

A GOD'S WORD FOR LIFE RESOURCE



COVENANT

AN INVITATION TO A RICHER
RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

LESSON GUIDE | WINTER 2025-2026



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 God's Word for Life

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LESSON GUIDE

© 2025 Pentecostal Publishing House

36 Research Park Court

Weldon Spring, MO 63304

www.pentecostalpublishing.com

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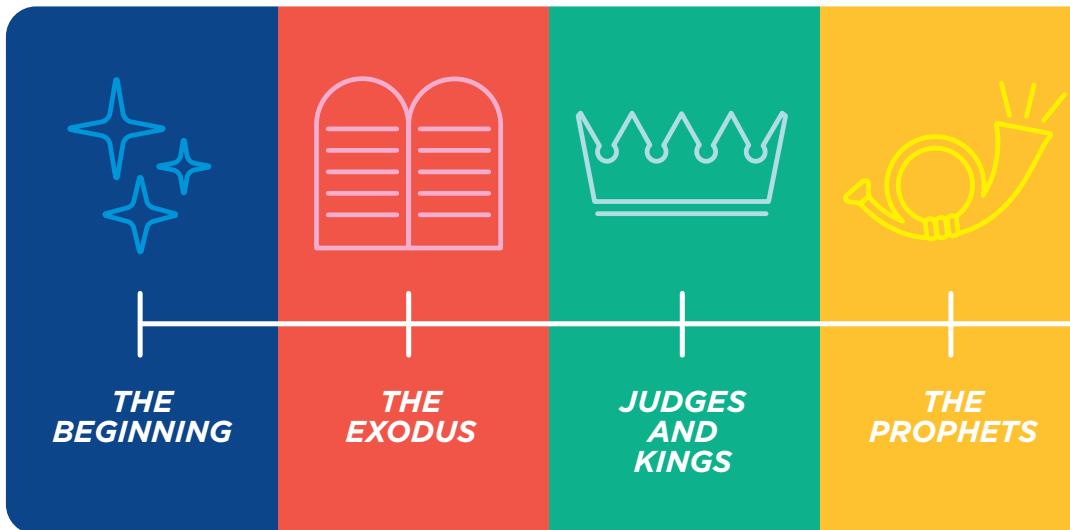
Manufactured in USA, November 2025, 6922611.

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WELCOME TO A ONE-YEAR JOURNEY THROUGH THE BIBLE



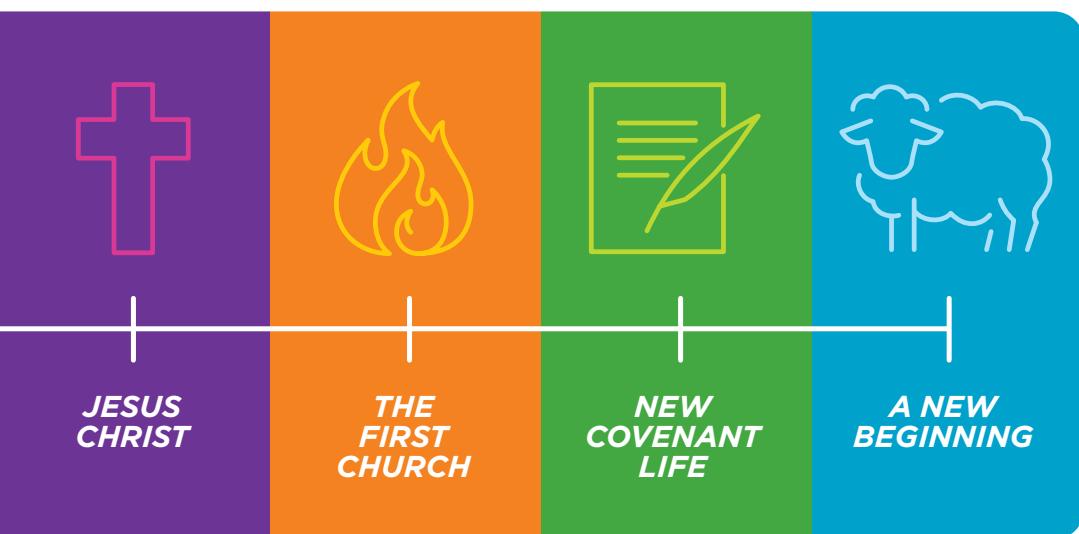
God's Word is composed of hundreds of stories—amazing stories in fact. We read of a man who built a boat to save the world from a flood, which had never happened before. And we see a shepherd slay a giant and later be crowned king. We peer into a den of hungry lions and watch God preserve His prophet, and we stand in the marbled court of a king as we watch his Jewish wife risk her life to save her people. Those are just a handful of Old Testament stories.

But every one of those stories tell a small piece of God's big story—God wants to be in covenant relationship with us. God willingly pledges His presence and faithful love to us as we follow Him.

Using the above timeline as your map and compass, take a journey through God's big story as each segment of the Bible advances the story of God's covenant relationship with humanity. In the beginning, God invited the first couple into covenant in paradise. Sadly, like the steep hills on a roller coaster, God's people seemed to careen toward bottom as they broke their covenant with God over and over through the ensuing centuries. But when they cried out for a Savior, He was there to restore and redeem them.

As you learn and apply these fifty-two stories of Scripture, you will discover a faithful God, even to a faithless people. And you will learn that the same God who wanted to be in covenant with Israel and with His New Testament church is inviting you to enter into and live in covenant relationship with Him.

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WHAT'S NEW

GENESIS TO REVELATION IN ONE YEAR

Thank you for joining us on our one-year journey from Genesis through Revelation. Each lesson is designed to build on the previous one. Because of the chronological nature of the overarching story, special Sundays such as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost Sunday may not fit the chronology. To account for your preference to teach according to these Sundays, we will provide digital copies of lessons geared to these days for you to teach instead of the Covenant lesson for that week.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT AND MY RESPONSE TO COVENANT

Since each story advances the Bible's big story of God wanting to be in covenant relationship with us, each lesson will tell a truth about covenant and what our response to God's covenant should be. The Truth about Covenant will be found in the left margin on the first page of each lesson, and My Response to Covenant will be found in creative word art on the same page.

COVENANT CONTEXT

Each lesson will help situate you where we are in the Bible's big story. Sometimes humanity responded rightly, and sadly sometimes we didn't. Covenant context will help you know where we have come from, where we are, and even where we are heading in this grace-filled journey.

HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

GETTING STARTED

The first page of each lesson gives valuable information to help you teach. Here you will find the Lesson Title, the Truth about Covenant, My Response to Covenant, the Focus Verses, and Lesson Text. The Covenant Context will pinpoint where you are in God's big story of His covenant relationship with humanity.



SG TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: Have you ever met someone famous without knowing who he or she was?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answer to illustrate how God sees us in what others may not see, much like He saw in David.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

1. GOD'S NEW PLAN OF REDEMPTION

DISCUSS: Why is it difficult for us to understand God sees the past, present, and future at the same time?

2. Samuel's Tip to Jesus' House

B. Overlooked

DISCUSS: What must it have felt like to be overlooked when Samuel came? What must it have felt like to be anointed king anyway?

C. I Will Make My Heart Humble so God Can Call me to Great Things for His Glory

DAVID DEFEATED GOLIATH

A. David's Anointing

B. David's Return to the Battlefield

C. I Will Make Good Walk with me as I Face my Enemies

DISCUSS: How can we choose faith over fear and trust God to do what our "Goliath" needs?

B. JESUS IS THE SON OF DAVID

A. God's Covenant with David

DISCUSS: Recall a time when you thought God had not kept His promise. How did He show you His faithfulness?

B. The Son of David

C. I Will Make Good Walk with me as I Face my Enemies

DISCUSS: What will you do today to tell others about the Son of David, Jesus Christ, who still rules and reigns in the hearts of His people?

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

Let your group pray and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to help us as a fresh representation for being in covenant relationship with Him
- For God to help us recognize open doors to introduce others to the Son of David

LESSON CONNECTION

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

LESSON CONNECTION

History is replete with individuals who, despite making significant and even world-changing contributions to society, are largely forgotten or overlooked. One such person is Syl Ludington. He was a 12-year-old boy who rode his horse at night to warn the British that the American Revolutionaries were coming. He is often referred to as the first computer programmer, as he wrote a program to calculate the sine of a number. He is also known for his work in pharmaceuticals, specifically in developing synthesized pharmaceuticals from plant-based resources. Most people treated for arthritis or glaucoma have benefited from his genius but probably could not even name him.

