and the focal passages several times.
- > **Study the lesson commentary** (pp. 88-93), and **contemplate** the Personal Bible Study questions.
- > **Determine which discussion points** and questions will work best with your group.
- > **Encourage** your group members to visit [lifeway.com/lifematters](http://lifeway.com/lifematters) and **purchase** the songs from the playlist. Consider downloading the songs to play each week as your group arrives.
- > **Visit the LifeMatters blog** at [threadsmedia.com](http://threadsmedia.com) for additional thoughts on the lesson and links to any Web features mentioned in this week's teaching plan.
- > **Pray** for the upcoming group meeting, your teaching, your group members, and their receptivity to the lesson.

## THE HIGHLIGHTS

- **Scripture:** Genesis 17:3-5  
<sup>3</sup> Then Abram fell facedown and God spoke with him: <sup>4</sup> "As for Me, My covenant is with you: you will become the father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> Your name will no longer be Abram, but your name will be Abraham, for I will make you the father of many nations."
- **Biblical Emphasis:** God promised Abram that his heir would be his own offspring. Abram believed God, but after years of not being able to conceive, Abram slept with Hagar, Sarai's servant, for the purpose of producing offspring and an heir. But God confirmed with Abram that God's plan and promise was to come through Isaac, the son he would have with Sarai. God changed their names to Abraham and Sarah to mark the covenant.
- **Life Impact:** God has a plan for our lives, but we need to trust Him to work in us and through us to accomplish that plan. We don't need to take shortcuts and take matters into our own hands. Like Abraham, we can learn to trust God's timing.

## INTRODUCTION

Have group members turn to the "Community Bible Study" on page 60 in the Learner Guide.

Given the choice between a pencil and a permanent marker, most of us would choose a pencil because a permanent marker is, well, permanent. Working on your budget? Pencil. Writing a grocery list? Pencil. Jotting down a quick note? Pencil. There are, of course, occasions when the permanent marker is appropriate. Labeling moving boxes? Permanent marker. Making a yard sale sign? Permanent marker.

God's promises may as well be scrawled in extra-thick permanent ink, preserved for all of eternity to witness. That's how confident He is that He will keep His word, but the question was never really about His confidence—it's about ours.

- *Do you consider yourself someone who has commitment issues? Why or why not?\**
- *Why can it be difficult to commit to things, especially long-term? What role does doubt play in our hesitations to commit?\**
- *How confident are you that God will fulfill His promises? What is this confidence (or lack thereof) rooted in?\**

### LEADER PACK

Use **PACK ITEM 2**, "Weekly Preparation Reminder," as a preparation tool this week. Adjust the schedule to meet the needs of your group.

Distribute copies of **PACK ITEM 3**, "Weekly Prayer Journal," so group members can write down prayer needs and remember them in prayer during the week.

Display **PACK ITEM 10**, "No Looking Back Unit Poster," and ask the members of your small group to share something that stood out to them this week as they read.

Display **PACK ITEM 13**, "No Looking Back Quote Poster," and ask your class for their thoughts on the quote.

*\*Additional discussion question that doesn't appear in the Learner Guide.*

## 1

## LEARNER GUIDE



Like many modern couples, Abram and Sarai battled with infertility. In a world without birth control, a healthy woman would have raised a brood of children by the time she was Sarai's age. To be childless would have been a disgrace. Children were insurance against the ills of society. They cared for ailing parents and guaranteed that the family name (and wealth) would go on. A man's legacy lasted only as long as there were children to carry it on. In Abram and Sarai's old age (both more than 70 years old), it must have been painfully apparent that Sarai would never have a child by natural means.



"Sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

—The White Queen in  
Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*<sup>1</sup>

**KEY THOUGHT:** Faith isn't based on what things look like at the moment, it's based on who God has proven Himself to be.

**KEY QUESTION:** *What are some of the outrageous promises of God that you're choosing to believe?*

## 1. TRUST GOD (GENESIS 15:4-6)

<sup>4</sup> Now the word of the LORD came to him: "This one will not be your heir; instead, one who comes from your own body will be your heir."<sup>5</sup> He took him outside and said, "Look at the sky and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then He said to him, "Your offspring will be that numerous."

<sup>6</sup> Abram believed the LORD, and He credited it to him as righteousness.

We first meet Abram, a descendent of Noah, in Genesis 12, when God called him to a new land and made a covenant with him (12:1-5). God promised to bless Abram and make him into a great nation if he would obediently follow Him. Fast-forward to Genesis 15, and God elaborated on that promise, telling Abram that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars in the sky (15:5). God intended for Abram to be the father of His chosen people.

But, Abram was getting old, and as we read in Genesis 15:2, he and Sarai remained childless. As much as he wanted to believe the promises God had made to him years ago, he was beginning to wonder if they would ever be fulfilled (15:1-3). In the midst of his frustration and disappointment, Abram complained to God, who, instead of reprimanding Abram for his disbelief, reassured him His promise of offspring and Abram's dream of a child would come true. Not only would he have an heir, but he would have a son of his very own. God didn't give Abram the exact plan, but He assured Him that there was a plan.

- *If you were in Abram's shoes, would you be able to believe God's promise?*
- *Does God's reaction to Abram's disbelief surprise you? Why or why not?*
- *Why is it difficult to trust God's plan when you don't know the details?*

"Look at the sky and count the stars, if you are able to count them . . . Your offspring will be that numerous" (v. 5). In that moment, that was all it took for Abram to believe (v. 6). To count the stars is an impossible task, and yet as Abram considered the billions of twinkling lights, he was reassured that the God whose word had brought them into shimmering existence was more than able to keep the promises He had made. God's plan was for Abram to become not only the patriarch of the entire Jewish nation, but also the spiritual father of all who would place their faith in the Lord. That means that all believers who have and will ever live are Abram's spiritual descendants, offspring as numerous as the stars.

- *What might the stars have revealed to Abram about God and His character?\**
- *When you admire creation, what do you learn about God?\**
- *Have someone read Romans 4:1-4. What was the connection between Abram's actions and his faith?\**

Abram exhibited trust in God not simply by believing facts about Him, but by trusting His character. Abram's actions were a direct result of his faith. When God makes a promise, He's not only able to fulfill it, but He's also faithful to see it through. It's not always easy to believe God, especially when your circumstances indicate that He's unbelievable, but faith isn't based on what things look like at the moment, it's based on who God has proven Himself to be. Over the course of centuries, He has proven Himself trustworthy and dependable. You can count on Him because He is God. He always keeps His word.

- *What are some of the outrageous promises of God that you're choosing to believe?\**
- *How do you deal with the uncertainty that arises when promises remain unfulfilled?*
- *Do you believe that God is trustworthy? Why or why not?*

1. Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass* (London: The MacMillan Company, 1897), 100.

## 2

## 2. AVOID TAKING CONTROL (GENESIS 16:1-5)

<sup>1</sup> Abram's wife Sarai had not borne any children for him, but she owned an Egyptian slave named Hagar. <sup>2</sup> Sarai said to Abram, "Since the LORD has prevented me from bearing children, go to my slave; perhaps through her I can build a family." And Abram agreed to what Sarai said. <sup>3</sup> So Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar, her Egyptian slave, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife for him. This happened after Abram had lived in the land of Canaan 10 years. <sup>4</sup> He slept with Hagar, and she became pregnant. When she realized that she was pregnant, she treated her mistress with contempt. <sup>5</sup> Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for my suffering! I put my slave in your arms, and ever since she saw that she was pregnant, she has treated me with contempt. May the LORD judge between me and you."

In chapter 16, the focus shifts from Abram to Sarai. At 75 years old, Sarai rightly assumed she was past childbearing age. All they knew of God's promise was that they would have an heir, so Sarai took the initiative to provide that heir by using Hagar, her servant, as a surrogate mother. While this was a custom in their day, and Sarai and Abram didn't know how God's plan would unfold, their action revealed a lack of trust in God's ability to provide. When the situation appeared hopeless, Abram and Sarai momentarily forgot the promises of God and turned to their own devices.

- *What might have prompted Abram and Sarai to take matters into their own hands?*
- *Have someone read Genesis 12:10-20. What does this passage, along with Genesis 16:1-5, tell us about Abram?\**
- *Have you ever tried to "help" God by devising your own plan? How did it turn out?*

Abram had a history of taking matters into his own hands when He started to doubt God's involvement. In this situation, his and Sarai's mistake had immediate consequences. Sarai was filled with jealousy, their marriage suffered discord, and Hagar felt contempt toward Sarai. Hagar had no choice but to comply with their scheme, and by the time the baby was actually born, Sarai rejected him. (For more on Hagar's reaction to this situation, read Genesis 16:6-16.) The sad truth is that Sarai and Abram's disbelief had consequences not only for them, but also for the people around them.

- *How did Abram and Sarai's actions affect Hagar and Ishmael?*
- *What effects have you seen in your life and the lives of those around you when you've failed to trust God?*
- *Compare this account with the account of the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. What similarities do you see between the two situations?\**

Abram and Sarai aren't the only people who have taken matters into their own hands when the waiting seems interminable. It's easy to grow antsy and impatient when our present reality doesn't reflect the promises to which we cling. But when we refuse to wait on God's perfect timing, we deny Him the opportunity to glorify Himself in and through us, and our plans rarely succeed. We must avoid the tendency to make our own plans and ask God to bless them.

- *What are some reasons why God might delay in fulfilling His promises?*
- *How is God glorified through our patience?*



Consider the following Scripture passages about the value of seeking godly advice when we're lacking in trust:

- *"Without guidance, people fall, but with many counselors there is deliverance" (Proverbs 11:14).*
- *"A fool's way is right in his own eyes, but whoever listens to counsel is wise" (Proverbs 12:15).*
- *"Plans fail when there is no counsel, but with many advisers they succeed" (Proverbs 15:22).*
- *"Listen to counsel and receive instruction so that you may be wise later in life" (Proverbs 19:20).*
- *"Finalize plans with counsel, and wage war with sound guidance" (Proverbs 20:18).*

**KEY THOUGHT:** When we refuse to wait on God's perfect timing, we deny Him the opportunity to glorify Himself in and through us, and our plans rarely succeed.

