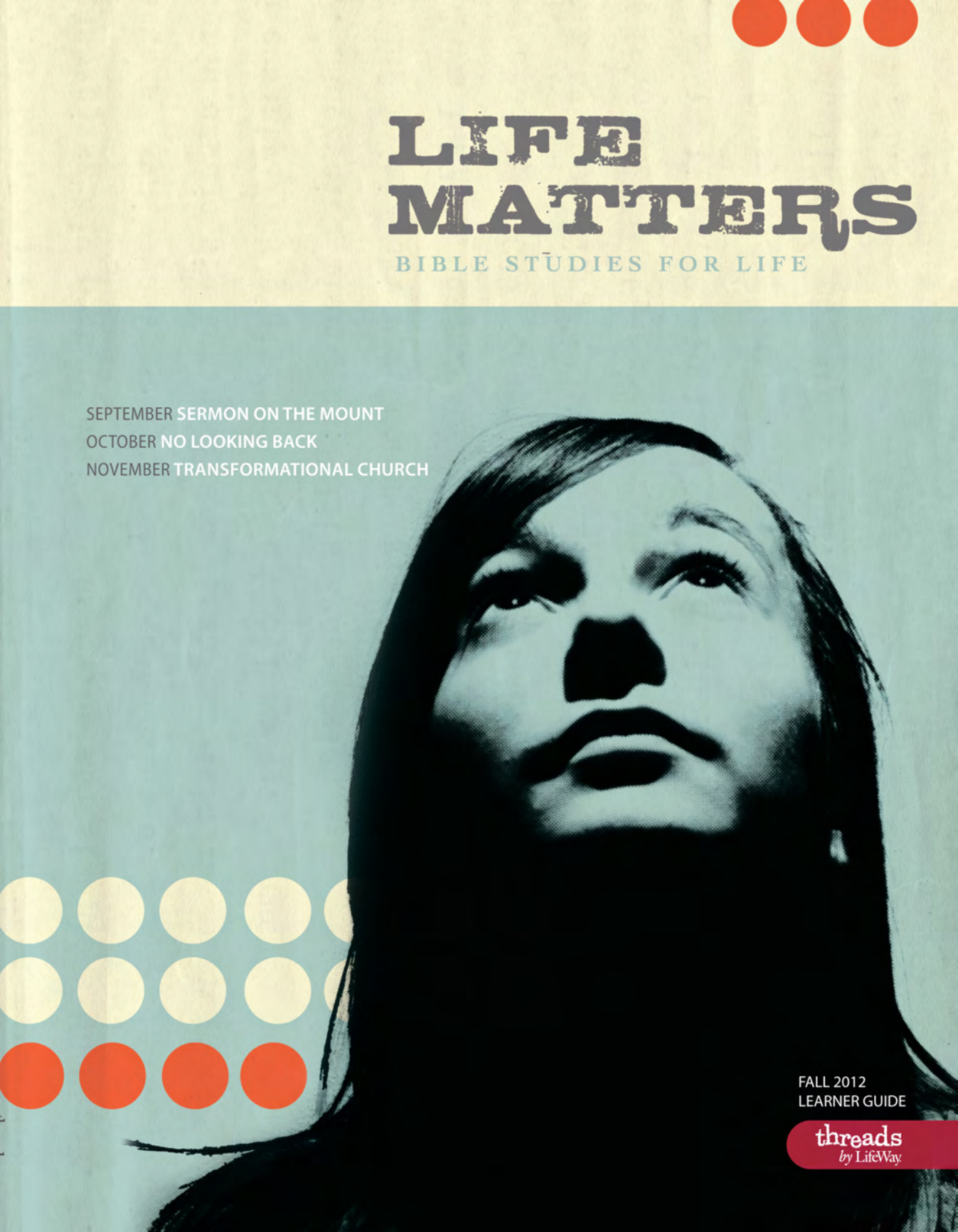




LIFE MATTERS

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

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



FALL 2012
LEARNER GUIDE

threads
by LifeWay

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FALL 2012

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 4

4 SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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.

46 NO LOOKING BACK

Most of us have things in our past that we're not proud of. We've made mistakes we regret—and we're not alone. Be encouraged by the stories of four biblical characters who didn't let their past failures keep them from living each day in God's grace.

80 TRANSFORMATIONAL CHURCH

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.



November's study is inspired by the book *Transformational Church*, by Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer. Find out more about the book and other Transformational Church resources at lifeway.com.