Have you heard of Ada Lovelace, the English mathematician from the early 1800s? Likely, hardly anyone knows her name today, but we all benefit from her ideas. She is often referred to as the first computer programmer, as she wrote about how a machine could calculate numbers. She is also known for her work in mathematics and for her contributions to the English language. She is often referred to as a simple instructions to perform complex tasks. Today the results of her work touch everyone's life, from the way we communicate to the way we live.

What about Sir Percy Julian? He was an African-American chemist living under the injustices of Jim Crow. He was a pioneer in the field of pharmaceuticals, specifically in increasing the availability of cortisone and other hormones. He is also known for his work in developing synthesized pharmaceuticals from plant-based resources. Most people treated for arthritis or glaucoma have benefited from his genius but probably could not even name him.

The list goes on and on. Charles Drew developed the method for safely storing blood for transfusions. Pieter van den Broek first introduced coffee to Western culture by introducing it to the Dutch. He is also known for his work in forensic science, as he was the father of multiple modern forensic investigation techniques still used by law enforcement. With profound courage, Nancy Wake led the seven-thousand-member French Resistance to safety during World War II.

Names shape history. Within the framework of God's kingdom, one such name is David. Instead of fading from prominence over time, God has ordained David's kingdom to be an everlasting one. No, David's natural heirs have not occupied a physical throne from his time to ours. Instead, the Son of David, Jesus Christ, has occupied the throne of God's kingdom. Jesus Christ, the Son of David, bears a name to which every knee will bow.

When God established the throne of David, the covenant forged with him was everlasting. The Christ child was born in Bethlehem specifically because He was of the house of David. He is the King of Kings. By His birth, God has established a kingdom above all other names; the name of David is also preserved throughout eternity, for the name of Jesus Christ reigns forever. The covenant of David remains in effect through the person of Jesus Christ. Through the gospel, we too share in these beautiful covenantal benefits.

BIBLE LESSON

WINTER LESSON 01

I. GOD'S NEW PLAN OF REDEMPTION

God lives outside of time. He has always been there, and one of the most difficult characteristics of God is that we cannot see Him. "Before the mountains were brought together, or ever hills did hatch up the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God" (Psalm 90:2). Since He exists in this transcendent way, God's plan for us is also transcendent. It is a plan that is not limited by time or space, but by day as we experience it. To His it is one story told simultaneously. He can decide end right as the first page is being turned. (See Isaiah 46:10.)

That is why nothing takes Him by surprise. He is never without a plan. When Saul—the reigns, God was already prepared to move forward with a new plan and a new man who would rule over Israel. Through this new king, God's plan to redeem humanity from our sins was set in motion.

DISCUSS: Why is it difficult for us to understand God sees the past, present, and future at the same time?

A. Samuel's Trip to Jesus's House

Had Saul kept his heart humble toward God, the Lord would have enabled him to lead Israel successfully. Regrettably, his self-will and recurring resistance to God and God's plan for him caused Saul to be rejected. "For Saul kept a rebellious heart; he did not accept the word of the Lord; he hath also rejected thee from being king" (1 Samuel 15:22). Immediately, Samuel's heart was broken. No true spiritual leader reflected God's man's standards (like Saul), but one whose heart reflected the very nature of God. The man's heart was broken, and Saul was destined to seek a replacement.

B. Overlooked

When Samuel arrived at Jesus's house with a horn of oil, we can only imagine the excited conversations that buzzed through the household. "The next king of the nation? One of our own?" Pride and ambition seared through Jesus's Bethlehem home as the people gathered to see the new king. "Behold, the man whom God hath chosen to reign over you; he is come" (1 Samuel 16:12). The people of Bethlehem, from the eldest to the youngest, they passed before Samuel, each with his own qualities that might make him the one to soon feel the weight of the crown. Yet one by one, each son was rejected by the voice of God.

BIBLE LESSON

The Bible Lesson is a manuscript of the entire lesson. The lessons are written by various Apostolic authors who explain the truths of God's Word and share ways we can apply these truths to our lives. The lesson contains discussion questions to foster interaction, and you will find media callouts (videos and images available in the Adult Resource Kit) to help you connect with students of all learning styles.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The end of each lesson invites the students to apply what they have learned. This segment usually includes a story or illustration for you to share, or you may share a story or illustration of your own to help bring your students to a call to action. Feel free to use the Prayer Focus at the end of the Small Group Outline (on page 2 of each lesson) to call your students to prayer.

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate our responsibility to tell our world who Jesus is.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

George W. Bush, the forty-third president of the United States, tells a delightful story about his interaction with an elderly lady in his home state of Texas. In 2004, during his reelection in 2004, he stopped by a nursing home where he chatted for a while with a sweet elderly woman in a wheelchair. While extremely kind, the dear lady did not seem to indicate any awareness of who Jesus was. George W. Bush asked, "Ma'am, do you know who I am?" She replied, "No, honey, but just ask at the desk." They both laughed.

I wonder how different the interaction would have been if someone had simply introduced the elderly woman to Jesus. If she stood politically, she likely would have told all her friends and family about her interaction with the president of the United States in American history. She might have even had a request or two to make of the most powerful man in the world. Instead, she simply considered him another polite stranger.

So many around us do not know who Jesus is. They may be aware of Him from a historical perspective, they may even be aware of His birth and death, and they may know what Easter truly celebrates. They may go to church regularly, but they do not understand the full significance of who He is and all He can do. They need someone to introduce them.

That is our responsibility. We are to let people know that Jesus is their neighbor. A good example is a wise teacher. He was the incarnation of the only God, and He was the Son of God, the Son of man, and David's Son. He declared, "I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things, and to bring good news of great joy unto you, and to all the people, and to the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star" (Revelation 22:16).

If people understood that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Son of man, and the Son of an everlasting covenant with David, they just might exercise faith to ask something of Jesus. When we do this, we are not only binding up broken hearts. He is the one who provides for every need. And though they may not be able to fully understand, He loves each one of us unconditionally.

In keeping with the covenant He made with David, God Himself sat on the throne of Israel. In the book of Chronicles, John recorded the wonder and splendor of the man who was exalted to the throne of the Father. "And immediately there was in the spirit; and behold, a throne was set in heaven; and he that sat upon it was clothed with a robe which reached unto the earth; and his name was called YAHWEH JEHOVAH OF HOSTS" (Revelation 4:2). That one must be made known to all. Each believer should pursue to introduce someone in his or her world to the Son of David, Jesus Christ.

LEGEND

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

V Shows a video component is available in the Adult Resource Kit to help illustrate the lesson information

I Indicates an image is available in the Adult Resource Kit to help illustrate the lesson information



WINTER 01

DECEMBER 07, 2025

LESSON TEXT

I Samuel 16-17

FOCUS VERSES

I Samuel 16:1, 13

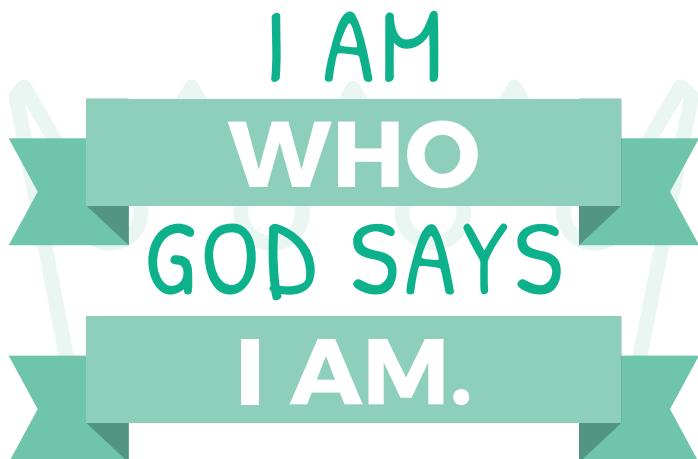
¹And the LORD said unto Samuel, How long wilt thou mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel? fill thine horn with oil, and go, I will send thee to Jesse the Beth-lehemite: for I have provided me a king among his sons.

¹³Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren: and the Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward. So Samuel rose up, and went to Ramah.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

Jesus is the Son of David, fulfilling the covenantal promises spoken to David.

David and Goliath



COVENANT CONTEXT

At the end of last quarter, we saw how King Saul's pride and rebellion eventually cost him the throne. As we continue through the Historical Books of the Bible, we discover God was already establishing His new covenant with David. God kept His promise that David would always have a descendant on the throne through the man Christ Jesus, who was heralded in the New Testament as the Son of David.

SG **TEACHING OUTLINE**

Icebreaker: Have you ever met someone famous without knowing who he or she was?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to illustrate how God sees in us what others may not see, much like He saw in David.