**KEY QUESTION:** *How is God glorified through our patience?*

## 3

## 3. REFOCUS ON GOD'S PLAN (GENESIS 17:3-6,15-19)

<sup>3</sup> Then Abram fell facedown and God spoke with him: <sup>4</sup> "As for Me, My covenant is with you: you will become the father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> Your name will no longer be Abram, but your name will be Abraham, for I will make you the father of many nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you extremely fruitful and will make nations and kings come from you.

<sup>15</sup> God said to Abraham, "As for your wife Sarai, do not call her Sarai, for Sarah will be her name. <sup>16</sup> I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she will produce nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

<sup>17</sup> Abraham fell facedown. Then he laughed and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a hundred-year-old man? Can Sarah, a ninety-year-old woman, give birth?" <sup>18</sup> So Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael were acceptable to You!"

<sup>19</sup> But God said, "No. Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will name him Isaac. I will confirm My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his future offspring.

Thirteen years after Ishmael's birth, God again appeared to Abram when he was 99 years old (17:1). Abram had placed his faith in God long ago, but when God appeared to Abram, he again surrendered to God's plan.

- *What is the relationship between faith and surrender?*
- *How did Abram demonstrate his submission to God?*

God affirmed His covenant with Abram with a name change. Abram became *Abraham*, which means "Father of a Multitude." Sarai became *Sarah*, meaning "Princess." The changes to their names signified the greatness of God's plan, which we read more about in verses 4-8.

- *What is significant about Abram and Sarai's name changes? What do you think that action meant to each of them?*

Abraham and Sarah were 99 and 89, respectively, when God told them they would have a son. They weren't exactly of child-rearing age, which Abraham found laughable (v. 17). But through Sarah's conception, God demonstrated His power over nature, and through her womb came a brand new nation, God's chosen people. God fulfilled His covenant promise in such a way that only He would receive the glory for it. There would be no question that God was behind the miracle of Isaac's birth.

- *What did God accomplish by waiting so long to complete His plan?*

God alone was the engineer of Abraham and Sarah's destiny, and their attempts to go it alone paled in comparison to the grandeur of God's plan. God would be the one to bless them. God would be the one to give them the promised son, Isaac, and make their descendants as numerous as the stars. And God would be the one to receive every last bit of the glory.

God's faithfulness and ability to do what He says overcomes all of our flaws and uncertainties. As long as we're willing to trust in the God who makes (and fulfills) extraordinary promises to His people, we'll be carrying on the legacy of Abraham, our spiritual father.

- *How can you show God you trust Him, even when His promises seem unbelievable?*
- *What plans do you have for your life that you need to surrender to God today?*
- *What specific things can you do to stay focused on God and pursue Him?*



Visit [thevisioncommunity.com](http://thevisioncommunity.com) to see how those with vision problems view the world.



Listen to the song "If I Ever Needed Grace" by Jimmy Needham from the album *Clear the Stage*, available for purchase on the Fall 2012 iMix, listed under "Additional Resources" at [lifeway.com/lifematters](http://lifeway.com/lifematters).

**KEY THOUGHT:** God's faithfulness and ability to do what He says overcomes all of our flaws and uncertainties.

**KEY QUESTION:** *What specific things can you do to stay focused on God and pursue Him?*



## AND FINALLY

Faith demands that we believe some incredible things on a daily basis. We believe that God speaks to us through His Word. We believe He sent His Son to restore our relationship with Him. We believe that same Son got up and walked out of a tomb after He had been dead for three days. We believe that the rewards of a faithful life include eternity in paradise and unbroken fellowship with God. We believe that God performs miracles, even today. We believe that God cares about the details of our lives, and perhaps most astonishingly, we believe that God Almighty loves us, in spite of our sinfulness. The Christian life is all about believing that the impossible is, in fact, possible. Because, as Abraham and Sarah found out firsthand, nothing is impossible with God.

- *What are you trusting God with today? Are you anxiously or patiently waiting for God to fulfill His promises?*
- *Does your day-to-day life reflect your commitment to believing God? Why or why not?*

## LEAD YOUR CLASS TO CONNECT

Direct group members to turn to page 63 of the Learner Guide. Go over “Connect with God” with the class as a whole and encourage them to set aside time this week to invest in their relationship with God.

## WITH GOD

It’s not enough simply to say we believe in and trust God. We must act like it, too. Rest assured that God will accomplish what He has promised. It’s up to us to be faithful in the meantime, which we can do by incorporating some basic spiritual disciplines into our daily lives. Worship regularly. Seek the Lord. Search His Word for truth and guidance. Trust the counsel of dependable mentors and leaders. Pray constantly. Serve wholeheartedly. When we practice these disciplines, we align our hearts and minds with God, a surefire way to stay tuned to His frequency while we wait. As you spend some time alone with God this week, grab your journal or a sheet of paper and record your answers to the following questions and any thoughts that come to mind:

- *Do you believe that God is both able and faithful to do what He has promised? What are some of the stories from Scripture that help you maintain faith?*
- *In what ways does your lifestyle lead you to closer fellowship with God? In what ways does it hinder your relationship with Him?*

## AS A COUPLE

Direct couples to read through their section together this week and remain on the lookout for ways they can strengthen their relationship with each other and with God.



### Conclude the Lesson

*Wrap up the discussion by addressing the personal application questions listed in the And Finally section. If your group is too large, split them into smaller groups. Allow enough time to process the lesson and application.*

*You can include discussion of the Connect section during the session or during their small-group time.*

### Pray with Your Group

*Close today’s group gathering by praying Psalm 138 over your group.*

## 1

## BEYOND A SHADOW OF A DOUBT

## 1. TRUST GOD

Genesis 15:4-6

I think Abram got nervous every time he pondered his future. He could have felt better about it if he had an heir who would carry on his name. Years earlier, he had listened to the Lord and moved from his home to live in the distant land of Canaan (12:1-5). The Lord had promised to give Abram an heir, someone who would provide him with descendants for generations to come. So far, however, Abram still did not have that heir. Consequently, each year that passed without an heir left him more concerned about the future. Because he did not have a son of his own, he had already resigned himself to the fact that Eliezer, a servant who lived in his house, would receive his promised inheritance (15:1-3).

The Lord came to Abram and addressed his concerns in two ways. First, He assured Abram that Eliezer would not be his heir.

Of course, we have an advantage over Abram. We have the Bible to give us God's direction and reassurance. Through His written Word, He speaks to us about what He wants us to do with our lives.

Notice the remarkable way the Lord reinforced the certainty of His plan for Abram. He instructed His troubled servant to go outside and take a look at the sky and count the stars (v. 5). Earlier, Abram testified to the king of Sodom that the Lord created heaven and earth (14:22). Now, the Lord directed Abram to count the number of stars He had placed in the sky He had created. A daunting task, it would help Abram to remember that the Lord who placed the stars in the sky would be faithful to provide him with an offspring. It also allowed Abram to see that the inheritance God had in mind for him would be larger than he could ever calculate.

Abram responded to the Lord's promise by believing in Him (15:6). Placing his trust

WHEN WE TAKE GOD AT HIS WORD AND TRUST HIM,  
WE FOLLOW THE GOOD EXAMPLE OF  
RIGHTEOUSNESS ABRAM SET.

Second, He confirmed that Abram's heir would be his own flesh and blood (v. 4). God's renewed promise of a son to receive his inheritance must have reassured Abram. The certainty of God's provision at such a critical time in his life helped to calm his fears about the uncertainty of his situation.

When we reflect on the story so far, we find ourselves drawn to the Lord's comforting reassurance. It's the kind of confirmation we can receive from the Lord, but it comes only when we spend time with Him. Like Abram, we can live in confidence that the Lord has a plan for us, but only when we give Him our attention. As we take the time to be with Him, He speaks to us so we can know His plan for us and how to live it out in ways that honor Him.

in the Lord meant more than merely believing some facts about Him and His ways. It meant Abram considered the Lord to be altogether trustworthy. He trusted the Lord's character completely. He turned his future over to the Lord who would keep His promises and do what was best for him. He believed in the Lord who would lead him in the right direction and provide him with what he needed so he could live out His plan. By trusting Him, Abram could go from fretting over his future to resting in the calm assurance God would take care of it.

Something significant happened when Abram placed his trust in the Lord. The Lord received Abram's response of faith as a vital component in their relationship. He affirmed it as the kind of response He



The following articles relate to this lesson and can be found in the Fall 2012 issue of Biblical Illustrator or on the Fall 2012 Biblical Illustrator Plus (CD-ROM):

- "Abraham's Travels" (Fall 2012)
- "Isaac" (Winter 1993)
- "Ishmael" (Fall 1987)

Biblical Illustrator is available for purchase at [lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator).



## 2

## 2. AVOID TAKING CONTROL

Genesis 16:1-5

Abram's story took an unfortunate turn as time passed without an heir. Sarai [SEHR igh (eye)], his wife, had been unable to have any children; both of them became desperate for an heir. That's when Sarai came up with a plan for producing an offspring for Abram. She posed the possibility that Abram could have a child with Hagar [HAY gahr], her Egyptian slave. A child with Hagar would supply the family with an heir to carry on Abram's name into the future (vv. 1-2).

Abram agreed Sarai's plan would work. By carrying out Sarai's plan instead of waiting on the Lord, Abram made a huge mistake. Although Abram and Sarai agreed on a plan of action to solve their problem, their agreement did not mean their plan was right. Their desperation had gotten the best of them, and they failed to turn to the Lord for His direction. Instead, they forgot about the Lord and created their own way out of their predicament.

From that point onward, the situation deteriorated rapidly. Abram apparently felt tremendous pressure because of Sarai's assault on him, and he caved in to her contempt. Perhaps concluding that he had no other choice, he exposed Hagar to a future of mistreatment by turning her over to Sarai (v. 6). In her anger, Sarai treated her pregnant Egyptian slave so miserably that Hagar "ran away from her." The plan Sarai and Abram agreed to carry out in order to meet the need for an heir had failed in the worst way. Resentment, desperation, and terror filled the home of a couple who stopped trusting God and took matters into their own hands.

The sad outcome of Abram and Sarai's plan demonstrates three key realities to keep in mind as we face the challenge of waiting on the Lord to keep His promises. First, we cannot rely on our own ideas alone when it comes to doing the Lord's work. Left to our own judgments, we certainly will make mistakes as we try to solve our problems without the Lord's involvement.