ICON LEGEND



Things to listen to



Things to watch



Expanding on biblical concepts



Fun facts and useful tidbits of information



Digging deeper into study concepts



On the Web

MEET THE WRITERS

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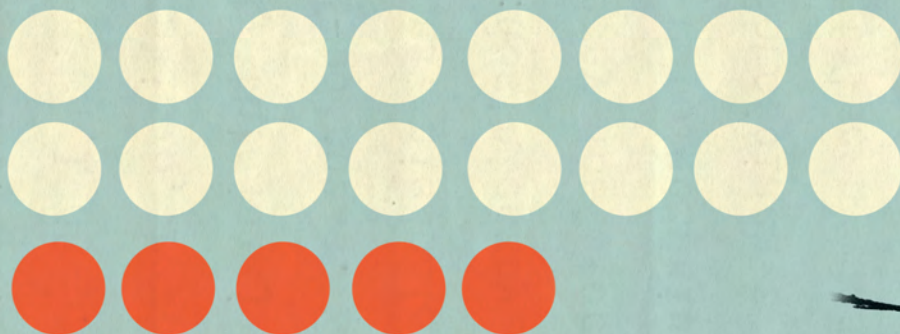
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NEXT ISSUE

- **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.

No Looking Back

WHAT IT MEANS TO MOVE FORWARD BY THE GRACE OF GOD



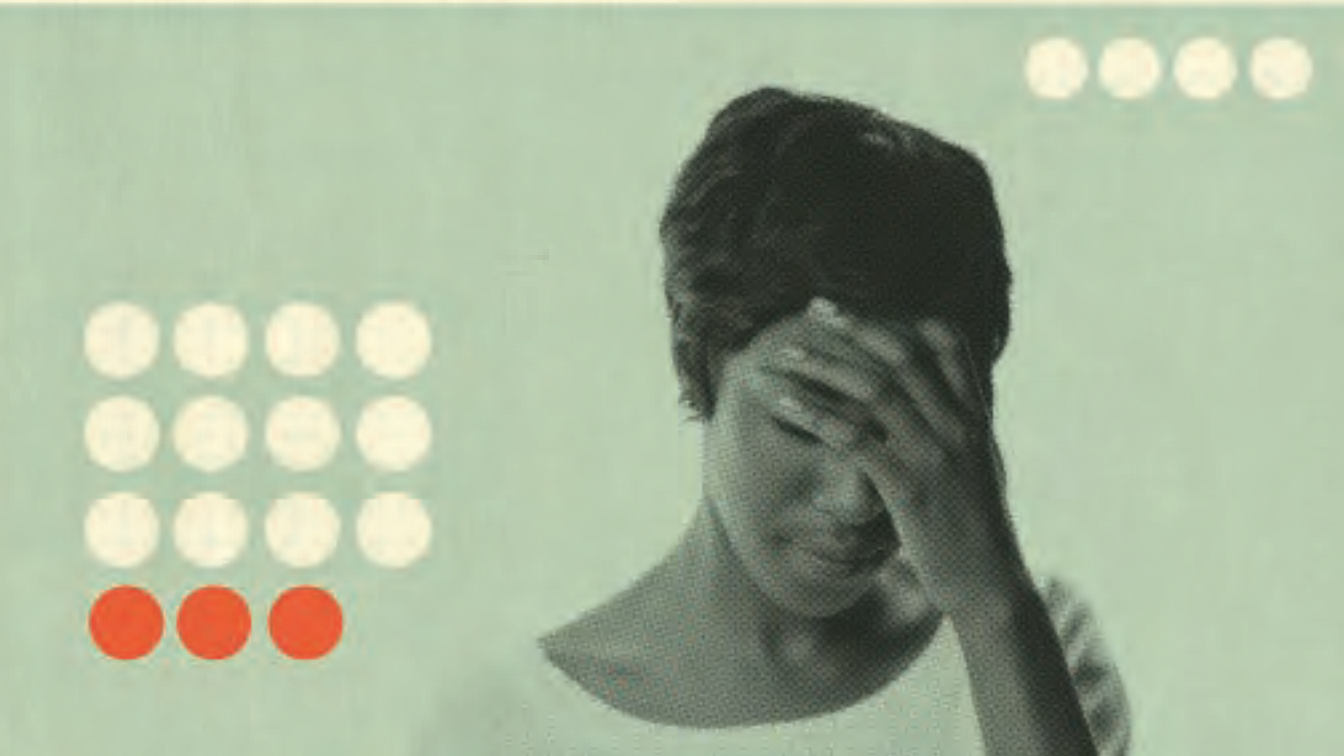


Failure, unfortunately, is something we're all familiar with. Failed classes. Failed relationships. Failed projects. Failed ideas. Failed commitments. Failed dreams. Whether we like it or not, mistakes and hiccups are a part of life, and Christians aren't immune.

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.

Free from Your Past



JESUS AND THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

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?

ADMIT YOUR THIRST

JOHN 4:7-14

Very few of us have ever felt what it's like not to have our most basic needs met. We have shelter, food, and water at our fingertips. We're educated and have marketable skills. Our transportation is reliable (most of the time). We enjoy enriching relationships that meet our needs for connection, and thanks to the cell phones in our pockets, we're always in touch.