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

I. GOD'S NEW PLAN OF REDEMPTION

DISCUSS: *Why is it difficult for us to understand God sees the past, present, and future at the same time?*

- A. Samuel's Trip to Jesse's House
- B. Overlooked

DISCUSS: *What must it have felt like to be overlooked when Samuel came? What must it have felt like to be anointed king anyway?*

- C. I will keep my heart humble so God can call me to great things for His glory. **V**

II. DAVID DEFEATED GOLIATH

- A. David's Anointing
- B. David's Run to the Battlefield
- C. I will trust God to walk with me as I face my enemies.

DISCUSS: *How can we choose faith over fear and trust God to defeat our "Goliaths"?*

III. JESUS IS THE SON OF DAVID

- A. God's Covenant with David

DISCUSS: *Recall a time when you thought God had not kept His promise. How did He show you His faithfulness?*

- B. The Son of David
- C. As Jesus calls and empowers me, I will declare His new covenant.

DISCUSS: *What will you do today to tell others about the Son of David, Jesus Christ, who still rules and reigns in the hearts of His people?*

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to give us a fresh appreciation for being in covenant relationship with Him
- For God to help us recognize open doors to introduce others to the Son of David

LESSON CONNECTION

History is replete with individuals who, despite making significant and even world-changing contributions to society, are largely forgotten or overlooked.

Their names do not resonate with most. At best they are a coveted answer to a question on a trivia night. Though their brilliance, bravery, or abilities impacted people around them, time has caused their names to fade unfairly from prominence.

1 Consider Percy Julian. He was an African-American chemist living under the injustices of Jim Crow laws in the United States. Yet his profound abilities led him to be a pioneer in developing synthesized pharmaceuticals from plant-based resources. Most people treated for arthritis or glaucoma have benefited from his genius but probably could not recite his name.

Have you heard of Ada Lovelace, the English mathematician from the early 1800s? Likely, hardly anyone knows her name today, but we all benefit from her ideas. She is often referred to as the first computer programmer, as she wrote about how a machine (an early “computer” called the Analytical Engine) could follow a series of simple instructions to perform complex tasks. Today the results of her work touch every aspect of our lives, but she is largely unknown to us.

What about Sybil Ludington? Have you ever heard of her? She was only sixteen years old on the night she rode, similar to Paul Revere, to alert Boston that the British were coming. In fact, she rode twice as far as her more famous counterpart. The famed poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow immortalized Revere’s courage in “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere.” No similar work was created for Sybil Ludington.

The list goes on and on. Charles Drew developed the method for safely storing blood for transfusions. Pieter van den Broeck first introduced coffee to Western culture by smuggling it into Europe from Yemen. Eugène-François Vidocq of France was the father of multiple modern forensic investigative techniques still used by law enforcement. With profound courage, Nancy Wake led the seven-thousand-member French Resistance against the Nazis in World War II.

Names shape history. Within the framework of God’s kingdom, one such name is David. Instead of fading from prominence over time, God has ordained David’s kingdom to be an everlasting one. No, David’s natural heirs have not occupied a physical throne from his day until now, but one of his descendants still reigns with unchallenged authority. Jesus Christ, the Son of David, bears a name to which every knee will bow.

When God established the throne of David, the covenant forged with him was everlasting. The Christ child was born in Bethlehem specifically because He was of the “house and lineage of David” (Luke 2:4). By Jesus’ name having been exalted high above all other names, the name of David is also preserved throughout eternity, for this Son of his lineage reigns forever. The covenant of David remains in effect through the person of Jesus Christ. Through the gospel, we too share in these beautiful covenantal benefits.

BIBLE LESSON

I. GOD'S NEW PLAN OF REDEMPTION

God lives outside of time. He has always been, which remains one of the most difficult characteristics of God for us to comprehend. “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God” (Psalm 90:2). Since He exists in this transcendent way, God’s knowledge of all things is unlimited. He does not see the world’s history unfolding day by day as we experience it. To Him it is one story told simultaneously. He can declare the end right as the first page is being turned. (See Isaiah 46:10.)

That is why nothing takes Him by surprise. He is never without a plan. When Saul—the man who was first crowned king in Israel’s monarchy—made shipwreck of his life and reign, God was already prepared to move forward with a new plan and a new man who would rule over Israel. Through this new king, God’s plan to redeem humanity from our sins was about to unfold.

DISCUSS: *Why is it difficult for us to understand God sees the past, present, and future at the same time?*

A. Samuel’s Trip to Jesse’s House

Had Saul kept his heart humble toward God, the Lord would have enabled him to lead Israel successfully. Regrettably, his self-will and recurring resistance to God and God’s plan resulted in Samuel’s chilling declaration against Saul: “Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king” (I Samuel 15:23). Immediately Samuel’s heart was broken. No true spiritual leader relishes delivering words of judgment, and Samuel was no exception.

But God’s plan to redeem the nation and the world would move ahead without Saul’s involvement, so God directed Samuel accordingly: “How long wilt thou mourn for Saul, seeing I have rejected him from reigning over Israel? fill thine horn with oil, and go, I will send thee to Jesse the Beth-lehemite: for I have provided me a king among his sons” (I Samuel 16:1). This time, God would not choose a king who looked regal by man’s standards (like Saul), but one whose heart reflected the very nature of God. The new king would be God’s ideal servant for such a position.

B. Overlooked

When Samuel arrived at Jesse’s house with a horn of oil, we can only imagine the excited conversations that buzzed through the household. “The next king of the nation? One of our own?” Pride and ambition swirled through Jesse’s Bethlehem home as the seven sons present that day began to posture and dream. One by one, from the eldest to the youngest, they passed before Samuel, each with his own qualities that might make him the one to soon feel the weight of the crown. Yet one by one, each son was rejected by the voice of God.

Samuel was confused. He asked if there was another son somewhere. The family reluctantly mentioned the youngest. David was not even deemed worthy for this significant moment. He was left out in the pasture tending sheep while his siblings lined up for their chance at greatness. Some scholars have speculated that he may have been an illegitimate son. It is not possible to know, but we can be certain that the one people rejected was the one God chose. When David entered the room, God spoke yet again: “Arise, anoint him: for this is he” (I Samuel 16:12). Imagine the gasps of surprise when the elderly prophet turned the horn of oil upside down over David’s head. But God could see in David’s heart what others could not. God is never surprised.

DISCUSS: *What must it have felt like to be overlooked when Samuel came? What must it have felt like to be anointed king anyway?*

C. I will keep my heart humble so God can call me to great things for His glory.

Since God is unchanging, what He looks for in people He can use does not change either. Individuals equipped and positioned for greatness in God’s kingdom are humble enough to recognize their consistent dependence on God. God chose Saul when he was “little” in his own sight. (See I Samuel 15:17.) But God rejected Saul when his arrogance drove him to ignore God’s commandments. David was selected because his heart was right toward God, and he was a humble shepherd, not demanding his own way.

▀ The lesson is clear for us and is in perfect harmony with the admonition in the New Testament Book of I Peter. Would you do a great work for our great God? “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time” (I Peter 5:6). Anyone God exalts and promotes must come to God humble and stay humble.

II. DAVID DEFEATED GOLIATH

A. David’s Anointing

David’s destiny was never in question. God firmly established it when He dispatched Samuel to Jesse’s home with the anointing oil. God sent Samuel there specifically to anoint the one who would follow Saul on the throne of Israel: the shepherd-who-would-one-day-be-king, David. There was no ambiguity or confusion. Samuel immediately obeyed the word of God and turned the horn of oil upon David’s head. This act was more than mere symbolism. Something spiritual occurred in that moment that confirmed this action: “And the Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward” (I Samuel 16:13).

As David walked back from his father’s house to the sheep under his care, he could feel a new and profound touch of God’s power on him that would enable him to one day lead God’s people, perhaps like he had been leading his father’s sheep. The anointing was not merely oil on his head; it had spiritually saturated his heart. But how was this going to happen? Saul still held the scepter. The army was still at his disposal. No imminent change of regency appeared to be on the horizon. Still the promises of God never fail and His timing is perfect. David could not have imagined the “giant” steps God would ask him to take to get to the throne.

B. David's Run to the Battlefield

Long-standing enemies of God's people were once again trespassing in Israel with their army. Overlooking a valley in Judah, the mighty army of the Philistines was arrayed for battle on one side, while Saul's army cowered on the other. The reason for their timidity was over nine feet tall. Goliath, a mountain of a man, marched boldly out into the valley each morning and evening challenging Israel to send out any man of their choosing to fight him one-on-one and to let that outcome decide the entire battle. For almost seven weeks, not one of God's people had come forward.

Meanwhile in Bethlehem, David's father sent David to check on his three oldest brothers in the battle—Eliab, Abinadab, and Shammah. Upon arriving and hearing the verbal threats of this pagan Philistine, David's actions distinguished him from the rest of the army. They ran away from the challenge; David ran toward it. Goliath was armed to the teeth: a helmet of brass, coat of armor, bronze armor on his legs, bronze javelin between his shoulders, massive spear, and a shield bearer who went in front of him.