## WE REFLECT WISDOM WHEN WE TURN TO THE LORD IN REPENTANCE AND OBEDIENCE.

Ten years earlier, Abram had followed the Lord's leadership and resettled in the distant land of Canaan. During those years, Abram waited on the Lord to provide an heir. After an unproductive decade, Abram and Sarai decided to handle their predicament themselves. As a result of their plan, Abram and Hagar would have a baby soon. When Hagar became pregnant, the women were filled with mutual contempt for each other. Sarai did not hold back her anger, and Hagar became the object of the hateful scorn that consumed her (Genesis 16:4).

Sarai did not make Hagar her sole target but also directed her contempt toward Abram (v. 5). In her anger, she blamed Abram for the plan that had led to Hagar's pregnancy. She went on to assassinate Hagar's character in Abram's eyes. Then she inflicted the crowning blow by invoking the Lord's judgment on her husband.

Second, we must resist the temptation to blame each other when we carry out our own plans only to see them fail. By contrast, we reflect wisdom when we turn to the Lord in repentance and obedience. Once we turn to Him, we can express our renewed willingness to follow His leadership.

Third, we should not devise our own plans then expect the Lord to make them work. When we live out God's plan, we can expect Him to bless it. However, when we depend on the Lord to bless plans we've devised without His input, we make a grave mistake. After Sarai's plan failed, she wanted the Lord to get involved and judge Abram for the role he played in its failure. When we see our plans falling apart, we also often find ourselves asking the Lord to make things better for us.

- *Has waiting on God ever caused you to doubt His faithfulness?*
- *Who do you turn to when you face such uncertainty? What makes them reliable counselors?*
- *What might drive you to resort to your own plans instead of waiting on God?*
- *How might you avoid making such rash decisions in the future?*



## 3

## 3. REFOCUS ON GOD'S PLAN

Genesis 17:3-6,15-19

Abram was 86 years old when Hagar gave birth to Ishmael [ISH may el] (16:16). Thirteen years passed before Abram's next recorded encounter with the Lord. He was 99 years old when the Lord appeared to him. The encounter would turn out to be a critical turning point for Abram and his walk with God. In this pivotal meeting, Abram would learn more about God's plan to fulfill His promise of a son (17:1-2).

Recognizing that the Lord had appeared before him, Abram assumed a posture that reflected his sense of awe and reverence in God's presence. By falling facedown, he showed the sincerity of his worship as well as his willingness to be submissive to the Lord who had confronted him. His act of wholehearted worship set the stage for the renewal of his relationship with the Lord.

Once God appeared to Abram, He began to share more details about His covenant. In those days, a covenant served as an

contrast on "Abram and Abraham.") Every time Abraham reflected on the meaning of his new name, he would remember God's promise to provide him with an ever-growing number of people who would bear his name and fill the land for generations to come. Not only would his descendants populate nations, they would also provide the kings who would rule over them (v. 6). The new name would remind Abraham that God intended to keep His promise in proportions that he could never capture in his imagination.

Notice that God went on to tell Abraham about two changes He would make in Sarai's life as well. First, her name would be changed to *Sarah*, a princess. Second, she would give birth to a son who would be the fulfillment of God's promise of an heir, and would give birth to nations and have kings come from her (vv. 15-16).

As Abraham listened to God, he worshiped again in humble submission. Like before, his posture reflected his heart of worship and awe in the presence of God. As he worshiped

### ABRAM'S ACT OF WHOLEHEARTED WORSHIP SET THE STAGE FOR THE RENEWAL OF HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LORD.

agreement between two parties. It had legal as well as relational implications for each of the parties engaged in it. By taking the initiative on the covenant, God showed His intention to make it the basis of His relationship with Abram (v. 4). As a part of God's covenant with Abram, He affirmed that He would keep His promise to Abram about his future. Because of God's faithfulness to His promise, Abram could count on the day coming when the number of his descendants would not make up mere families and tribes but would grow so vast they would compose the populations of entire nations.

In order to nail down His promise so Abram would never forget it, God changed his name. God decreed that his name would be changed to *Abraham*, the father of a multitude. (See this lesson's compare and

the Lord, however, he *laughed ... to himself* (17:17). His laughter was not meant as disrespect for what God had said. It only signaled his immediate reaction to the notion that Sarah would have a baby at the age of 90. He would be 100 years old by the time the baby would be born. The idea of two extremely old people having a child struck Abraham as humorous.

God showed He would get the last laugh. First, He said Ishmael would not be the heir, even though that made sense to Abraham. Also, He told Abraham that the son born to him and Sarah would be called Isaac, a name which meant laughter. Every time Abraham would mention his son's name, he would be reminded he served a God who fulfilled His promise, even when it appeared laughable at first.



#### Meanings of Abram and Abraham (Genesis 17:5)

*Abram in Hebrew means "exalted father." In Genesis 11:26, the name identified a man to whom God would promise a son. Yet for a long time, Abram could not live up to his name because he wasn't a father. In Genesis 17:5, God reaffirmed His covenant with Abram and changed his name to Abraham, which means father of a multitude. The new name signified that the Lord would keep His covenant promise to Abraham and provide him with more than a son. He would bless Abraham with a vast number of descendants so large that counting them would be impossible.*





**OCTOBER 21, 2012**

## THE SECRET TO CONTENTMENT

Learning from Miriam's frustration with God

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### STUDY THEME

NO LOOKING BACK: WHAT IT MEANS TO MOVE FORWARD BY THE GRACE OF GOD

### FOCAL PASSAGES

EXODUS 15:19-21; NUMBERS 12:1-3,8-13,15

### BACKGROUND PASSAGES

EXODUS 15:19-21; NUMBERS 12:1-16

### SESSION OVERVIEW

Moses' sister Miriam is only mentioned a handful of times in the Bible, but from what's in Scripture, we see evidence that Miriam was an imperfect human being just like the rest of us. Miriam believed in the One True God of Israel, and she experienced personally His power and glory. She knew how to act in those "mountain-top" moments of life—like when God parted the Red Sea—but she also struggled through some valleys, times when she was discontent with God's plans. Despite these momentary frustrations and lapses in faith, God graciously worked in Miriam's life.

If you've been a believer for any length of time, you've had your share of mountain-top and valley moments. The question isn't whether you'll experience both (that's a certainty) but whether you're able to sing the same song of praise you shouted from the top of the mountain when you're standing at its base. When life gets tough, do you falter, or do you cling to the truth that God is sovereign over all? God is consistent in His faithfulness. Can He say the same about you?

- 1. CELEBRATE GOD'S WORK (EXODUS 15:19-21)**
- 2. AVOID DISSATISFACTION (NUMBERS 12:1-3)**
- 3. BE REHABILITATED (NUMBERS 12:8-13,15)**





## BEFORE SUNDAY

- > **Read the teaching plan** (pp. 96-99), the background Scripture, and the focal passages several times.
- > **Study the lesson commentary** (pp. 100-105), and **contemplate** the Personal Bible Study questions.
- > **Determine which discussion points** and questions will work best with your group.
- > **Encourage** your group members to visit [lifeway.com/lifematters](http://lifeway.com/lifematters) and **purchase** the songs from the playlist. Consider downloading the songs to play each week as your group arrives.
- > **Visit the LifeMatters blog** at [threadsmedia.com](http://threadsmedia.com) for additional thoughts on the lesson and links to any Web features mentioned in this week's teaching plan.
- > **Pray** for the upcoming group meeting, your teaching, your group members, and their receptivity to the lesson.

## THE HIGHLIGHTS

- **Scripture:** Numbers 12:1-2  
<sup>1</sup> *Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses because of the Cushite woman he married (for he had married a Cushite woman).* <sup>2</sup> *They said, "Does the LORD speak only through Moses? Does He not also speak through us?" And the LORD heard it.*
- **Biblical Emphasis:** After God brought the waters down on Pharaoh's army, Miriam led the Israelite women in a song of praise. Later, though, she joined Aaron in criticizing Moses because he married a Cushite woman. They were also jealous of his leadership position and relationship with God. As a consequence for her sin, God struck Miriam with a skin disease.
- **Life Impact:** Praising God for His work in one area yet questioning His work in another area is inconsistent; it calls into question the character of God. Like Miriam, we can learn to trust God's character and be content with the way He works.

## INTRODUCTION

Have group members turn to the "Community Bible Study" on page 68 in the Learner Guide.

Erosion is a process that happens over the course of time. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as destruction by degree. In other words, erosion simply wears away at something that seemed impenetrable. Just as acid can erode metal or a river can cut through rock, dissatisfaction can, and does, erode our faith in God.

It starts out slowly, but as time passes, it cuts deeper and deeper into our hearts, chipping away at our faith. Have you ever allowed the hardships of life to wear away at your once unshakable faith? What if submitting to God's correction could reverse the destruction of eroding emotions? Then you could walk through life with a faith—and heart—guarded against erosion.

- *What experience have you had with erosion or decay of your possessions?\**
- *What sets erosion apart from other forms of destruction?\**
- *Do you think this is an accurate image for what can happen to our faith? Why or why not?\**
- *Have you ever experienced something comparable to erosion in your relationship with God? If so, explain that season of your life.\**

### LEADER PACK

Use **PACK ITEM 2**, "Weekly Preparation Reminder," as a preparation tool this week. Adjust the schedule to meet the needs of your group.

Distribute copies of **PACK ITEM 3**, "Weekly Prayer Journal," so group members can write down prayer needs and remember them in prayer during the week.

Display **PACK ITEM 10**, "No Looking Back Unit Poster," and ask the members of your small group for something that stood out to them this week as they read.

*\*Additional discussion question that doesn't appear in the Learner Guide.*

## 1

## LEARNER GUIDE



*King David also danced before the Lord, and the judge Deborah sang her own song of praise. Read about them in 2 Samuel 6:16-23 and Judges 5, respectively.*

**KEY THOUGHT:** When we express honest and sincere praise to God for His marvelous works, we encourage others to do the same.

**KEY QUESTION:** *Why is it important to recount the great things God has done for us?*

## 1. CELEBRATE GOD'S WORK (EXODUS 15:19-21)

<sup>19</sup> When Pharaoh's horses with his chariots and horsemen went into the sea, the LORD brought the waters of the sea back over them. But the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. <sup>20</sup> Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her with their tambourines and danced. <sup>21</sup> Miriam sang to them: Sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted; He has thrown the horse and its rider into the sea.