Here's the problem, though: When we have no perceivable needs, it's hard to see a need for God. But in truth, we're dependent on Him for everything, whether we realize it or not. Would it be easier to recognize our need for the living water of Jesus if we didn't have an overabundance of running water, like the Samaritan woman making her daily trip to the well? Is it possible that in vigilantly taking care of our physical needs, we overlook our spiritual ones—like our needs for salvation, redemption, and eternal life? Not to mention our needs for depth, meaning, fulfillment, boundless love, overflowing joy, and inextinguishable hope? What about our desperate search for purpose and worth?

It's not enough simply to have all of our material needs met. Our souls have needs as well, the greatest of which is our need for Jesus. He alone can satisfy our spiritual cravings. Those are the needs that can only be met in Jesus: "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" (John 4:14).

How does your need for Jesus affect your daily life?

At this moment, what are your three greatest spiritual needs? What can you do today to give them attention?

**WHEN WE HAVE NO
PERCEIVABLE NEEDS,
IT'S HARD TO SEE A
NEED FOR GOD.**



"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. Lewis¹



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

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

CONFRONT YOUR FAILURE

JOHN 4:15-18

We all know people who are perfectionists. Memories of a game-changing missed shot haunt them, and beware the professor who had the audacity to give their project a “B.” Nobody likes failure, but perfectionists have an especially hard time dealing with it. They either drive themselves crazy refusing to admit defeat, or they altogether avoid situations where they may not succeed. Perfectionists are usually strung out and stressed, and it’s obvious to anyone who observes them that avoiding failure takes much more effort than accepting it and moving on.

Maybe you’ve been there. You didn’t make the grade you expected. Your longest-lasting relationship crashed and burned. You didn’t get the job you desperately wanted, or you lost the job you loved so much. You’re swimming in debt. You didn’t live up to your spouse’s expectations. You didn’t live up to your own expectations. You failed. Well, you know what? That’s OK. We all fail from time to time. It’s learning how to overcome those moments that matters.

THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, GOD HAS OFFERED US A WAY UP AND OUT OF OUR SIN.

The first step to getting over our mistakes is admitting that we messed up and then putting it in perspective. The problem isn’t that we make mistakes, that we fail to meet a personal standard, or that we hurt someone around us. Those are all consequences of the bigger problem—that we sinned, we failed to live up to God’s expectations.

Romans 3:23 says that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We’re all sinners who have not lived up to God’s ideal, but the good news is that through Jesus Christ, God has offered us a way up and out of our sin. To claim that remarkable truth for ourselves, we must first confess our sin and admit that we’re not perfect after all.

What’s your greatest failure? Do you have a hard time admitting it?

Do you make it a habit to confess your sins to God? Why or why not? Why is it important to make confession a part of your life?

How has admitting your failures enhanced your relationship with God?



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.

SHARE YOUR STORY

JOHN 4:25-26,39

If you've ever been on an airplane, you know the drill. After you board and shove your slightly-too-large carry-on bag into the overhead compartment, you watch other passengers struggle to do the same. While the plane taxis toward the runway, flight attendants cover safety procedures, either by video or demonstration. I've always been fascinated by the way the flight attendants coil the tube of the oxygen masks in their hands and then drop them from the ceiling to show you what happens when the plane loses cabin pressure. The flight attendants are adamant that you first secure your own mask before attempting to help others with theirs. If you're unconscious, you're of no use at all.

Figuratively speaking, as soon as that elastic strap slapped the back of the Samaritan woman's head, she started directing the people around her to the Source of life: "Then the woman left her water jar, went into town, and told the men, 'Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could this be the Messiah?' " (John 4:28-29). Her encounter with Jesus transformed her and motivated her to introduce Him to others.

The Samaritan woman didn't have to respond that way. She could've glued herself to Jesus' side, soaked up all His teaching, and ignored the people in the town, leaving them to fool with their own oxygen masks, so to speak. So, which type of person are you: the one who is only concerned with his/her own life, or the one who wants others to have their own life-saving encounter with the Son of God?

Make a list of lost people you interact with on a daily basis. Tape the list to your bathroom mirror and commit to encourage them with truth this week.

**THE SAMARITAN WOMAN'S
ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS
TRANSFORMED HER
AND MOTIVATED HER TO
INTRODUCE HIM TO OTHERS.**



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.

JESUS AND THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

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

ADMIT YOUR THIRST (JOHN 4:7-14)

⁷ A woman of Samaria came to draw water.

"Give Me a drink," Jesus said to her, ⁸ for His disciples had gone into town to buy food.

⁹ "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.

¹⁰ 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."

¹¹ "Sir," said the woman, "You don't even have a bucket, and the well is deep. So where do You get this 'living water'?" ¹² 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."

¹³ Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks from this water will get thirsty again. ¹⁴ 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. Jesus wasn't like most Jews, though, and He knew His message of salvation includes Gentiles just like the Samaritan woman.

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?

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?