David was armed only with a simple sling and five smooth stones, but he held within his heart an unshakable faith in his unfailing God. David ran toward the mighty man of war, trusting in the power and the name of the Lord. David slung the stone, watched the monster fall, and used Goliath's sword to take off his own head. The entire nation enjoyed the fruits of David's faith. His triumph over Goliath remains one of the most iconic moments in the life of any biblical personality. A mere stone may have embedded itself into Goliath's forehead, but a lasting touchstone of God's purpose in David's life was established at that moment.

C. I will trust God to walk with me as I face my enemies.

Facing our enemies with confidence should not be so difficult, given that God's record is perfect. We cannot point to any time in our lives when God has failed any one of us. Consequently, you would think trusting God would be easy, but it is not. Sometimes we fall prey to the trap of comparing ourselves to the giant rather than comparing the giant to our God. Since God is directing our steps, we can boldly conquer any enemy, knowing that the one we trust is mightier than the one we face. Choose to trust God rather than your fears. Even if there is not a host of witnesses for your victory like David had, the "great cloud of witnesses" will celebrate every time every one of your "Goliaths" fall.

DISCUSS: How can we choose faith over fear and trust God to defeat our "Goliaths"?

III. JESUS IS THE SON OF DAVID

A. God's Covenant with David

Kings rose and fell quickly in ancient Israel and Judah. Their longest-serving king was Manasseh, who reigned fifty-five years (II Kings 21:1), in sharp contrast to Zimri, who only ruled for seven days (I Kings 16:15). Given the royal turnover rate, this promise of God to David may have seemed quite peculiar: "And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever" (II Samuel 7:16).

God entered a new covenant relationship with David which would never end. David's descendants would sit on the throne forever. On its face, this promise appears to have lapsed, as Jeroboam (the first king of the Northern Kingdom) was not of David's lineage at all. All the kings of the southern kingdom of Judah were, yet their reigns ended when Babylon captured the nation of Judah as prisoners of war. At a glance, the "forever" throne of David seemed to have ended.

DISCUSS: Recall a time when you thought God had not kept His promise. How did He show you His faithfulness?

B. The Son of David

However, the promise to David of an everlasting covenant did not reference an earthly kingdom. The Messiah would arise from David's descendants, and Jesus Christ's throne is indeed eternal. When Mary miraculously conceived and gave birth to Jesus Christ, a son of David received a crown that would never be displaced. He has no successor and He will never abdicate His throne. He rules a vastly different kingdom, for it is resident inside His believers. Jesus taught: "Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). In this New Covenant—this new spiritual kingdom—there is but one King, and He is the offspring of David. Jesus Christ, the Savior, is the fulfillment of God's eternal covenant He faithfully made with David.

C. As Jesus calls and empowers me, I will declare His new covenant.

As citizens of this new Kingdom, our mission is to tell everyone about our King. We are commissioned to inform everyone that David's son, Jesus Christ, reigns in the hearts of those who trust in Him. He offers forgiveness of sins and redemption through His royal mercy and grace. No king is like our King, and we, His servants, are called to proclaim His message to the world.

DISCUSS: What will you do today to tell others about the Son of David, Jesus Christ, who still rules and reigns in the hearts of His people?

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate our responsibility to tell our world who Jesus is.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

George W. Bush, the forty-third president of the United States, tells a delightful story about his interaction with an elderly lady in his home state of Texas. While campaigning for re-election in 2004, he stopped by a nursing home where he chatted for a while with a sweet, white-haired lady in a wheelchair. While extremely kind, the dear lady did not seem to indicate any awareness of who President Bush was. Gently, he asked, "Ma'am, do you know who I am?" She replied, "No, honey, but just ask at the desk. They'll know."

I wonder how different the interaction would have been if someone had simply introduced her to "W." No matter where she stood politically, she likely would have told all her friends and family about her interaction with someone so significant in American history. She might have even had a request or two to make of the most powerful man in the free world. Instead, she simply considered him another polite stranger who stopped by to chat for a bit.

So many around us do not know who Jesus is. They may be aware of Him from a historical perspective, they may even be able to recite select facts regarding His birth, and they may know what Easter truly celebrates. They may go to church regularly, but many do not understand the full significance of who He is and all He can do. They need someone to introduce them.

That is our responsibility. We are to let people know that Jesus is more than simply a good example or a wise teacher. He was the incarnation of the only God, and as such He was both David's father and David's son. He declared: "I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star" (Revelation 22:16).

If people understood that Jesus Christ is the embodiment and fulfillment of an everlasting covenant with David, they just might exercise faith to ask something of Him. What a shame for someone not to understand that Jesus can forgive sins. He can heal our bodies and minds. He still binds up broken hearts. He is the one who provides for every need. And though they may not understand it fully, He loves each one of us unconditionally.

In keeping with His covenant He made with David, God Himself reigns on the throne forever as Jesus Christ. John recorded the wonder and splendor of all he saw while he was exiled on the Isle Patmos: "And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne" (Revelation 4:2). That one must be made known to all. Each believer should purpose to introduce someone in his or her world to the Son of David: Jesus Christ.



WINTER 02

DECEMBER 14, 2025

LESSON TEXT

I Samuel 19-II Samuel 2; I Chronicles 10-11:3

FOCUS VERSES

I Samuel 24:4-6

⁴And the men of David said unto him, Behold the day of which the LORD said unto thee, Behold, I will deliver thine enemy into thine hand, that thou mayest do to him as it shall seem good unto thee. Then David arose, and cut off the skirt of Saul's robe privily.

⁵And it came to pass afterward, that David's heart smote him, because he had cut off Saul's skirt.

⁶And he said unto his men, The LORD forbid that I should do this thing unto my master, the LORD's anointed, to stretch forth mine hand against him, seeing he is the anointed of the LORD.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

God always keeps covenant, although He fulfills it in His time.

King David



COVENANT CONTEXT

David was the rightful heir to Saul as king of Israel, but he did not reign right away. Nearly fifteen years passed between the time David was anointed and the time he was crowned. During the waiting, God was carrying out His plan for David's life and preparing him for the throne. Today we can encourage students that God's covenant promises have no expiration date.

SG **TEACHING OUTLINE**

Icebreaker: On a scale of one to ten, how good are you at waiting? Why do you say that?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to set up the story of David waiting years to be crowned king.

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

I. SAUL'S JEALOUSY INTENSIFIED

A. David's Wait for the Throne

DISCUSS: *Why is it so hard to wait on God's timing sometimes? How can we better learn to wait?*

B. Saul's Attempts to Kill David

DISCUSS: *What do you think God was working in David during his long wait? What is God working in you while you wait on His timing?*

C. I will trust God while I wait on His timing.

II. DAVID SPARED SAUL'S LIFE

A. David on the Run

DISCUSS: *If you have ever tried to force God's timing, how did it turn out?*

B. David's Mercy Toward Saul

C. I will be cautious when becoming critical of spiritual leadership. **V**

DISCUSS: *How can we follow God-ordained spiritual leadership and remember every leader is also human?*

III. DAVID WAITED FOR GOD'S TIMING

A. Saul's Death in Battle

B. David's Tearful Response

C. God will do what He says in His perfect timing.

DISCUSS: *What are you still waiting for God to bring to pass?*

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to help us wait patiently for Him to unfold His plans in our lives
- For God to bless someone who has directly opposed or wronged us

LESSON CONNECTION

At its peak in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Mongol Empire was the largest connected empire in history. Originating from what is now Mongolia, this vast empire stretched from the Sea of Japan (East Sea) in the Far East to Eastern Europe in the West. It extended from above the Arctic Circle and south into India. It claimed more than nine million square miles.

Despite its military successes in conquering a myriad of lands, the Mongol Empire could not successfully invade and overwhelm one country—Japan. The Mongols tried on two separate occasions, both under the strong leadership of Kublai Khan. The first attempt was in 1274 with a force of eight thousand warriors aboard nine hundred ships. When that attempt failed, the Mongols again attempted seven years later with a much larger force of fifteen hundred ships and an army that has been estimated as high as one hundred forty thousand fighters. Once again, the invasion failed.

The reason was not simply the heroic fighting of the Japanese; it was an amazing example of fortuitous timing. Both invasion fleets were assailed by tropical typhoons, or what we would know as hurricanes. These horrific storms destroyed a sizable portion of the Mongol fleet each time, sending untold numbers of its warriors into the merciless sea. Had the Mongols invaded at any other time, they most likely would have defeated the smaller nation of Japan handily.