For approximately 430 years (Exodus 12:40), the Israelites lived in slavery in Egypt, but it only took one miraculous year for them to escape bondage and flee the nation, under the direction of Moses. God had been planning for that moment of exodus, and from Moses' birth, it was evident God intended to use him. An integral part of that plan involved Miriam, Moses' sister.

- *What do you know about Miriam and her involvement in Moses' early life?*

Moses was born at a time when newborn baby boys were being killed by order of Pharaoh. Moses should've been one of those babies, but thanks to Miriam's quick thinking, Moses escaped murder and grew up in Pharaoh's courts as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. (Read the story in Exodus 2.) Though her brother grew up in Pharaoh's courts, Miriam most likely was one of the Israelite slaves who Moses led out of Egypt. At that moment when God crushed Pharaoh's army under the waters of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:27-28), Miriam had plenty of reasons to praise God for His protection and provision. She joined in Moses' song of praise and worship.

- *Read Miriam's song of praise in Exodus 15:21. What do these words communicate about God and His character?*
- *What were some of the mighty works God had performed in the exodus?*
- *How does Miriam's song compare with the beginning of Moses' song in 15:1?\**
- *How do Miriam's words of praise compare to your favorite praise song?\**

The song of Moses and Miriam begins and ends with the same proclamation, except the first verse is Moses' statement that he will praise God, while the last is Miriam's command to praise. Their song focused entirely on God, His character and His works. In that moment, they weren't thinking about themselves, they were completely focused on God and were overcome with worship.

- *Are you able to worship as freely as Miriam? Why or why not?\**
- *How might focusing on God fuel our praise?*
- *In what ways might our own honest praise influence the people around us?\**

We've also been rescued from a life of slavery—not to Egypt, but to sin—and we have much to be thankful for. God has redeemed us. It's only fitting that we offer Him the praise He is due. When we point to the One who has done marvelous things for us, He gets the glory He rightly deserves. Furthermore, when we express honest and sincere praise to God for His marvelous works, we encourage others to do the same.

- *Why is it important to recount the great things God has done for us?\**
- *When have you witnessed God at work? How did you respond in that moment?\**

## 2

## 2. AVOID DISSATISFACTION (NUMBERS 12:1-3)

<sup>1</sup> Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses because of the Cushite woman he married (for he had married a Cushite woman). <sup>2</sup> They said, “Does the LORD speak only through Moses? Does He not also speak through us?” And the LORD heard it. <sup>3</sup> Moses was a very humble man, more so than any man on the face of the earth.

Two years after the exodus event, the Israelites were approaching the promised land. The miraculous experience at the Red Sea was a distant memory, and the trek through the desert took its toll. It was taxing on everyone, even Moses, who begged God for relief from the burden of leadership (Numbers 11:14-15).

- Skim Numbers 11. What was behind the Israelites' complaining?
- What is your gut reaction to less than ideal situations?

Miriam and Aaron represented the Israelite prophets and priests, the most powerful groups in the Israelite camp, and they shared in the complaining, but they took it out on their brother. In verse 1, we read that they criticized Moses on the issue of his foreign (aka non-Jewish) wife, who was a Cushite, or Ethiopian. But it becomes evident in verses 2-3 that their critique of his wife masked the real problem—jealousy of Moses and frustration with God (v. 2).

- How does Miriam and Aaron's complaint reveal their discontentment with God?
- Describe a time when you've lashed out at someone else, even though you were really upset with God.

According to verse 2, Miriam and Aaron challenged Moses' position as the primary recipient of revelation from God. Also, God had just given Moses the responsibility of appointing 70 elders to help him carry the burden of being God's spokesman (Numbers 11:16-17). This group of divinely appointed leaders likely threatened Miriam and Aaron's power, too. Their questions in verse 2 reveal that they no longer believed God's ways were best. And verse 3 serves as a reminder that Moses hadn't provoked their criticism by abusing his power. When they criticized Moses' authority, they challenged God's leadership. That's quite different from the praise we saw from Miriam in the previous set of verses.

- Do you think God can handle your frustrations and emotions? Is that evident in your relationship with Him?
- Miriam and Aaron's critical spirit drove a wedge in their relationship with their brother and spiritual leader. What effect has a critical spirit taken on your relationship with God and with fellow believers?\*

Nothing good comes out of discontentment. When we shift our focus from God to our circumstances, we allow bitterness, jealousy, and anger to take root in our hearts. As those roots burrow in, they drive a wedge between us and God, and before we know it, we've gone from praising God to criticizing Him. Miriam's story just goes to show that it can, and does, happen to the best of us when we take our eyes off God.

- What are some practical ways you've learned to prevent the roots of discontentment from settling into your heart?
- Do you find it easier to trust God and stay focused on Him when things in life are going well, or when life's more challenging?\*



Listen to the song “10,000 Reasons” by Matt Redman from the album 10,000 Reasons, available for purchase on the Fall 2012 iMix, listed under “Additional Resources” at [lifeway.com/lifematters](http://lifeway.com/lifematters).

**KEY THOUGHT:** When we shift our focus from God to our circumstances, we allow bitterness, jealousy, and anger to take root in our hearts.

**KEY QUESTION:** What effect has a critical spirit taken on your relationship with God and with fellow believers?

## 3

**Rehabilitate** (verb)

1. to restore to a former capacity:  
reinstatement
2. to restore to good repute:  
reestablish the good name of
3. to restore to a former state
4. to restore or bring to a condition  
of health or useful and  
constructive activity

**KEY THOUGHT:** God never disciplines His people haphazardly. It's always for the purpose of realigning us to His standard.

**KEY QUESTIONS:** *What is the point of God's discipline? In what ways are we, like Miriam, better for it?*

### 3. BE REHABILITATED (NUMBERS 12:8-13,15)

<sup>8</sup> "I speak with him directly, openly, and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. So why were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?" <sup>9</sup> The LORD's anger burned against them, and He left. <sup>10</sup> As the cloud moved away from the tent, Miriam's skin suddenly became diseased, as white as snow. When Aaron turned toward her, he saw that she was diseased <sup>11</sup> and said to Moses, "My lord, please don't hold against us this sin we have so foolishly committed. <sup>12</sup> Please don't let her be like a dead baby whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother's womb." <sup>13</sup> Then Moses cried out to the LORD, "God, please heal her!"

<sup>15</sup> So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on until Miriam was brought back in.

Following Miriam's questions, God summoned a meeting with the three siblings (vv. 4-5). God told Miriam and Aaron that unlike His usual way of speaking to prophets through dreams and visions, God spoke to Moses directly, as He had been doing since the burning bush encounter (v. 8). This marked Moses as unique from the rest of God's appointed leaders, making it all the worse for them to call his leadership into question.

- *What's the difference between questioning God and asking God questions?*
- *Have someone read verses 9-12. How did God respond to Miriam's questioning?*

There's nothing wrong with asking God questions when you're searching for clarity and seeking His will, but questioning His judgment and voicing criticism or doubt of His competency is a different story. It communicates a lack of belief and trust in His sovereignty.

Although Miriam and Aaron both expressed discontentment, Miriam alone bore the brunt of God's discipline. She had allowed jealousy to disease her heart, but God turned her inside out, and He diseased her skin. Any skin disease that caused her to look white as snow or like a stillborn baby would've rendered her unclean according to Levitical law (see Leviticus 13-14). This led to her solitary confinement, described in verse 15. What was once hidden in Miriam's heart was now on display for all of Israel to see.

- *How did Aaron and Moses respond to their sister's diseased appearance (vv. 10-13)?*
- *Likewise, how can you help someone who's struggling with a critical spirit?*
- *How did Miriam's sin affect the community? How have you seen your sin affect others?*

Miriam's rebellion against God didn't happen overnight. Left unchecked, Miriam's dissatisfaction in her role among the Israelites likely simmered for some time before it bubbled to the surface. Likewise, her rehabilitation would take some time to be complete (v. 15). She had an entire week of solitary confinement outside the camp to think about what had happened. God's discipline was designed to humble Miriam and remind her that He was in control. Miriam eventually rejoined the people of Israel in their journey through the wilderness, and at her death, she was in good standing within the community (see Numbers 12:14; 20:1; Micah 6:4). Her mistake didn't define her, but it did change her.

God never disciplines His people haphazardly. It's always for the purpose of realigning us to His standard. It can be painful, embarrassing, and awkward, but how we respond to God's discipline and chastening of the Lord says a lot about the state of our hearts.

- *Have you ever been in a situation that you knew was God's discipline? If so, how did the experience change you, and how did you handle it?*
- *Read Job 5:17 and Hebrews 12:11. What is the point of God's discipline? In what ways are we, like Miriam, better for it?\**

## AND FINALLY

Whether we care to admit it or not, we all can relate to Miriam. Our circumstances often distract us from God’s plans. When we’re focused on the “unfairness” of life, we forget that God is in control, and He’s working all things for good. We have the honor of living lives that glorify God, through both the sunshine and the storms. Any rough patches we hit, like the Israelites’ time in the desert, can be character building experiences if we’ll let them. As long as we remain focused on God in our hardships, as Christ modeled en route to the cross, we’ll grow into the people who He has created us to be—people who praise His holy name and reflect His holy image, no matter what.

- *What are examples of things that distract you from God or cause you to forget that He’s in control?*
- *Some people feel closer to God through struggles, others feel closer to Him in life’s joys. Which best describes you, and why do you think that is?*
- *Can we train ourselves to stay focused on God’s greatness when our world falls apart? If so, what are some ways we can do that? If not, why do you think not?*
- *What does it look like to glorify God in the midst of trouble?*

## LEAD YOUR CLASS TO CONNECT

Direct group members to turn to page 71 of the Learner Guide. Go over “Connect with Your Family” with the class as a whole, and encourage them to find ways to invest in their relationships with family members.

## WITH YOUR FAMILY

Conflict is an inevitable side effect of being siblings. Even Moses, Miriam, and Aaron couldn’t escape it. Miriam and Aaron’s dissatisfaction with their circumstances caused a rift in their relationship with Moses at a time when he desperately needed them. As their story demonstrates, harboring negative feelings toward family members—be it jealousy or something else—leads to conflict. Here are a few suggestions to help maintain an encouraging and godly relationship with family.