CONFRONT YOUR FAILURE (JOHN 4:15-18)

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

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

¹⁷“I don’t have a husband,” she answered.

“You have correctly said, ‘I don’t have a husband,’” Jesus said. ¹⁸“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.

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.

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.

What do you see when you look at yourself? Can you admit that you’ve failed God?

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

²⁵ The woman said to Him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When He comes, He will explain everything to us.”

²⁶ “I am He,” Jesus told her, “the One speaking to you.”

³⁹ 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.”

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. Ironically, the woman didn’t understand that she was speaking with the Messiah Himself.

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). 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.

What keeps you from sharing your testimony with others?

Who needs to hear your story today?

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?

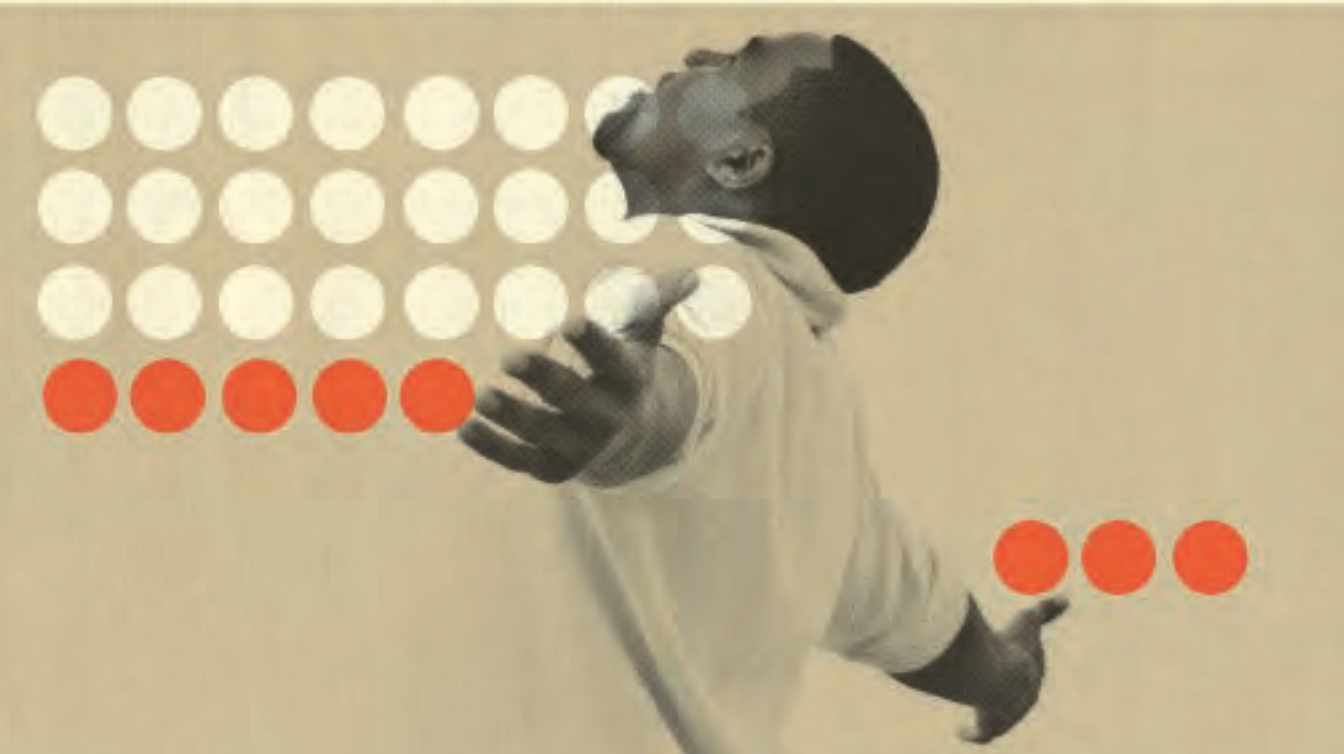
CONNECT

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.

Beyond a Shadow of a Doubt



ABRAHAM, SARAH, AND A PROMISE FROM GOD

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?

TRUST GOD

GENESIS 15:4-6

If you've ever been part of a team, chances are you've been subjected to your share of team-building exercises. Designed to foster teamwork, the activities range from the mundane to the absurd. Maybe you've been forced to navigate a maze while blindfolded, following verbal directions from your partner; or perhaps you've had to squeeze 14 people onto a 1-foot square; or maybe you participated in the "human knot."

The mother of all team-building exercises, though, is the trust fall. Here's how it works: One person stands on a raised platform and must fall backward into the arms of his or her teammates. The experience is a true act of trust, because if the teammates don't catch the person, he or she falls and hits the ground. Before taking the fall, the person must believe that the people below are trustworthy, that they'll do what they've said they'll do.