The Japanese coined a new term for these monster cyclonic weather systems. They called them “divine winds,” believing God had rescued them by sending the storms at just those times. The timing of these events shaped history. Regardless of whether God sent the typhoons of 1274 and 1281 to rescue the Japanese, the truth remains that timing can alter history. Both what happens and when it happens define destinies.

The knowledge that God controls all things is wonderful news for children of God. We have this assurance from God’s Word: “The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in his way” (Psalm 37:23). God orchestrates our lives providentially to bring about His will for us. At all times, including in those moments when we don’t realize it, God is arranging matters according to His plans for our lives.

We see a beautiful example of this principle in the life of David. From the time Samuel anointed him, David knew he was to sit on the throne. But God’s timing was markedly different from David’s. He experienced a significant season of brokenness and disappointment before his coronation, none of which was enjoyable for one with such a divine destiny resting on him. Still, David’s patience through the process and his unwillingness to force God’s will meant when the “divine winds” of the storms were over, the perfect will of God was revealed for all to see. We can learn much from this season of the life of the man after God’s heart.

BIBLE LESSON

I. SAUL'S JEALOUSY INTENSIFIED

It was like fingernails on a chalkboard every time King Saul heard the lyrics from I Samuel 18:7: "Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands." The women sang as they danced out of the cities of Israel to meet King Saul when David was returning from another victory over the Philistines. The words were meant to compliment Saul. After all, who else had slain thousands? But David was also being credited with ten times as many fallen by his sword. It was admittedly inaccurate, for by this point David was credited with but one victory, albeit a giant one named Goliath. But the zeal of these singers produced profound jealousy in the heart of Israel's king. Saul suspected that the only conquest remaining for David was his own throne. (See I Samuel 18:8.)

A. David's Wait for the Throne

The throne of Israel was prophetically David's. When Samuel arrived at David's house and emptied the oil on his head in the presence of his family, David's ascension to his royal estate was assured. "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?" (Numbers 23:19). God will always promise what He performs. There was never a question of David's destination, but it did not happen overnight.

David was considered a youth when he was anointed, and he was thirty when he began to reign; approximately fifteen years passed as David waited for God to fulfill His word. There is often a waiting process between the pronouncement of a divine promise and the performance of it. God's children must learn the art found in Psalm 27:14: "Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD."

DISCUSS: Why is it so hard to wait on God's timing sometimes? How can we better learn to wait?

B. Saul's Attempts to Kill David

David's season of waiting did not give him time to comfortably watch the days pass. Saul's vitriol for David surged into murderous rage. It even led to violence: "David played with his hand, as at other times: and there was a javelin in Saul's hand. And Saul cast the javelin; for he said, I will smite David even to the wall with it. And David avoided out of his presence twice" (I Samuel 18:10-11). This scenario played out again in the very next chapter.

David fled from Saul out into the wilderness, but in I Samuel 19, Saul commissioned his own son Jonathan and all his servants to kill David. Saul dispatched squads to kill David on multiple occasions when he believed he had discovered where David was hiding. Saul himself led excursions to hunt down and slay David. (See I Samuel 19; 23:7-8.) David's season of waiting was filled with distress, homelessness, and despair, but through it all God was shaping David's character and preparing him to reign.

DISCUSS: What do you think God was working in David during his long wait? What is God working in you while you wait on His timing?

C. I will trust God while I wait on His timing.

Hopefully none of us will ever have our lives threatened while waiting on God's plan to unfold. But all of us will go through the process of dying out to our will, our plans, and our ideas of how to see God's will completed. In such seasons, we must remind ourselves that just as God's ways are not our ways, His timing is not ours either. We struggle with His timing because we tend to be a "want-it-now" culture. Just a five-minute wait at a drive-through restaurant frustrates us. One man said the surest proof of our impatience is the fact there are microwave instructions on a box of Minute Rice. But with God we must relinquish our demands for instant fulfillment. Delay is not denial; it is merely God wisely knowing the best season for His hand to move. Just wait on Him.

II. DAVID SPARED SAUL'S LIFE

The contrast between Saul and David is striking on multiple levels. We see it clearest in the way they treated one another. Though David had done no wrong to Saul, Saul sought repeatedly to kill him. Though Saul had clearly wronged David, David refused to kill Saul when given the chance—twice.

It is often quite easy for us to gauge how we treat someone else against how that person has treated us, but such is not the principle of God's kingdom. For those of us who are citizens there, we have a higher law: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:43-45).

Just as God shows mercy and pours out blessings on those who have mistreated Him, we are called to do the same. David is a splendid Old Testament example of what His descendant, Jesus Christ, would teach centuries later.

A. David on the Run

After repeatedly escaping Saul's direct javelin attacks, David decided he would be safest to flee. He could have fought. He was certainly able in battle, and having established himself as a national military hero, he could have tried to rally a sizable portion of the army to his side. Had he been willing to do so, a coup with his immediate ascension to the throne was a distinct possibility.

But David chose to trust God's timing. Would David be king one day? Absolutely. God had spoken it and it would come to pass. Did God need David's assistance in forcing the issue? Absolutely not. Even though it meant hiding in a cave surrounded by about four hundred men of rather low estate and dealing with hunger and deprivation, it was better to flee from Jerusalem and allow God to unfold His plan in His time, not David's.

DISCUSS: If you have ever tried to force God's timing, how did it turn out?

B. David's Mercy Toward Saul

On two occasions during David's flight from the murderous and corrupt king, circumstances placed Saul at David's feet. The first time, Saul entered a cave where David and his men were hiding; the second time, Saul was asleep when David discovered him. In both settings, with little effort David could have slain Saul in an instant and then asserted his right to the throne.

David's men urged him to kill Saul and take what was rightfully his. It would naturally appeal to them because it would allow them to return to their homes and possibly even assume leadership roles in David's kingdom. None of them would be on the run anymore. "And the men of David said unto him, Behold the day of which the Lord said unto thee, Behold, I will deliver thine enemy into thine hand, that thou mayest do to him as it shall seem good unto thee" (1 Samuel 24:4). Abishai, another of David's mighty men, advised: "God hath delivered thine enemy into thine hand this day: now therefore let me smite him, I pray thee, with the spear even to the earth at once, and I will not smite him the second time" (1 Samuel 26:8).

But David would not bow to the pressure of his friends nor to the desires of his own flesh (human nature). In the cave, David carefully cut off the corner of Saul's robe without Saul's knowledge. During Saul's sleep, David simply took Saul's spear and water jug. After each incident David alerted Saul to what could have been and how he spared Saul's life. Though everything seems to point to the fact David had a justifiable right for revenge, he did not give in; He still trusted God.

C. I will be cautious when becoming critical of spiritual leadership.

First Samuel 24:10 gives David's clear reason for the mercy he showed Saul: "I will not put forth mine hand against my lord; for he is the LORD's anointed." David purposed in his heart that leaving his God-called leader in God's hands was the wisest course of action.

Similarly, we should be incredibly careful about lifting our hands or voices against God-ordained spiritual leadership. Since church leaders are human, they are flawed and can make mistakes. Sometimes those mistakes can deeply hurt those they lead. This is a regrettable reality of fallen humanity. However, we do best to leave any correction of them to God and those with properly delegated authority over them. We are better served to maintain carefully clean hands and a pure heart than to exercise any "right" we may feel to retribution. God calls pastors and other spiritual leaders gifts in Ephesians, and we would do well not to abuse His gifts. If something is amiss, God is more than able to correct it through proper channels.

DISCUSS: How can we follow God-ordained spiritual leadership and remember every leader is also human?



III. DAVID WAITED FOR GOD'S TIMING

A. Saul's Death in Battle

Although David refused to strike down Saul when he had the chance—twice—he knew the Lord would judge Saul when God was ready. God indeed judged Saul in the last chapter of I Samuel when Saul and his sons fell in battle against the Philistines. It is ironic—and even poetic justice—that the same enemy involved in David's greatest victory produced Saul's final defeat.

B. David's Tearful Response

At Saul's death much of David's trouble ended abruptly. No longer was the most powerful man in Israel seeking to kill him. His path to the throne was wide open. His future was secure. One would think David would find it hard to stop smiling at the way his prospects turned when Saul breathed his last. Instead, we read, "Then David took hold on his clothes, and rent them; and likewise all the men that were with him: and they mourned, and wept, and fasted until even, for Saul, and for Jonathan his son, and for the people of the Lord, and for the house of Israel; because they were fallen by the sword" (II Samuel 1:11-12).

David exemplified a distinctive trait of a follower of Jesus Christ, namely not rejoicing when evil befalls people who might wish us harm. In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, our Lord admonished us, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). When we trust God's timing, we bear no ill will against those who appear to be opposing it.