- Make a list of reasons you love each of your immediate family members.
- Pray for your family each day, thanking God for their unique gifts and their presence in your life.
- Volunteer to help family members with needs you know they have.
- Write a letter to family members telling them how much you love and appreciate them.

These are just a few suggestions for simple ways you can glorify God by sharing the love of Christ with the people who are closest to you. Add to the list other ideas you come up with. When we’re selfish in our relationships, we elevate ourselves over everyone else, including God. Love, on the other hand, elevates both God and others. We must choose whether we’ll allow ourselves to be controlled by selfishness or love. Which will it be?



### Conclude the Lesson

*Wrap up the discussion by addressing the personal application questions listed in the And Finally section. If your group is too large, split them into smaller groups. Allow enough time to process the lesson and application.*

*You can include discussion of the Connect section during the session or during their small-group time.*

### Pray with Your Group

*Divide into groups of 3 or 4 for the closing prayer time. Encourage group members to focus their prayer requests on areas of their lives where they’re struggling to find contentment.*

## 1

## THE SECRET TO CONTENTMENT

## 1. CELEBRATE GOD'S WORK

Exodus 15:19-21

The Lord had shown faithfulness to the people of Israel. He had kept His promise to deliver them from Egyptian bondage. He called Moses to lead His people out of Egypt, and Moses served Him faithfully. God used Moses to show Pharaoh that He alone had the last word. As a result, Pharaoh finally let Israel leave.

Following the Lord's instruction, Moses led Israel to march out of Egypt toward their freedom. Then Moses guided God's people as they began their journey across the wilderness toward the land He had promised them generations earlier. On their journey, they ran into trouble at the Red Sea. There God demonstrated His faithfulness and power by parting the water so His people could pass through to safety on the other side of the sea (Exodus 3-14). No wonder Moses led the people of Israel in a song of joy (15:1-18).

the water so they would be able to get to the other side safe and sound. Once they made their way to safety, God collapsed the corridor in the sea, now filled with the Egyptian army. Water quickly submerged the entire army, drowning the soldiers in pursuit and washing away Pharaoh's efforts to do any more harm to God's people.

In the setting saturated with joyful worship, a prophetess (see this lesson's word study on "Prophetess") named Miriam led the women in a worship celebration (v. 20). Miriam was Moses and Aaron's sister (Numbers 26:59). She appeared early in the story of Moses' life when he was a baby floating in a basket near the bank of the Nile River. She arranged for her mother to take care of Moses when Pharaoh's daughter found him in the basket. Now, years later on the freedom side of the Red Sea, she arranged a celebration so the women could praise God for everything He had done to lead His people to liberty. With her tambourine in hand, she led them as they danced for joy.



The following articles relate to this lesson and can be found in the Fall 2012 issue of Biblical Illustrator or on the Fall 2012 Biblical Illustrator Plus (CD-ROM):

- "The Egyptian Army" (Fall 1998)
- "Songs in the Old Testament" (Fall 1991)
- "Miriam: All We Know" (Fall 2012)
- "Aaron's Role in the Exodus" (Spring 2010)

Biblical Illustrator is available for purchase at [lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator).

## GOD DEMONSTRATED HIS FAITHFULNESS AND POWER BY PARTING THE WATER.

- How has the Lord displayed His faithfulness to you?
- How often should we praise God for the work He has done in our lives?
- Is it easy or difficult to acknowledge God's greatness in the aftermath of His intervention in your life?
- If you were writing your own declaration of praise, what would it say?

They had experienced God's presence in a time of desperation, and they praised Him for rescuing them. In the process of being guided by Him through the crisis, they got to see Him in a way that led them to worship Him with grateful hearts. Together they affirmed His majesty and exalted His greatness.

Notice what followed Moses' song of joy to the Lord. A brief summary recounts the episode involving the Egyptian army at the Red Sea. As God's people approached the Red Sea, they could see the Egyptian army in hot pursuit. Their elation because they had been liberated from Egypt soon gave way to panic because they had no way to defend themselves. Trapped between the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army, God's people cried out in fear. God heard their cry, directed Moses to guide His people across the sea, and parted

Pay close attention to Miriam's song (Exodus 15:21). Although it's brief, it's packed with at least two durable expressions of true worship. First, she prompted the women to sing their praise exclusively to the Lord. Don't overlook the fact that she did not lead the women to praise Moses and Aaron, even though they were her brothers and had led God's people to freedom. Second, she counseled them wisely on how to focus on what He had done. He had delivered them from danger. The sea filled with horses and their riders gave a sobering testimony of the Lord's sovereign power and consistent care. He had destroyed the Egyptian army while He preserved the people of Israel. She called on all the women to focus on what God had done so they could sing praises to Him instead of worshipping the actions themselves.

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- *We are quick to acknowledge God’s leadership when He does something dramatic—when He divides the sea and washes away our obstacles. But what about when life isn’t going like we want, or when it’s going OK, “normal”? Do we acknowledge His leadership at these times as well? Whatever your present life-situation, take time to seek and acknowledge His leadership before you move on to the next section.*



**Prophetess (Exodus 15:20)**

*In the Hebrew language, the word “prophetess” simply signified a woman who fulfilled a prophetic role. A prophet spoke for God, calling His people to Him by proclaiming His Word under the inspiration of His Spirit. Almost all of the Old Testament prophets were men, although a few women were also named as prophetesses. Miriam was referred to as a prophetess (Exodus 15:20). So was Deborah (Judges 4:4) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14). In the New Testament, Anna (Luke 2:36) and Phillip’s four daughters (Acts 21:8-9) were prophetesses.*

## 2

## 2. AVOID DISSATISFACTION

Numbers 12:1-3

Although Miriam served as an example of contentment at the Red Sea, her attitude changed for the worse over time as the people of Israel continued to travel across the desert. At the Red Sea, she sang a song of contentment to the Lord because of what He had done. Later on, at a difficult juncture in the journey, she reflected a negative spiritual temperament. It showed in the way she criticized Moses for marrying a Cushite woman.

We don't know the exact meaning of *Cushite* as it applied to Moses' wife. Perhaps Zipporah, Moses' first wife, had died, and he had remarried a woman who was a descendent of Ham, one of Noah's three sons (Genesis 10:1,6). If so, she probably came from the Nile Valley, and she may also have been referred to as an Ethiopian. Or maybe Miriam hurled something like a racial slur about Zipporah to Moses because she was from Midian instead of Israel

had poured his heart out to the Lord about the burden of leadership he alone had to bear. He asked the Lord to go ahead and kill him so he could be put out of the misery of leading such a large crowd of obstinate people (11:10-15). Emotionally spent already, he didn't need criticism by his siblings.

Discontentment had robbed Aaron and Miriam of the joy they had experienced at the Red Sea, and put pressure on their relationship with Moses in another way. They unveiled their dissatisfaction with his leadership (12:2). They complained that Moses shouldn't have been considered the spokesperson through whom God would speak to His people. Actually, their complaint didn't square with the facts. Although God spoke primarily through Moses, He also spoke to His people in the desert through Miriam and Aaron as well (Micah 6:4). Even so, Miriam and Aaron did not hesitate to gripe about Moses' relationship with the Lord and his role as the leader of Israel. Jealousy simmered in their hearts, prompting them

- *Have you ever criticized leaders for the way they conduct their personal lives? If so, what fueled the criticism? Was it the action or jealousy?*
- *What might cause you to express dissatisfaction with the people who God has chosen to lead you?*
- *How can you maintain a spirit of contentment when you think you can do a better job than your leader?*
- *In what ways can you support, rather than tear down, the leaders in your life?*

### MOSES BEHAVED LIKE A GODLY MAN CONSUMED BY A SENSE OF SPIRITUAL HUMILITY.

(Exodus 2:15-21). Whatever the meaning, Miriam spoke cruelly and critically.

Obviously, Aaron joined Miriam in criticizing Moses' wife. On the heels of God's provisions in the desert, their judgmental behavior and critical spirit seemed to be out of order (Numbers 11:1-9,31-34). Their relationship with Moses made their attacks appear to be out of character, too. They did not level their complaints against a distant and unknown leader, but against the brother they loved. Miriam had arranged for his care when Pharaoh's daughter found him floating in a basket on the Nile River. Aaron had surrendered to the Lord's call and accompanied Moses without complaint, and together they had gone to confront Egypt's Pharaoh. This criticism about Moses' marriage seemed totally unreasonable and exhibited an extremely bad attitude.

Miriam and Aaron's criticism came when Moses needed allies, not critics. Earlier, he

to make baseless and critical remarks about their brother. They might have hidden their jealousy from others, but they could not conceal it from the Lord. He heard what they said and the spirit in which they said it.

Miriam and Aaron's complaint suggested Moses hungered for power and glory and therefore was unwilling to allow anyone to share the stage with him. But the scriptural description of Moses conveyed an entirely different picture of him as a leader (Numbers 12:3). He behaved like a godly man consumed by a sense of spiritual humility. In fact, nowhere in the world could anyone find another person as humble as Moses. Consequently, Miriam and Aaron's criticism about Moses' leadership didn't fit the facts of the person who had led them out of Egypt.





## 3

**3. BE REHABILITATED**

Numbers 12:8-13,15

The Lord heard the critical remarks Miriam and Aaron made about Moses; He confronted both of them. Their complaints against their brother and leader prompted His personal reprimand for their judgmental behavior. He started by reminding them of the way He spoke to other prophets (12:4-6). Then He went on to describe how He spoke to Moses (v. 8). He pointed out His unique walk with Moses, a close personal relationship marked by exceptional intimacy and trust. Whenever He talked with Moses, He didn't use the vague and shadowy language of mysterious riddles to get across His message. Instead, He spoke with Moses heart to heart with clarity and sincerity. Obviously the Lord had shown more of Himself to Moses than He had to any other prophet. Moses had an intimate walk with the Lord, and it showed in the way the Lord spoke to Him.

- *In your experience, what are the consequences of indulging a critical spirit?*
- *Have you ever allowed discontentment to rule your attitude? If so, what turned things around?*
- *How may you guard against allowing such negative feelings to take root?*
- *What is the proper response to discipline from the Lord?*

The Lord confronted Miriam and Aaron with their sin, but not because He wanted to punish them. Ultimately, He wanted to help them overcome their critical spirits. The actions He took to help them address their sin showed that He intended for them to change their behavior and get rid of their bad attitudes.