It's much easier to say we believe God than it is to actually take the plunge and prove our faith. But if we really trust God, then our lives will reflect it. Sometimes that means leaving behind what's comfortable to start a new adventure. Other times it means faithfully waiting on God to fulfill His promises. Choosing to trust God is like choosing to believe the impossible. Just like the person taking the trust fall, we've got to believe that God will catch us. We must trust that He will do what He has said He will do. And then, we've got to let go of anything that's holding us back and surrender to His love and His will. Are you ready to take the plunge?

Make a list of areas in which you need to trust God, then write down specific ways you will demonstrate your trust in each specific area. Pray out loud, committing to trust God's plan with each thing on your list.

IT'S MUCH EASIER TO SAY WE BELIEVE GOD THAN IT IS TO ACTUALLY TAKE THE PLUNGE AND PROVE OUR FAITH.



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*¹

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

AVOID TAKING CONTROL

GENESIS 16:1-5

Britt Reid imagines himself a hero in the classic tale *The Green Hornet*, a story that has been told in various comic book, TV, and movie adaptations since the 1930s. In reality, Reid isn't a hero, that title belongs to his sidekick and saving

GOD IS BIG ENOUGH TO REDEEM EVEN OUR WORST DECISIONS. IT'S UP TO US TO AVOID REPEATING THE MISTAKES OF OUR PAST.

grace, Kato. Reid is known for getting himself into trouble by not taking the advice of others and following his blind ambition. Only Kato's quick thinking saves the would-be superheroes from certain death, time and again.

From Reid, we're reminded that our rash decisions have serious consequences. If

we're being honest, we can admit we've all been there. Maybe our mistakes haven't led us into a deathtrap, but they've certainly led us out of God's will and into situations we shouldn't be in. Usually when this happens, it isn't intentional—we make a decision that seems like a good solution, and before we know it, we're facing consequences we never imagined. At some point along the way, we stop seeking God's guidance and lose our way.

This is where Abram and Sarai found themselves in Genesis 16. After years of trusting God and being faithful to Him, they lost their way momentarily. But through their story, we learn that God is big enough to redeem even our worst decisions. It's up to us to avoid repeating the mistakes of our past. How do we do that? By seeking God each day, all day. We abide in His Word. We take advice from trusted counselors. We wait on His lead. And we live as the believers He's called us to be. When we do that, we'll be exactly where we're supposed to be, which is a much better place than the alternative.

How might you avoid taking matters into your own hands?

In what ways are you seeking God's direction today?

Who do you turn to for advice when you're making decisions? What makes them trustworthy counselors?



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).

REFOCUS ON GOD'S PLAN

GENESIS 17:3-6,15-19

A large number of adults need help to see clearly. Studies have shown that more than half of the population rely on glasses, contacts, or corrective surgery to improve their vision. If you have 20/20 vision, then you're in the minority, so count your blessings. If, however, you have less-than-perfect vision, you understand just how much it complicates your life.

Clear vision eludes most of us, and when it comes to matters of faith and belief, from time to time it eludes all of us. Sometimes we're so blinded by our own expectations, plans, or distractions that we completely miss the wonderful plan God is unfolding right in front of our eyes. When those moments of clarity come, and we're able to see how Almighty God has been working in and through us, we can't help but fall to our knees in surrender like Abram did in Genesis 17:3.

In those moments when we feel like we've lost sight of God and our faith seems blurry, we can refocus on Him by practicing spiritual disciplines. Devote yourself to regular worship and service. Make the study of His Word a priority in your life. Spend concentrated time in prayer and confession. All of these things help us know God and see His plans more clearly. As author and theologian J. I. Packer wrote, "What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the 'eternal life' that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight and contentment than anything else? Knowledge of God. What, of all the states God ever sees man in, gives God most pleasure? Knowledge of himself."²

What's holding you back from refocusing on God today?

Of the spiritual disciplines mentioned—worship, service, Bible study, prayer, confession—which do you find most helpful when your faith needs strengthening?

What are some other unmentioned disciplines that you could also practice?

**SOMETIMES WE'RE SO BLINDED
BY OUR OWN PLANS THAT WE
MISS THE WONDERFUL PLAN
GOD IS UNFOLDING RIGHT IN
FRONT OF OUR EYES.**



Visit 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.

2. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 33.

ABRAHAM, SARAH, AND A PROMISE FROM GOD

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.

TRUST GOD (GENESIS 15:4-6)

⁴ 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." ⁵ 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."

⁶ 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.

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).

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?

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.

How do you deal with the uncertainty that arises when promises remain unfulfilled?

Do you believe that God is trustworthy? Why or why not?

AVOID TAKING CONTROL (GENESIS 16:1-5)

¹ Abram's wife Sarai had not borne any children for him, but she owned an Egyptian slave named Hagar. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ He slept with Hagar, and she became pregnant. When she realized that she was pregnant, she treated her mistress with contempt. ⁵ 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.

What might have prompted Abram and Sarai to take matters into their own hands?