C. God will do what He says in His perfect timing.

God can complete His plans regardless of what evil men or evil spirits do. He is sovereign, which simply means He exercises authority without limitation. It is often difficult for us to accept when God's timing takes longer than ours, but we must remind ourselves that delay is not denial. In His infinite wisdom, God will complete every purpose He has ordained in each of our lives. His timing was perfect for David; it will be perfect for you.

DISCUSS: *What are you still waiting for God to bring to pass?*

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how God can work even difficulties together for good.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Someone born today in Guam or Puerto Rico is a United States (US) citizen at least in part due to bituminous, or black coal. This coal is prone to produce what is known as “firedamp,” a highly flammable mixture of gases, comprised largely of methane, the culprit in multiple mining disasters. Some experts think it led to a different tragedy on February 15, 1898.

On that date, the *USS Maine* exploded in the Harbor at Havana, Cuba, where it had been dispatched to guard US interests during the Cuban War for Independence. The explosion and subsequent fire sank the *Maine*, killing 268 sailors, nearly three-fourths of her crew. Speculation ran amuck that it had been destroyed by a Spanish mine, and “Remember the Maine” became a rallying cry in the States that accelerated US involvement in the Spanish-American War just two months later. The Treaty of Paris, which ended that conflict after eight terrible months and over two thousand deaths, granted Puerto Rico and Guam to the United States.

But had the coal produced enough of the flammable gas to ignite even three weeks earlier, it would have been clear the

Spanish were not responsible, and who can say how history might have unfolded differently. The timing of the event turned the tide of nations and territories.

In the moment, we generally cannot see how the circumstances of our lives will unfold over time. Far too often we do not understand how God is sovereignly directing His purposes for us, so we attempt to force issues based on our own desires and grossly limited perspectives. But His ways are not ours: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

God has a purpose for each of us, and it will come to pass as long as we walk in submission to Him. However, a facet of that submission is trusting God’s timing is perfect. Even “explosions” have a purpose for the citizens of Heaven. It may seem like a tragedy, but God can work good from it. Only in retrospect can we look back at painful moments and see how the plan of God allowed events to occur when they did. History is perhaps one of the greatest witnesses of God’s providence.



WINTER 03

DECEMBER 21, 2025

LESSON TEXT

I Kings 3:11;
II Chronicles 1-9

FOCUS VERSES

I Kings 3:11-12

¹¹And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; ¹²Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

God blessed Solomon as long as he lived in covenant with God.

Solomon's Wisdom

AS I PRAY FOR
WISDOM,
I WILL SEEK GOD'S
COVENANT IN
EVERY AREA
OF MY LIFE.

COVENANT CONTEXT

After David's reign, his son Solomon was chosen as the next king of Israel. God's promise for David to always have a descendant reign on the throne was already coming to pass. Although Solomon wisely began as a humble king who built the Temple for God to dwell, the end of his reign as king was mired in war and idolatry. Solomon's foolishness would eventually lead to the Divided Kingdom of Israel and Judah, showing us both an important development in human history and our own need to guard against an enemy of covenant: selfishness.

SG **TEACHING OUTLINE**

Icebreaker: If God offered to grant any of your requests, what would you ask for?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to set up the story of God offering to answer Solomon's request.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. SOLOMON PRAYED FOR WISDOM

- A. Solomon's Prayer

DISCUSS: *When you feel unequal to a task, what do you do?*

- B. God's Answer
- C. If we trust God and seek His wisdom, He will bless us.

DISCUSS: *How important is your prayer time to you? When do you have it?*

II. SOLOMON BUILT THE TEMPLE

DISCUSS: *How do you reach out for others' help and not feel threatened by their strengths?*

- A. Israel in the Promised Land
- B. The Dedication of the Temple

DISCUSS: *What do God's promises in II Chronicles 7:14 mean to you?*

- C. I will pray to continually live in covenant with God.

III. SOLOMON STRAYED FROM COVENANT

- A. Solomon's Disregard **V**

DISCUSS: *Are you surprised by Solomon's sharp decline spiritually? How do we avoid the same trap?*

- B. God's Covenant with Jeroboam
- C. Wisdom alone is not enough; I must have a heart that continually seeks after God.

Internalizing the Message **I**

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to give us wisdom
- For God to help us remain faithful to His plan and purpose

LESSON CONNECTION

The tale is told of a weary traveler who visited a war-torn European village after World War II. The war had ravaged their possessions and even their trust. They hoarded their food and what little they had left, keeping it hidden away from outsiders. When the traveler entered their village, he asked if they had any food to share. All the villagers shook their heads and tried to send him away, but he would not be discouraged. He simply smiled and replied, “That’s okay. I’ll make stone soup instead.”

They looked puzzled. *What’s stone soup?* From his pocket the traveler pulled out a small, polished stone and placed it in a pot and filled the pot with water. As he brought the water to a boil over a fire, he commented, “This is going to be delicious. I just wish I had a little seasoning for some extra flavor.” One villager ran home and returned with some salt and a few herbs. The traveler-turned-cook sprinkled the seasonings into the soup. He continued to stir and said, “This soup would be even better with a carrot or two.” Another villager brought a handful of carrots, and the cook cut them up and added them to the soup.

The people were mesmerized by this traveler’s stone soup recipe. Before long, they could smell the soup cooking. Several came around and the outsider willingly scooped out soup for those nearby him. They ate and laughed and smiled. Their bellies and hearts were full. After their shared meal, one of the villagers asked what they were all thinking: “How did you make such a delicious soup with a stone?” The traveler wisely answered, “I didn’t. The stone is just a reminder that we need what each of us has to offer.”

Knowledge told the traveler that the villagers were unwilling to share their meager rations with an outsider, but wisdom drew them all together and showed them that we all need each other. Wisdom and knowledge are often connected, but they are two different things. Someone once said, “Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting a tomato in a fruit salad.” Someone hearing this explanation asked, “Does that mean ketchup is a fruit smoothie?”

Wisdom appreciates humor, knowing that laughter does good like a medicine. The wisest people know when to share a proverb to help someone or when to tell a clever joke to lift someone’s spirits. Wisdom has a long and treasured history from the days of the Bible until now. Wisdom is God’s universal covenant with everyone. But just as people fail to make a covenant with God in salvation, many choose foolishness over a more abundant life through wisdom. Wisdom is a gift from God, and God offered that gift to Israel’s third king: David’s son, Solomon.

BIBLE LESSON

I. SOLOMON PRAYED FOR WISDOM

People who read the Bible primarily know Solomon for two things: (1) his request for God to give him wisdom and (2) his many wives. The political alliances the king created because of the multitude of Mrs. Solomons led him into idolatry and damaged his wise reputation. By having so many wives and concubines, Solomon neglected a most important woman in his life: Lady Wisdom.

The Book of Proverbs depicts wisdom as a woman. Lady Wisdom cries out in the streets. She begs everyone to hear her reproof and take her words to heart. Unfortunately, her attempts to get the attention of the simple ones often fail. They ignore her and face the consequences. Solomon started off having a solid relationship with Lady Wisdom, but somewhere along the way, even he neglected her.

A. Solomon's Prayer

As a young man, Solomon recognized the importance of courting Lady Wisdom. Tasked with leading a strong kingdom as he followed his renowned father David, Solomon felt inadequate. Having grown up in the palace, he lacked the military skills of his giant-slaying dad. David possessed a strategic mind, honed by many years on the battlefield and the events of his reign.

Solomon felt unequal to his father and the task before him. When the Lord offered to grant Solomon what he wanted, the king humbly admitted he felt like a little child despite his elite status as the king of Israel. Fully aware of the daunting task ahead of him, Solomon wisely asked the Lord for wisdom.

DISCUSS: *When you feel unequal to a task, what do you do?*

B. God's Answer

The God who gives abundant life to us and pours out blessings so large we are unable to receive them not only granted Solomon's request, but the Almighty also granted the monarch riches and honor. The Lord was pleased that Solomon did not ask for wealth, material possessions, or the death of his enemies. Asking the Lord for wisdom was the wisest decision of his young life.

And the Lord blessed Solomon and God's covenant people because of Solomon's request. The Lord gave Solomon rest on every side. This peace put the monarch's subjects at ease. As a result, Solomon and the people could begin work on building the Temple as a permanent dwelling place for the presence of God on earth.

C. If we trust God and seek His wisdom, He will bless us.

In this New Covenant, we are the temple of God (I Corinthians 3:16-17). Just as God blessed Solomon's Temple, the Lord wants to bless us. To fully receive the benefits the

Almighty desires to give us, we must place our trust in God and seek His wisdom. The book of wisdom known as Proverbs tells us we should trust in the Lord with all our heart. We should not lean to our own understanding. If we acknowledge the Lord in all our ways, He will direct our paths (Proverbs 3:5–6).