Suddenly, Miriam found herself suffering from a terrible skin disease that had the symptoms of leprosy (v. 10). Aaron recognized the spiritual problem that caused his sister's physical malady. He turned to Moses with a plea for forgiveness. Using the language of repentance, he acknowledged the judgmental remarks as sin (v. 11). Using extremely graphic language that depicted a harsh reality of his day, he described what he considered to be the dreadful outcome of her awful disease (v. 12). In turn, Moses pleaded with the Lord to heal his sister (12:13).

The Lord answered Moses' plea and healed Miriam. However, the story didn't end there. Miriam still had to go through

### MOSES HAD AN INTIMATE WALK WITH THE LORD, AND IT SHOWED IN THE WAY THE LORD SPOKE TO HIM.

For that reason, Miriam and Aaron should not have been surprised by the Lord's frustration with them. Their critical spirit had allowed them to become bold with their judgmental remarks about Moses. Such harsh statements demonstrated that they apparently had overlooked the unique relationship Moses shared with the Lord. If they had remembered the intimacy between the Lord and their brother, at least they would have thought twice about criticizing him and his leadership of Israel.

Because of what they did, they would have to reckon with the anger of the Lord fueled against them (v. 9). To say that the Lord's anger burned against them did not imply God went into a rage or threw an emotionally-charged tantrum. Rather, it suggests that the Lord responded to their statements in keeping with His character. He could not tolerate their sin. They would have to be held accountable for it.

the procedure prescribed in Leviticus 13-14. In keeping with the procedure, she had to remain in seclusion outside the camp for seven days (Numbers 12:15). At the end of the waiting period, God's people would be able to confirm that her health had been completely restored. Consequently, for seven days Miriam had to be confined outside the camp while the entire nation of Israel had to wait. Their advance to the land God promised them would have to be delayed by a whole week because of one person who had allowed her discontentment to get the best of her.

After the waiting period, Miriam returned to the camp, and the people of Israel resumed their journey. Apparently she continued to serve the Lord faithfully. When she passed away, she received the honor of having her death and burial acknowledged (20:1). Seven centuries later, the Lord affirmed through an Old Testament





**OCTOBER 28, 2012**

## UNDENIABLE GRACE

**Peter's journey—from denying Jesus to lifelong devotion**

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### STUDY THEME

NO LOOKING BACK: WHAT IT MEANS TO MOVE FORWARD BY THE GRACE OF GOD

### FOCAL PASSAGES

JOHN 18:15-18,25-27; 21:15-19; ACTS 4:13,18-20

### BACKGROUND PASSAGES

JOHN 18:12-27; 21:15-19; ACTS 4:1-20

### SESSION OVERVIEW

Peter is one of the most well-known individuals we read about in Scripture. He was in Jesus' "inner circle" of disciples (along with James and John), and he exhibited tremendous faith from the moment he met Jesus. His close relationship with Jesus and bold preaching made him an influential leader in the early church. But even Peter wasn't without fault. His tendency toward speaking passionately and acting impulsively got him into trouble on more than one occasion. He was an ordinary man who made mistakes, and that's one of the most endearing things about him.

From Peter's story, we learn that our mistakes don't have to get the last word; they don't have to define us. Despite the fact that Peter momentarily turned his back on Jesus, he went on to become one of the most influential people in the history of the church. God uses imperfect people to accomplish spectacular things. Will you let Him use you?

- 1. DO YOU DENY CHRIST? (JOHN 18:15-18,25-27)**
- 2. DO YOU REALLY LOVE CHRIST? (JOHN 21:15-19)**
- 3. DO YOU STAND UP FOR CHRIST? (ACTS 4:13,18-20)**

## BEFORE SUNDAY

- > **Read the teaching plan** (pp. 108-111), the background Scripture, and the focal passages several times.
- > **Study the lesson commentary** (pp. 112-117), and **contemplate** the Personal Bible Study questions.
- > **Determine which discussion points** and questions will work best with your group.
- > **Encourage** your group members to visit [lifeway.com/lifematters](http://lifeway.com/lifematters) and **purchase** the songs from the playlist. Consider downloading the songs to play each week as your group arrives.
- > **Visit the LifeMatters blog** at [threadsmedia.com](http://threadsmedia.com) for additional thoughts on the lesson and links to any Web features mentioned in this week's teaching plan.
- > **Pray** for the upcoming group meeting, your teaching, your group members, and their receptivity to the lesson.

## THE HIGHLIGHTS

### • Scripture: John 21:17

*He asked him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved that He asked him the third time, "Do you love Me?" He said, "Lord, You know everything! You know that I love You." "Feed My sheep," Jesus said.*

- **Biblical Emphasis:** During Jesus' trial, Peter denied knowing Him on three occasions. After Jesus' resurrection, Jesus lovingly confronted Peter and asked about his love for Him. Peter affirmed his love, and Jesus called him to serve. In Acts 4, we learn of Peter's boldness and commitment to spreading the message of Christ.

- **Life Impact:** Many of us have good intentions to do the right thing, but we falter when the time comes. Jesus forgives, restores, and desires to use us. Like Peter, we can learn to rely on God's power and boldly serve Him.

## INTRODUCTION

Have group members turn to the "Community Bible Study" on page 76 in the Learner Guide.

No one wants to hear that they've been put on academic probation, but it's happened to some of the best of us. Failing class was never the goal, but between life, conflicts with professors, poor time management, missing a few too many classes, and various other factors, sometimes it just happens. As we've discussed this month, we've made our fair share of mistakes and failures, and we'll make many more. How we deal with them, and whether we let the experiences change us for the better, is what really matters. To begin your group time, discuss the answers your group members have to the following questions:

- *Is failing at something, like class or a job assignment, acceptable to you? What does your answer say about your personality?*
- *What is your initial reaction when you realize you've made a mistake? Are you hard on yourself, do you lash out at others, shift blame, and so forth?\**
- *In the long run, do you let mistakes get the best of you, or do you consider them personal challenges to do better next time?\**

### LEADER PACK

Use **PACK ITEM 2**, "Weekly Preparation Reminder," as a preparation tool this week. Adjust the schedule to meet the needs of your group.

Distribute copies of **PACK ITEM 3**, "Weekly Prayer Journal," so group members can write down prayer needs and remember them in prayer during the week.

Display **PACK ITEM 10**, "No Looking Back Unit Poster" and ask the members of your small group to share something that stood out to them this week as they read.

Cut out **PACK ITEM 15**, "No Looking Back Memory Verse Cards," and distribute them to your group.

At the end of your small group time, hand out **PACK ITEM 14**, "No Looking Back Wrap-Up" and encourage everyone to spend a few minutes this week reviewing where this study has taken them.

\*Additional discussion question that doesn't appear in the Learner Guide.

## 1

## LEARNER GUIDE



Listen to the song “Let It Go” by Le’Andria Johnson from the album *The Awakening*, available for purchase on the Fall 2012 iMix, listed under “Additional Resources” at [lifeway.com/lifematters](http://lifeway.com/lifematters).

**KEY THOUGHT:** It’s far too easy to downplay our relationship with God when we allow fear and insecurity to determine our behavior.

**KEY QUESTION:** List some ways we deny knowing Jesus in our speech, actions, or lack of either.

## 1. DO YOU DENY CHRIST? (JOHN 18:15-18,25-27)

<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Simon Peter was following Jesus, as was another disciple. That disciple was an acquaintance of the high priest; so he went with Jesus into the high priest’s courtyard.

<sup>16</sup> But Peter remained standing outside by the door. So the other disciple, the one known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the girl who was the doorkeeper and brought Peter in. <sup>17</sup> Then the slave girl who was the doorkeeper said to Peter, “You aren’t one of this man’s disciples too, are you?” “I am not!” he said. <sup>18</sup> Now the slaves and the temple police had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold. They were standing there warming themselves, and Peter was standing with them, warming himself.

<sup>25</sup> Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They said to him, “You aren’t one of His disciples too, are you?” He denied it and said, “I am not!” <sup>26</sup> One of the high priest’s slaves, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, said, “Didn’t I see you with Him in the garden?” <sup>27</sup> Peter then denied it again. Immediately a rooster crowed.

Peter was one of the first men Jesus called to be disciples, along with his brother Andrew (Matthew 4). During Jesus’ three years of earthly ministry, Peter was present for some of the most miraculous moments, like the Transfiguration (Matthew 17). Peter exhibited great faith (like the time when he jumped out of the boat to walk on water, Matthew 14), and he was one of Jesus’ best friends.

However, Peter was an impulsive man, and his quickness to speak and act without thinking through the consequences often got him in trouble. When Jesus revealed His plan to die for humanity, Peter’s instinct was to protest, so he pulled Jesus aside and rebuked Him (Matthew 16:21-23). When the soldiers and priests came to arrest Jesus, Peter’s instinct was to fight, so he drew his sword and entered the fray (John 18:1-11), and when people questioned Peter about Jesus during Jesus’ trial, Peter denied any connection to Him.

- Have someone read John 18:15-18,25-27. How do you see Peter’s impulsiveness influencing his denial of Jesus?
- What are some of the dangers of always allowing yourself to be driven by instinct?
- Now have someone read John 13:33-38. Why was denying Jesus unfathomable to Peter?
- What emotions might Peter have felt in that moment when he realized Jesus’ prophecy came true?\*

Peter’s lie couldn’t have been further from the truth. He wouldn’t have been in the courtyard outside Jesus’ trial if he didn’t love Jesus, but fear and self-preservation kicked in, and he allowed those emotions to control him.

Peter blatantly denied his relationship with Jesus, and if we’re being totally honest, we know that we’ve done the same thing. Maybe we’ve never come right out and said we don’t know Jesus, but just because we’ve never said it out loud doesn’t mean we haven’t communicated the same thing with the choices we make.

- List some ways we deny knowing Jesus in our speech, actions, or lack of either.
- Do actions really speak louder than words? If so, what do your actions say about your relationship with Jesus?\*
- What measures can you take to avoid denying Jesus in the future?