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. 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?

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.

What are some reasons why God might delay in fulfilling His promises?

How is God glorified through our patience?

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

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

¹⁵ God said to Abraham, "As for your wife Sarai, do not call her Sarai, for Sarah will be her name.

¹⁶ 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."

¹⁷ 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?" ¹⁸ So Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael were acceptable to You!"

¹⁹ 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?

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

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?

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?

CONNECT

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 If we're not intently focused on seeking God's direction, we can easily assume that our own plans came from God Himself. Abram and Sarai veered off-course when they skipped the step of testing their plan against the will of God. Commit to allow God to direct your paths. Here are some questions to discuss together:

How may we seek God's direction together? Who can we ask to mentor us?

In what ways can we encourage one another toward a deeper relationship with Christ? What are we doing to make sure our actions are in step with God's will?

The Secret to Contentment



LEARNING FROM MIRIAM'S FRUSTRATION WITH GOD

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?

CELEBRATE GOD'S WORK

EXODUS 15:19-21

Few things bring out a person's intensity like favorite sports teams. Fans paint their faces and camp out in parking lots before "the big game." They shout fight songs at the top of their lungs and jump up and down on rickety bleachers. If their team wins, it's thanks to athletic prowess. But if they lose, it's the referees' fault—always.

Who doesn't like to win, or cheer for the winning team? If you're a sports fan, you know very little in life is more satisfying than celebrating a victory. Sadly, we often feel more enthusiasm and excitement when our team beats its rival than when we worship God. We spend Saturday evenings cheering in the stands and Sunday mornings yawning in the pews. Where does the disconnect come from?

**DON'T BE AFRAID TO WORSHIP
GOD WITH ABANDON—LETTING
JOY, PRAISE, AND EXCITEMENT
GET THE BEST OF YOU.**

For starters, we must remember that a win on the playing field is a mere shadow of true victory, which comes from God alone. In Exodus 15:19-21, Miriam was so overcome with excitement about God's miraculous work in their Red Sea crossing that she couldn't stop herself from celebrating. As her joy spilled out, it was infectious (as joy often is), and a mass worship service ensued. The Israelites weren't afraid to let loose when they celebrated God's mighty work. They had tasted victory, and they acted like it.

We didn't cross the Red Sea with the Israelites, but we also have victory in God that's worth celebrating. In one fell swoop, Jesus conquered sin and death. And through Him, we can be victorious over both. Now that's something to get excited about! Don't be afraid to worship God with abandon—letting joy, praise, and excitement get the best of you. If you've truly tasted victory, you can't help but celebrate.

Everyone expresses joy and celebration differently. What might worshiping God with abandon look like for you?

What are some ways you can celebrate God's victory in your daily life?

If someone had observed your life yesterday, would that person know the joy you have in Christ? Why or why not?



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.

AVOID DISSATISFACTION

NUMBERS 12:1-3

Flipping through a stack of old photographs is like stepping into a fuzzy version of history. The images aren't quite as sharp as they used to be, and the colors have softened over time. Compared to the crystal-clear and vivid digital images we're accustomed to, vintage photos can seem a bit, well, faded. They didn't start out that way. At one time, they were bright and colorful, but as years passed, they became a little less vibrant than they used to be.

GOD IS GOOD ALL THE TIME—EVEN WHEN OUR CIRCUMSTANCES INDICATE OTHERWISE.

The slow fade of a photograph over time symbolizes what can happen to our faith and enthusiasm for God if we're not careful.

In those moments when we see God work in miraculous ways (like when we first became Christians), our faith is bright and vivid. But as life goes on, hardships creep in, and our focus shifts away from God and toward our circumstances. That same faith can lose its vibrancy. It's still there, just more dull and faded than it once was. That's what happened to Miriam. She started off full of faith and joy like we saw in Exodus 15, but she lost it bit by bit when she took her eyes off of God.

The only way to keep full-color faith is to fix your eyes on the One in whom you have believed. When we focus on God's unchangeable attributes, we remember that He is good all the time—even when our circumstances indicate otherwise. If we do that, it will be our worries that fade, not our faith. The old hymn says it best: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His goodness and grace."

Dwell on God's goodness and grace today. Remember times when you've personally experienced His presence in your life, and take note of your reflections. Look back on what you've written in the moments when your faith seems to be fading.



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.

BE REHABILITATED

NUMBERS 12:8-13,15

If your teenage years were anything like mine, you got a discipline speech from your parents on more than one occasion. I'm sure you remember those uncomfortable encounters when they used your

first *and* middle name to get your attention.

My parents always found out, and to this day I don't know how. The moment would come when I heard my full name (in that

unforgettable tone), and I cringed because I knew exactly what was about to happen. They would yell and I would be grounded for the rest of my life (after they took away my cell phone and car keys, of course). And there I sat reeling from the shock of the meeting.