We need a prayer life like young Solomon. During the early days of his reign, he exhibited humility and fully acknowledged his need for God. Despite his inexperience and the fact he was neither a priest nor a prophet, Solomon prayed one of the most powerful prayers in history. We too must covenant with the Lord in prayer, seeking His face before seeking anything else.

DISCUSS: *How important is your prayer time to you? When do you have it?*

II. SOLOMON BUILT THE TEMPLE

Even though Solomon lacked the prestigious reputation his father had, King Solomon could do something his dear ol' dad could not: Solomon could build the Temple. God did not covenant with David to build the Temple because David had shed too much blood. The peace that resulted from Solomon choosing wisdom paved the way for construction.

The Lord also granted Solomon a good relationship with Hiram, the king of Tyre. Hiram possessed both the materials and the expertise to assist Solomon in building the house of the Lord. The alliance between Solomon and Hiram reveals that wise people often seek the assistance of others. While Solomon had wisdom from the Lord and plans for the Temple, the young monarch needed someone to help him make his dream a reality. A wise individual will not feel threatened but will humbly accept someone else's expertise and utilize those talents for the glory of God.

DISCUSS: *How do you reach out for others' help and not feel threatened by their strengths?*

A. Israel in the Promised Land

The Temple served as a visible reminder of God's covenant with Israel. As a fulfillment of God's covenant to David, the act of building the house of God further cemented Israel in the Promised Land. No longer would they move the Tabernacle from place to place—they were finally home in the Promised Land. Even outsiders from other nations who saw the Temple would know that the Lord dwelled in Israel.

The Temple also reflected the unity of the tribes of Israel. For years they had struggled to remain cohesive. Now the Temple provided a place for them to gather and renew their covenant with God and each other. The Law required Jews to appear at the Temple for three different feasts: Passover, Pentecost, and Sukkot (Booths or Tabernacles). These consistent returns to the heart of Jerusalem revealed the wisdom of building the Temple. Those who made the annual pilgrimages remained united in their purpose and their worship.

B. The Dedication of the Temple

After seven years, over 150,000 workers finished their work on the house of God. It was grand and beyond beautiful. Solomon knew the Temple needed to be dedicated to God. Although human hands had constructed the Temple, the building would be just another beautiful building without the presence of the Lord. Solomon offered numerous burnt offerings and sacrifices. He invited the presence of the Lord into His new house, and Almighty God responded to Solomon's faith.

At the dedication of the Temple, God promised to remember His covenant with the people of Israel and heal their covenant land (II Chronicles 7:14). Even if the people found themselves in exile, they could humble themselves, direct their prayers toward the Temple, and call on the name of the Lord; then the Lord would hear their prayers, forgive their sin, and heal their land.

DISCUSS: *What do God's promises in II Chronicles 7:14 mean to you?*

C. I will pray to continually live in covenant with God.

In our own times of distress, we must realize the Lord will hear our prayers. If we want to maintain our covenant relationship with God, we must be willing to humble ourselves in repentance. We must have faith when we pray. We must call on the name of Jesus, the name above every name.

When we reach out in faith, we renew our covenant with God. In prayer we remind the one who never forgets our covenant of His promises to us. Our God wants us to pray so we reignite and recommit to the covenant we have made with Him. When we do, our Redeemer stands ready to forgive. Our Healer stands ready to cure us of sickness, disease, and oppression. It's all part of living in covenant with Almighty God.

III. SOLOMON STRAYED FROM COVENANT

Life seemingly could not get any better for Solomon. His relationship with Lady Wisdom was a marriage made in Heaven. Solomon took care of the things of God, and God blessed the king and his people. Because Solomon honored his Creator, the Lord brought honor to Solomon. He soon gained renown for the Temple and for his wisdom. The Queen of Sheba traveled well over 2,500 miles round-trip to hear the wisdom of the king of Israel.

Sadly, Solomon's fame soon soured to infamy. The wise king began walking further and further away from the covenant he had made with God. He deviated from God's plan and eventually from God, putting his relationship with the Lord and the children of Israel at great risk. The successful king began paving the path to failure as he focused on worldly wisdom instead of the wisdom of God.

A. Solomon's Disregard

Problems in an individual's relationship with God often result from problems in other relationships. Solomon disregarded God's wisdom regarding marriage. He chose

women from foreign lands to be his wives. These politically arranged marriages seemed like a good idea on the surface. They maintained peace between neighboring nations, opened the door to extensive trade, and promoted cultural exchanges. However, they weakened Solomon's allegiance to an exclusive covenant with God.

¶ Solomon's wives led his heart astray. The man who built the Temple began constructing shrines for false gods. Worse yet, he drafted his Israelite brothers to complete these idolatrous projects. The king commanded the people of the one true God to build temples for false gods. He even built a place to worship the Ammonite god Molech, the god who required child sacrifice as worship. In II Samuel 1, King David lamented, "How the mighty have fallen," after King Saul died in battle. He may have lamented his own son in the same way after Solomon broke covenant with God and worshiped other gods.

DISCUSS: Are you surprised by Solomon's sharp decline spiritually? How do we avoid the same trap?

B. God's Covenant with Jeroboam

As a result of Solomon's dalliances with foreign gods, the Lord called Jeroboam to rule over the ten northern tribes. Jeroboam was one of the leaders of Solomon's work forces, an industrious man much like his ancestor Joseph. Solomon not only taxed the people heavily, but he also demanded they work on his building projects. But Jeroboam opposed the king. Fearing Jeroboam's growing influence, Solomon attempted to eliminate him. Jeroboam fled to Egypt, seeking refuge during his forced exile.

Jeroboam would one day return and divide the kingdom between north and south. The rise of Jeroboam reveals that God's Spirit will not always—and does not have to—strive with us. If we break God's covenant, God will covenant with someone else. He will have a called-out people, no matter how many or how few are in it.

Solomon's life serves as a warning. Most people know Solomon for his numerous marriages, but we should pay more attention to his greatest divorce. Solomon separated himself from Lady Wisdom. In the settlement, Lady Wisdom took most of Solomon's kingdom and gave it to Jeroboam. Scorning Lady Wisdom led to the sharp downfall of the once great—even regarded as the wisest—king.

C. Wisdom alone is not enough; I must have a heart that continually seeks after God.

When we look at the life of Solomon, we should appreciate his early years. His prayer life as a young man kept him focused on the right things. As a fledgling king, he devoted himself to Lady Wisdom. She brought joy, peace, and wealth into his life because he sought the wisdom that only comes from right relationship with God. Solomon experienced many happy years because of that single commitment.

However, Solomon failed to realize he needed to continually seek after God. Being right with God in the beginning did not necessarily mean he would be right with God at the end. Perhaps he grew too complacent, thinking the Lord would honor him no matter what. Perhaps growing pride that stemmed from his fame went before his destruction and led to his fall. If we are wise, we will heed the cautionary story of the wise king who became a fool.

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to show the need to mix wisdom with godly character.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

While Scripture compares wisdom to a lady, ornithologists (feather and fowl experts) say Wisdom is a bird. She is an albatross, in fact, and the oldest one at that.

① Wisdom, a female Laysan albatross, is believed to be over seventy years old. One might never know it from her stately white gullet, long beak, and brown broad feathers, but she was first tagged in the north Pacific Ocean in 1956 and has been tracked across the decades.

Perhaps Wisdom is most famous for hatching her brood well into her senior years. So all eyes turned to her at the end of 2022 when Wisdom's long-time mate went missing. For over a year Wisdom remained alone, and a leader of the bird refuge where she is known to reside stated in March of 2024 that it was highly unlikely she would be able to find another mate.

However, in December Wisdom made headlines for laying her sixtieth egg. Though no one is reported to have thrown a baby shower or gender reveal party, Wisdom was celebrated as the oldest known bird to have laid an egg. Her story has been picked up by major news outlets around the world as they ponder the wonder of the septuagenarian (in her seventies) bird still nurturing offspring.

Think of the vocabulary collisions in the story. First, the term *albatross* is loaded with mixed meanings. It can mean a rare but prizeworthy golf achievement when an athlete pulls off a near-impossible shot, scoring three under par on a single

hole. Yet it can also be used to refer to a person who causes trouble or inhibits a person from achieving a purpose. With all of those connotations, scientists chose to name the oldest living albatross Wisdom.