Denying Jesus takes many forms, and it doesn’t have to be verbal. It’s far too easy to downplay our relationship with God when we allow fear and insecurity to determine our behavior. We should take a cue from Jesus, whose love motivated Him to be completely selfless, which included forgiving Peter for his denial.

## 2

## 2. DO YOU REALLY LOVE CHRIST? (JOHN 21:15-19)

<sup>15</sup> When they had eaten breakfast, Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said to Him, “You know that I love You.” “Feed My lambs,” He told him. <sup>16</sup> A second time He asked him, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” “Yes, Lord,” he said to Him, “You know that I love You.” “Shepherd My sheep,” He told him. <sup>17</sup> He asked him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved that He asked him the third time, “Do you love Me?” He said, “Lord, You know everything! You know that I love You.” “Feed My sheep,” Jesus said. <sup>18</sup> “I assure you: When you were young, you would tie your belt and walk wherever you wanted. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will tie you and carry you where you don’t want to go.” <sup>19</sup> He said this to signify by what kind of death he would glorify God. After saying this, He told him, “Follow Me!”

After that terrible night in the courtyard, Jesus was sentenced to death. His disciples, including Peter, looked on helplessly as their leader was crucified and buried. Thankfully, Jesus’ death wasn’t the end of the story. Three days after His death, He rose from the grave, just as He promised He would do (see John 19–20). In the aftermath of these events, Peter returned to the familiar world of fishing.

When we pick back up with Peter’s story in John 21, he has already seen the resurrected Jesus on three separate occasions: Easter morning (1 Corinthians 15:4-5), Easter evening (Matthew 20:19-23), and a week later (20:26-29). Regardless, that didn’t stop Peter from joyfully jumping out of the boat and swimming to shore when he spotted Jesus standing on the beach (21:7). Have someone read John 21:1-9.

- *What do you think was going through the disciples’ minds when they saw the resurrected Jesus standing on the shore?*
- *What does Peter’s rush to join Jesus say about him?*
- *Has shame over a past failure ever prevented you from running to Jesus? Why?*

Now have someone read John 21:15-19. Three times Peter had denied Jesus, and at this meeting on the shoreline, Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him three times, each canceling out a denial. Their dialogue makes it clear that in God’s eyes, love far outweighs failure. That kind of love would propel Peter to spend the rest of his life spreading the good news of the gospel.

- *If we believe Jesus knows everything we do and think, then why do we often try to hide our mistakes from Him?*
- *Look again at their dialogue in these verses. What did Jesus ask Peter to do? Based on what you know about Peter’s life, how did he handle the task?*

The first time he met Jesus, Peter was fishing. That day, Jesus called him out of the boat and invited Peter to follow Him. He issued the same invitation here, reminding Peter that there’s no going back to the way life was before. He couldn’t be a fisherman because he had more important work to do. He was given the responsibility of shepherding Jesus’ sheep.

Jesus extends His mercy to those who truly love Him, even if we feel like we’re unforgivable. Peter may have deemed himself useless, but as Jesus talked with him on the shore, He gently restored Peter to a place of useful ministry. He longs to do the same for all of us. Don’t let the shame of your past keep you from reuniting with Jesus. He’s ready to forgive. Are you ready to receive it?

- *In what ways are you encouraged by Jesus’ conversation with Peter?\**



*For a clearer vision of God, read J. I. Packer’s classic, Knowing God.*

**KEY THOUGHT:** In God’s eyes, love far outweighs failure. That kind of love would propel Peter to spend the rest of his life spreading the good news of the gospel.

**KEY QUESTION:** *In what ways are you encouraged by Jesus’ conversation with Peter?*

## 3



View before and after photos of “The Biggest Loser” contestants at [nbc.com](http://nbc.com).

**KEY THOUGHT:** If you’ve messed up, take a cue from Peter—accept God’s forgiveness, learn from your experience, and move on.

**KEY QUESTIONS:** *Do you put yourself in a position to be used by God in miraculous ways? If not, what holds you back?*

### 3. DO YOU STAND UP FOR CHRIST? (ACTS 4:13,18-20)

<sup>13</sup> When they observed the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed and recognized that they had been with Jesus.

<sup>18</sup> So they called for them and ordered them not to preach or teach at all in the name of Jesus. <sup>19</sup> But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it’s right in the sight of God for us to listen to you rather than to God, you decide; <sup>20</sup> for we are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

Quite a change came over Peter after Jesus returned to heaven. In Acts, there are no traces of the Peter who huddled fearfully in the high priest’s courtyard. That Peter is gone, replaced with a Peter who was bold and passionate about completing the work Jesus entrusted to him. Emboldened by the Holy Spirit, Peter was no longer afraid, and he was preaching and healing in Jesus’ name.

- Compare and contrast Peter in these verses to Peter in the courtyard. What differences are evident?
- How do you explain the change that came over him?

When we finally release our fears and commit to live boldly for Jesus, He empowers us to do things we never imagined ourselves capable of. When that happens, people sit up and take notice. Whenever Peter had an opportunity to talk about Jesus, he did so without shame, and people were coming to Christ by the thousands—literally. God doesn’t call the equipped; He equips the called. Peter is a prime example of that truth in action. As long as we’re motivated by His love and fueled by His Spirit, He’ll take care of the rest.

- What did Peter’s newfound boldness communicate about his commitment to Christ?
- Do you really believe God can accomplish extraordinary things through you? Why or why not?
- Do you put yourself in a position to be used by God in miraculous ways? If not, what holds you back?

The priests and scribes were astonished that an ordinary man like Peter could cause such a stir in Jerusalem. They thought they had put an end to Jesus’ influence when they crucified Him, but it was obvious that their plan had backfired. Jesus’ disciples were performing miracles in the temple and powerfully sharing Jesus’ story with anyone who would listen. To make matters worse, when confronted and threatened, the disciples refused to stop what they were doing. They were on a mission from God, and they weren’t going to let anyone stop them from completing it.

- If you have time, have group members read *Matthew 7:28-29; Mark 1:22; Luke 20:19-26; and John 7:15*, and discuss the similarities between this scene and different moments in Jesus’ ministry.\*

Read Acts 4:19 again. That’s a far cry from the timidity Peter demonstrated after Jesus’ arrest. Yes, Peter messed up, but his failure didn’t define him. Instead, he spent the rest of his life boldly serving the Lord. Through our actions and words, we can bring glory to God just as easily as we can deny our relationship with Him. If you’ve messed up, take a cue from Peter—accept God’s forgiveness, learn from your experience, and move on. Decide to be different from here on out, and take a stand for Jesus by living out the gospel truth.



## AND FINALLY

Failure only defines us when we let it. God is always willing to forgive us when we mess up, but sometimes the bigger hurdle is forgiving ourselves. All the people we studied this month made mistakes but also had significant moments of transformation. It's time to let go of the past and walk confidently into the future with a new resolve to live out the implications of the gospel, with lives that look like the kingdom people we talked about last month. Don't look back—the gospel of Jesus has redeemed your past and compels you to live each day for Him.

- *What does Peter's story teach you about moving on from your past and not letting it define you?*
- *Are you taking a stand for Jesus in all areas of your life? If not, why not? In what areas do you need to practice boldness for Christ?*

## LEAD YOUR CLASS TO CONNECT

Direct group members to turn to page 79 of the Learner Guide. Go over "Connect with Your World" with the class as a whole and encourage them to care for Jesus' sheep.

## WITH YOUR WORLD

Imagine how differently church history may have unfolded if Peter hadn't moved on from his failure and served God in the way he did. Through the Holy Spirit, he led thousands of people to Christ. You may never preach before thousands, but that doesn't mean you don't have anything to contribute to the world around you. Jesus instructed Peter to care for His sheep, His children. How are you taking care of God's people? Here are some suggestions to get you started:

- Volunteer to drive an elderly church member to and from doctor appointments. As you travel, get to know the person and his/her life story.
- Spend a Saturday helping repair storm damage in a hard-hit area of town. As you work, speak openly about your faith with the people around you.
- When coworkers ask how you've been, don't just say "fine," use it as an opportunity to tell them what God has been doing in your life lately.
- The next time you're eating fast food, pay for the order of the person behind you. When asked why, explain that it's a way of letting him know that God loves him.

## AS A COUPLE

Direct couples to read through their section together this week and remain on the lookout for ways they can strengthen their relationship with each other and with God.



### Conclude the Lesson

*Wrap up the discussion by addressing the personal application questions listed in the And Finally section. If your group is too large, split them into smaller groups. Allow enough time to process the lesson and application.*

*You can include discussion of the Connect section during the session or during their small-group time.*

### Pray with Your Group

*As you close in prayer, thank God for the transforming power of His grace in our lives. Praise Him for His faithfulness to us, no matter how many times we stumble. Pray encouraging words of hope over your group, and remind them of the confidence they have in who they are in Christ.*

## 1

## UNDENIABLE GRACE

## 1. DO YOU DENY CHRIST?

John 18:15-18,25-27

The stage had been set. Jesus was arrested and delivered to Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest. In the night, the drama in the city of Jerusalem unfolded with Roman guards and temple police tying Jesus up in the garden of Gethsemane and taking Him to Annas (18:12-14). As they led Jesus away, two disciples followed Him. One went inside the door into the courtyard with Jesus, while Peter remained standing outside. As John wrote about what happened next, he didn't give the identity of the disciple who went inside; instead, he focused his attention on Peter.

After the other disciple invited Peter into the courtyard, people approached Peter with questions about his connection with Jesus. Apparently no one asked the other disciple any questions, perhaps because Annas and the others who gathered there had already become acquainted with him

step toward failure in living up to his pledge of loyalty to Jesus.

Notice that the doorkeeper asked Peter the question about his connection with Jesus in a way that gave him an easy opportunity to lie. Apparently she was not sure whether Peter was one of Jesus' disciples, so she asked the question to be certain. But she put the question to him in a way that would tempt him to give her the answer she wanted. Instead of taking a stand for Christ then and there with his answer, Peter gave in to the temptation and answered her question by denying Him (vv. 16-17).