Discipline is never an easy pill to swallow. It wasn't fun when it came from my parents, and it's even worse when it comes from God. Sometimes, though, a tiny bit of relief accompanies the "being found out." When you do get caught doing something wrong, then all the anxiety you had about getting caught goes away. The game is over. Everyone knows you've messed up, and all you have to do is swallow that pride and accept the correction.

Miriam knew what it was like to experience the discipline of the Lord. Along with her physical punishment—leprosy—she was given a week on her own with God, a time that likely helped her restore her relationship with Him, learn from her mistake, and experience both physical and spiritual rehabilitation. It's times like these when we learn how strong our faith is and how much God loves us. We all mess up and must be disciplined, but it's important to remember that God's correction is always for the purpose of rehabilitation. A sure sign of mature faith is the ability to submit to God's discipline and accept the consequences of our actions. It's the only way we'll be able to move on.

How do you respond when people correct your behavior? Compare that with how you respond to God's correction.

Think back on a time when you've experienced spiritual rehabilitation. What were the circumstances surrounding that time, and how were you changed?

A SURE SIGN OF MATURE FAITH IS THE ABILITY TO SUBMIT TO GOD'S DISCIPLINE.



Rehabilitate (verb)

1. to restore to a former capacity; reinstate
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

LEARNING FROM MIRIAM'S FRUSTRATION WITH GOD

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.

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

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her with their tambourines and danced. ²¹ 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?

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 might focusing on God fuel our praise?

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.

AVOID DISSATISFACTION (NUMBERS 12:1-3)

¹ Miriam and Aaron criticized Moses because of the Cushite woman he married (for he had married a Cushite woman). ² They said, "Does the LORD speak only through Moses? Does He not also speak through us?" And the LORD heard it. ³ 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.

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.

Do you think God can handle your frustrations and emotions? Is that evident in your relationship with Him?

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.

What are some practical ways you've learned to prevent the roots of discontentment from settling into your heart?

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

⁸“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?”⁹ The LORD’s anger burned against them, and He left.

¹⁰ 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 diseased¹¹ and said to Moses, “My lord, please don’t hold against us this sin we have so foolishly committed. ¹² 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.”

¹³ Then Moses cried out to the LORD, “God, please heal her!”

¹⁵ 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?

Read verses 9-12. How did God respond to Miriam’s questioning?

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. 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?

God never disciplines His people haphazardly. It’s always for the purpose of realigning us to His standard.

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?

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?

CONNECT

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 riff 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?



PETER'S JOURNEY—FROM DENYING JESUS TO LIFE-LONG DEVOTION

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?

DO YOU DENY CHRIST?

JOHN 18:15-18,25-27

Have you ever had a friend act ashamed of you? When you're hanging out alone, you get along great. But when you're in a crowd, he or she acts as if you're a stranger. A relationship like that isn't fun; it's awkward and stressful. In truth, it's not a friendship at all, because real friends don't act like that. Real friends love you for who you are, and they could care less what others think of you.

Healthy friendships are mutually beneficial. You spend so much time together that you start to rub off on each other—you laugh at the same jokes, say the same thing at the same time, and share the same mannerisms. Plus, you have fun together whether you're hanging out alone or with a group. If I had to choose between those two types of friends, I'd choose the latter. Who wouldn't?

When someone who is supposed to be your friend acts like you don't exist, it hurts. We hate it when people do it to us, and we vow that we would never treat someone else that way. In today's passage, Peter acted like he didn't know Jesus when in a crowd of His enemies. Forget the fact that just a few days earlier Peter vowed to stand up for his friend, no matter what. When fear took over, he quickly forgot his promise, and his only concern was for himself.

If we were in Peter's shoes, many of us would've responded the same way. We've all denied our connection to Jesus at one point or another, with either our words or our actions. Our challenge is to stop living like we don't know Jesus and start introducing others to Him. That becomes instinct when we're committed to investing in our relationship with Him every single day.

This past week, did you spend more time ignoring your connection to Jesus or strengthening it? Was that a normal week for you?

What adjustments do you need to make so that your life will reflect your relationship with God?

**OUR CHALLENGE IS TO
STOP LIVING LIKE WE
DON'T KNOW JESUS AND
START INTRODUCING
OTHERS TO HIM.**



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.

DO YOU REALLY LOVE CHRIST?

JOHN 21:15-19

Aline Umegwaneza was 16 when the genocide began in Rwanda, an experience she describes as “very scary . . . very sad. We did not have hope.” Government soldiers hunted down “traitors,” killing people every minute of every day for three months. Aline’s family fled their village, but when her mom stopped to help a neighbor, it was the last Aline saw of her. Her mom was a victim of the murders.

Aline and her siblings waited out the rest of the genocide in a refugee camp, but after they returned home, a family who wanted their property killed Aline’s

brothers and sisters, leaving her alone and again on the run.