John didn't tell us about Peter's personal reaction to his own failure to tell the truth about his relationship with Christ. Perhaps he surprised himself with his denial. Maybe he reasoned to himself that nobody else there would ask him any more questions about Jesus. He may have determined in his mind that he would screw up his courage and proclaim his identity with Jesus the next time someone asked him about it. He might have



The following articles relate to this lesson and can be found in the Fall 2012 issue of Biblical Illustrator or on the Fall 2012 Biblical Illustrator Plus (CD-ROM):

- "The Life of Simon Peter" (Winter 1987)
- "Peter's Shepherd Assignment" (Summer 2001)
- "The Sanhedrin, Their History and Function" (Summer 2008)

Biblical Illustrator is available for purchase at [lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator).

## INSTEAD OF TAKING A STAND FOR CHRIST, PETER GAVE IN TO THE TEMPTATION BY DENYING HIM.

(v. 15). Maybe they already knew why he had come there. His devotion to Jesus compelled him to go through the door into the courtyard. However, Peter's relationship with Jesus must have been more of a mystery to them. Seemingly, they didn't know him or the connection between him and Jesus, so through the night they asked him questions about it. John wrote about three particular questions people asked Peter.

The first question came from the doorkeeper. John didn't say much about her. She probably was one of Annas' slaves. John wrote that the other disciple spoke to her and brought Peter in to the courtyard. At some point, perhaps when she turned her face to Peter, however, she asked him a question. That's when Peter took his first

resolved to never let Jesus down again.

However, the second time someone asked Peter a question about Jesus, he failed once more. The second question came from some of the temple police and slaves as they stood around a charcoal fire. After the doorkeeper questioned Peter, he retreated to the fire where they had gathered to keep themselves warm on the cold night (v. 18).

John shifted the scene from Peter to the courtyard where Annas questioned Jesus. The scene became ugly as Jesus answered Annas' questions in a way that prompted one of the officers to strike Him. After Annas had completed his interrogation, he sent Jesus to Caiaphas (vv. 19-24).

Meanwhile, Peter stood by the fire in silence. John didn't tell us if Peter heard



## 2

**2. DO YOU REALLY LOVE CHRIST?**

John 21:15-19

Caiaphas, the high priest, turned Jesus over to Pilate with a request to have Him crucified. After debating with the religious leaders, Pilate eventually gave the order to crucify Jesus. After His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus appeared to some of His disciples who had gone fishing on the Sea of Galilee, and He prepared breakfast for them. There He initiated a conversation with Peter that reflected His love for His disciple who had failed (18:28–21:14).

After breakfast, Jesus turned to Peter and began the conversation. On the night of Jesus' arrest, Peter answered three questions by denying Him three times. Now in the conversation after breakfast, Jesus also asked him three questions. Each of them had to do with Peter's love for Jesus. Likewise, each of them gave Peter an opportunity to look into his heart so he could give honest answers about how

than the other disciples who had gone fishing with him did (21:2). Or He could have been asking if Peter loved Him more than the 153 fish they had just caught in the Sea of Galilee (v. 11). Or He could have wanted to know if Peter loved Him more than he loved his fellow disciples. Taken any of these ways, the question got to the priority of Peter's devotion to Christ.

Peter's answer to the question reflected a sincere testimony regarding how much Jesus actually mattered to him. He could never forget how he had faltered on the night he denied Jesus three times. He also recognized that Jesus knew what was in his heart. For that reason, Peter didn't try to deceive Jesus or keep anything from Him. He told Jesus the absolute truth about his love for Him. Jesus responded to Peter's answer by calling him to ministry. Peter had been a fisherman all of his life. Now Jesus directed him to be a shepherd. In his role as a shepherd, Peter wouldn't tend to his own sheep. Instead, he would be feeding the Lord's lambs. (See this lesson's

**JESUS RESPONDED TO PETER'S ANSWER BY CALLING HIM TO MINISTRY.**

much Christ actually meant to him. Also, they emphasized Jesus' love for Peter and His willingness to restore him.

Bible scholars have pondered the value of the two Greek words for "love" in the conversation. Some of them have maintained that the two words played a critical role in understanding Jesus' strategy as He confronted Peter about his failure. Others, however, have insisted that other details of the conversation deserve more attention. All of them would agree that the issue that Jesus raised with Peter involved love and the way He wanted the failed disciple to express it in the future.

Jesus' first question introduced a comparison that is somewhat vague. Scholars have wondered what Jesus had in mind when He mentioned *these* in His question to Peter. Jesus could have been asking Peter whether he loved Him more

phrase study on "Feed My Lambs.") In other words, Christ commissioned Peter to devote himself exclusively to ministering to people who would belong to Him.

The second question Jesus put to Peter was more straightforward. He simply asked Peter if he loved Him. Again, Peter answered Jesus' question with honesty and sincerity. In fact, he uttered the very same words as he used when he replied to Jesus' first question. In turn, Jesus responded, repeating His call for Peter to serve Him as a shepherd feeding His sheep. With Jesus' response, He confirmed again His commissioning of Peter to serve Him in ministry. He intended for Peter to devote himself to a life of ministry to others who yearned for a personal relationship with Him like sheep longing for nourishment.

Jesus' third question continued to drive home the point about Peter's future

**Feed My Lambs****(John 21:15; also vv. 16,17)**

*The picture of God as a shepherd appears throughout the Bible.*

*In Psalm 23, David compared the Lord to a caring shepherd.*

*In John 10:11, Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd. He also commanded Peter to "feed My lambs."*

*With His commission, He had in mind Peter's future role in ministry. Using the image of a shepherd, Jesus commissioned Peter to minister to the people who would belong to Him once they received His gift of salvation.*

*Using the image of a shepherd, Jesus commissioned Peter to minister to the people who would belong to Him once they received His gift of salvation.*

ministry. Peter's reply demonstrated his heartfelt willingness to be completely open and honest with Jesus about the depth of his love for Him. Jesus' response to Peter's reply made His commission to His failed disciple perfectly clear. From that moment on, Peter would devote himself to ministry. Peter didn't need to see himself as a disciple who failed to live up to his commitment to Christ. Now he could see himself as a restored disciple who had a renewed call from his Lord to minister to people who would belong to Him.

Jesus went on to tell Peter about his future as a spiritual shepherd. He painted a realistic picture of how Peter's life would come to an end. One day Peter would no longer be able to control what happened to him. In due time, others would take control of his life and bring it to an end. At the same time, Jesus assured Peter that God would be glorified in the way he would die. Then Jesus commanded Peter to follow Him. Following Jesus into the future would exhibit Peter's love for Him.

- *Do failures in your past hinder you from serving Christ in the present?*
- *Imagine that you were standing on the beach with Jesus that day. How would you answer His questions?*
- *In what ways are you fulfilling the call that Jesus has placed on your life?*
- *How does Jesus' conversation with Peter comfort you about your past mistakes?*
- *Read John 21:15-19 and underline the four commands Jesus gave Peter. If you have failed Jesus but stand ready to earnestly, sincerely affirm your love for Him, He stands ready to use you, too.*

## 3

## 3. DO YOU STAND UP FOR CHRIST?

Acts 4:13,18-20

In due time, Jesus gathered His disciples, and they witnessed His ascension. Before He ascended to heaven, He assured them they would receive the Holy Spirit. When they received the Holy Spirit, they would bear witness of Jesus with boldness. At the festival called Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came, and Peter proclaimed a dynamic Christ-centered message in His power. As a result of the Spirit's work through Peter's message, 3000 people were saved (Acts 1:4–2:42).

Soon afterward, Peter preached again, and many more people received Christ. The religious leaders tried to put a stop to Peter's preaching. They arrested him and John and threw them into jail. After spending the night there, the religious leaders called the two disciples to appear before them and explain why they preached about Christ (4:1-12).

Peter spoke up with such boldness about Jesus the religious leaders reacted with astonishment to Peter's defense of his message (v. 13). Obviously, Peter's

through Christ the Lord, whom he loved with his whole heart.

The dynamic change in Peter's life serves as an encouraging example to us. When we find ourselves defeated by our failures to live out our convictions about Christ, we don't have to settle for being sidelined. Neither should our failures force us into the shadows of shyness when it comes to letting others see Christ in us. Like Peter, we can go from timidity to boldness when we turn to the Lord for help. We can trust Him to strengthen us with His presence so we can serve Him with confidence. And like Peter and John, people will see our boldness and recognize that we have been with Jesus.

That's what the religious leaders recognized as they observed Peter. However, their awareness of the disciples' courage didn't stop them from taking steps to get the matter regarding the message of Christ under control. Asserting their authority, they ordered the two disciples to stop their proclamation in Jesus' name. The authorities thought that if they could silence the message about Christ, the movement surrounding Him would lose momentum and eventually die.

## PETER'S LIFE WAS DIFFERENT BECAUSE OF JESUS.

boldness had surprised them. His courageous proclamation about Christ in the presence of the religious leaders stood in stark contrast to his denials of Christ on the night of His arrest. Then he had behaved like a coward, denying he even knew Jesus. Now he stood up for Jesus and caught his accusers off guard with his confidence.

Peter's life was different because of Jesus. When Jesus confronted Peter in love at breakfast with a desire to restore him, things began to change for the faltering disciple. He became a loyal apostle who would never again deny Jesus. He personified fearlessness in the face of opposition. When the Holy Spirit came, He empowered Peter to preach with confidence the message of salvation

But they didn't factor in the boldness of the disciples when they gave their order. The Holy Spirit who had empowered them to preach made them bold as they took their stand for Christ in the presence of the religious leaders. They showed they would not relent in their commitment to stand for Him, regardless of what would happen to them along the way. If the religious leaders determined that the disciples disobeyed God by speaking up for Christ, then those leaders would be free to act accordingly. However, their judgment of the disciples' proclamation of Christ would not prevent His followers from declaring the gospel message.

Notice in particular the kind of information Peter and John would declare in

- *Has God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, ever enabled you to do something you thought you couldn't do? If so, describe the experience.*
- *Do you have the courage to speak boldly in the name of Christ like Peter did? If not, what's stopping you?*
- *In what ways are you trusting God to enable you to do the work He has set before you?*
- *What have you seen and heard about Jesus? Are you willing to boldly share those experiences with others?*
- *You probably won't stand before the nation's highest court as Peter did, but you do and will have opportunities to stand up for Christ (or fail to). Very possibly you can already anticipate such an opportunity—Who will it involve? Where might it occur? What are the likely issues? How will you prepare to take a stand for Christ?*