“REGARDLESS OF THE SITUATION, JESUS CAN SHOW YOU FORGIVENESS.”

Aline finally found shelter with an old classmate, whose mom told her about Jesus and took her to church: “Every time I go to

the church, they speak about forgiveness. I said, ‘What about the people who have killed my family, my siblings?’” Miraculously, Aline was eventually able to forgive them, and she attributes her forgiveness to a peace God gave her and the freedom she found in Jesus. As a missionary, she encourages others that regardless of the situation, Jesus can show you forgiveness.¹

Jesus wants us to embrace forgiveness like Aline did, because it’s the same forgiveness He modeled when He forgave His murderers as He hung on the cross (Luke 23:34), and when He forgave Peter for denying Him. In Jesus, Peter (like Aline) found the love, grace, and restoration he longed for. We’ve all denied that we care about Jesus at one point or another, and though the shame of that failure may prompt us to turn and run, if our love for Him is genuine, the only place we need to run to is into His arms. There we will find grace and forgiveness. And, in the end, that’s all that we truly need.

Aline’s love for Jesus motivated her to forgive. Do you owe someone forgiveness? What’s holding you back?

On the other hand, Peter needed Jesus’ forgiveness. What do you need Jesus’ forgiveness for today? Spend a few minutes in prayerful confession and repentance, then accept the forgiveness Jesus is extending to you.



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

1. Christine McWorter, “Aline Umegwaneza: Forgiving Genocide,” April 6, 1994 [cited 27 February 2012]. Available from the Internet: www.cbn.com.

DO YOU STAND UP FOR CHRIST?

ACTS 4:13,18-20

Before and after photos are fascinating, and weight loss photos are some of the most dramatic. The hit NBC show “The Biggest Loser” has shown us just how shocking such a transformation can be. When you view the before and after photos of the show’s finalists, it’s sometimes hard to believe they’re the same person.

That’s what it’s like to look at Peter in the Book of Acts compared to Peter in the Gospels. For all of his faith and love for Jesus, in the Gospels he’s impulsive and often motivated by his emotions; he displayed fear and insecurity on the night he denied Jesus. In Acts, though, he’s quite the opposite. His faith is mature, and he expertly leads the fledgling church with boldness through threats, imprisonments, and persecution. It’s hard to believe we’re reading about the same Peter.

PEOPLE WHO KNEW YOU BEFORE CHRIST SHOULD BE SHOCKED BY THE TRANSFORMATION THE HOLY SPIRIT HAS MADE IN YOU.

So, what’s the explanation for Peter’s transformation? The presence of the Holy Spirit. The kind of transformation Peter experienced is only possible when we relinquish our lives to the control and direction of God’s Spirit. He lives within each and every person who has surrendered to Christ, transforming us into the likeness of Jesus and enabling us to do the work to which God has called us. Take a look at your own life. You should be able to tell a difference between the person you were before you met Christ and the person you are today. People who knew you before Christ should be shocked by the transformation the Holy Spirit has made in you.

How have you changed since you became a believer?

In what ways have you seen the Holy Spirit at work in your life?

Are you living in complete surrender to His direction? Why or why not?



View before and after photos of “The Biggest Loser” contestants at nbc.com.

PETER'S JOURNEY—FROM DENYING JESUS TO LIFE-LONG DEVOTION

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.

Is failing at something, like class or a job assignment, acceptable to you? What does your answer say about your personality?

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

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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.

²⁵ 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!"

²⁶ 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?"

²⁷ Peter then denied it again. Immediately a rooster crowed.

Peter was an impulsive man, and his quickness to speak and act without thinking through the consequences often got him in trouble.

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?

Read John 13:33-38. Why was denying Jesus unfathomable to Peter?

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.

What measures can you take to avoid denying Jesus in the future?

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

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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.

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. ¹⁸ "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." ¹⁹ He said this to signify by what kind of death he would glorify God. After saying this, He told him, "Follow Me!"

When we pick back up with Peter's story in John 21, he has already seen the resurrected Jesus on three separate occasions. 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.

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?

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?

What did Jesus ask Peter to do? Based on what you know about Peter's life, how did he handle the task?

Jesus extends His mercy to those who truly love Him, even if we feel like we're unforgiveable. 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?

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

¹³ 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.

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¹⁸ So they called for them and ordered them not to preach or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

¹⁹ 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; ²⁰ 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?

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?

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?

CONNECT

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 Our relationships with Christ should affect every part of our lives. Everything we think, say, or do has the potential to honor or deny Him. As this week's lesson emphasized, denying Christ can take many forms, and some of them may be unintentional. Find time this week to sit down as a couple and examine your lives in light of the truths discovered in this lesson. Here are some questions to consider together:

Does our relationship bring honor to Christ? In what areas are we denying Jesus? How may we start proclaiming Him in those areas instead? How may we encourage one another toward boldness in Christ? What can we do to serve Christ together this week?