Perhaps this quirky but true account can remind us today of the connection between wisdom and purpose. Though Solomon provides a cautionary tale that wisdom separated from God's covenant plan is dangerous, maybe on an elementary level Wisdom the albatross reminds us that longevity connected to purpose can be fruitful. Something innate deep within Wisdom the bird called to her to seek a mate, despite the odds—seemingly because of a natural instinct to nest and nurture. Whether having purpose multiplies her longevity or she simply follows her instincts in her unusually long life, she has not resigned herself to rest on her nest. Wisdom chooses to continue with the purpose sparked within her; the results have made people take notice.

On a much more significant level, our lives are sparked with purpose. It may involve service at church, influence in the lives of family members, witnessing to our community, honoring God through special talents, and on the list could go. This purpose God calls us to is much more special than that of Wisdom the albatross. We can impact our world with the gospel. We'll need wisdom to do so, and then we'll need to use that wisdom according to God's covenant plan. Let us pray today for wisdom to steward our gifts in ways that honor our God-breathed purpose.



WINTER 04

DECEMBER 28, 2025

LESSON TEXT

I Kings 11:25;
II Chronicles 10:36

FOCUS VERSES

Ezekiel 37:15-17

¹⁵The word of the LORD came again unto me, saying,

¹⁶Moreover, thou son of man, take thee one stick, and write upon it, For Judah, and for the children of Israel his companions: then take another stick, and write upon it, For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel his companions:

¹⁷And join them one to another into one stick; and they shall become one in thine hand.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

Even though Israel divided, God did not give up on them.

The Kingdom Divided



COVENANT CONTEXT

Although we are only two generations into King David's descendants, the nation of Israel divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Yet through the warring between the two nations, God redeemed the division to open the door for the entire world to be in covenant relationship with Him.

SG **TEACHING OUTLINE**

Icebreaker: What is the greatest sibling rivalry you can think of?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to set up the story of the rival nations of Israel and Judah.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. THE TWO SOUTHERN TRIBES OF JUDAH

- A. King Rehoboam
- B. Rehoboam's Reign
- C. God kept His covenant to David, although not as God intended.

DISCUSS: *Whom do you ask for advice? Are they helping you grow closer to God or further from Him?*

II. THE TEN NORTHERN TRIBES OF ISRAEL

- A. King Jeroboam
- B. Jeroboam's High Places

DISCUSS: *Although the golden calves were intended for Israel to worship the Lord, why did God have a problem with them?*

- C. God's Mercy
- D. I will rely on God's mercy to reveal to me the error of my ways. **(V)**

DISCUSS: *What might be a "golden calf" in your life that you need to repent of? Are you willing to repent and give it to God?*

III. THE FALL OF BOTH NATIONS

- A. The Fall of Israel
- B. The Fall of Judah

DISCUSS: *How can we better learn from others' mistakes so we don't have to make them?*

- C. God's Covenant to the Whole World
- D. I will trust God to use even my failures for His glory.

DISCUSS: *What division do you need to mend with God or others? How can you do so?*

Internalizing the Message **(I)**

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to help us see His plan even when life is difficult
- For God to redeem us from our troubles

LESSON CONNECTION

Sibling rivalries and blood feuds between brothers have filled the annals of time. Even when brothers worked together to accomplish great things, division could tear them apart. From Roman mythology, the story of Romulus and Remus founding Rome records that the twin brothers differed on their goals for the new civilization. Orphaned at birth, the two at least had each other. However, Romulus eventually killed Remus because they disagreed on where to build the city. Remus preferred the location that would provide the best farmland; Romulus preferred a more strategic position to protect the city. With his penchant for war, Romulus prevailed, and Rome served Mars, the god of war.

Other wars throughout history pitted brother against brother. The American Civil War is infamous for siblings fighting on opposite sides. The Battle of Front Royal featured an interesting encounter when the Confederate Captain William Goldsborough took his brother Charles, a Union soldier, prisoner. Four brothers fought in the battle at Hartsville, Tennessee, where the Confederates emerged victorious. Three of four Terrill brothers were on the winning side. The other brother, Robert Q. Terrill, was among over 1,800 Union prisoners.

The Battle of Secessionville in June 1862 pitted the Campbell brothers against each other. Confederate James and Unionist Alexander fought close to each other, although they did not know it until after the battle's end. Alexander wrote a letter home to his wife and told of his brother James: "We are not far from each other now . . . this was a war that there never was the like of before Brother against Brother."

Stories from various families featured different outcomes, depending on who won the battle. The McBeath brothers fought on opposite sides. Thankfully they made their way back home on the same evening at the end of the war. William was dressed in a sharp uniform fitting his station as a major in the Union; Anthony later joined his brother at home wearing rags.

All these stories reflect the dangers of division among biological brothers. If even such close family members found themselves at odds, then brothers and sisters in Christ must be aware of the problems that can arise from disunity. The church must guard against falling into this trap. The Bible provides consistent warnings about problems between brothers. In fact, sibling rivalry is one of the major themes in the Book of Genesis. The older half-brother Ishmael mocked Isaac, so Sarah had Hagar's son Ishmael sent away. Despite his own struggles with his older brother, Isaac still favored his son Esau over Jacob.

The animosity between the two led to Jacob bartering for Esau's birthright and later stealing it. Jacob did not learn his lesson, and he favored his son Joseph over his other sons. Judah pushed to sell his brother Joseph into slavery. Joseph's story also foreshadowed the descendants of each brother. Division would occur when the tribe known as Ephraim, the name of one of Joseph's sons, split from the tribe of Judah. Ephraim became another name for Israel, and the once united nation of Israel divided in two.

BIBLE LESSON

I. THE TWO SOUTHERN TRIBES OF JUDAH

As we've previously studied, the nation of Israel entered the Promised Land as a mighty army until rebellion raised its ugly head during the days of the judges. The once mighty army turned into splinter groups, and all the other tribes ultimately found themselves in a civil war with the tribe of Benjamin. The tribe of Benjamin somehow survived and gave Israel its first king. Saul's own personal demons of division plagued him. He fought his successor, David.

The war between the house of David and the house of Saul continued even after the mad king's death. David eventually united the tribes. The man after God's own heart set up his son Solomon for success, but the division of the kingdom loomed on the dark horizon. The dismemberment of the nation of Israel left two southern tribes: Judah and Benjamin formed the southern kingdom of Judah; the remaining tribes were known as the northern kingdom of Israel, or Ephraim.

A. King Rehoboam

Scholars often refer to the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon as the United Kingdom because the next era is known as the Divided Kingdom. After Solomon's death, Rehoboam ascended to the throne, threatening to be even stricter and stronger than his father Solomon was. (See I Kings 12:1-24.) Although many solely blame Rehoboam for the fracture, Solomon sowed the seeds of division. The break arose because of Solomon's harsh taxation policies. He also required the tribes to engage in forced labor, leaving their homes to work on his projects. If a tribe's service occurred during planting or harvest, the women, children, and elders were tasked with those responsibilities.

B. Rehoboam's Reign

King Rehoboam could have changed the situation. The elders advised him to listen to the people and seek a peaceable solution. "Go easy on them, and they'll follow you for life," they suggested. But Rehoboam's peers disagreed. They urged Rehoboam to be even tougher than his dad was. Foolishly Rehoboam followed his peers' advice and threatened the people with higher taxes and harsher treatment. Rehoboam would have done well to have heeded at least one of his father's proverbs. A wise answer could have turned away wrath (Proverbs 15:1). Instead, his harsh answer severed the kingdom. Rehoboam only retained control of Judah and Benjamin, called the kingdom of Judah, whose life-center was Jerusalem. The initial split was bad enough, but more damage lurked. Political division eventually yielded religious division.

C. God kept His covenant to David, although not as God intended.

Even though the tribes broke covenant with each other, the Lord remained faithful to His covenant He had made with the house of David. In the Davidic covenant, the Almighty promised to keep a member of the line of David on the throne. Rehoboam, the grandson of David, maintained his position as monarch, although his kingdom was greatly diminished.

The situation in the Bible is disturbing, but the message of hope still shines. Even when we make mistakes, the Lord keeps His covenant with us. However, we must be extremely careful not to take God's love and faithfulness for granted. We would do well to have an attitude that maintains unity with our God and the family of God because unchecked division can grow into greater problems.

DISCUSS: *Whom do you ask for advice? Are they helping you grow closer to God or further from Him?*

II. THE TEN NORTHERN TRIBES OF ISRAEL

The southern kingdom of Judah had the advantage of the Davidic covenant, but the ten northern tribes formed a powerful and fruitful kingdom known as Israel. The Northern Kingdom possessed rich and enticing farmland. Israel often proved to be far more powerful than Judah. Sometimes the Southern Kingdom served as a vassal to the Northern Kingdom, forced to pay tribute and ally with the Israelites in wars.

Anyone looking at the two kingdoms might have assumed the larger and more powerful kingdom would persist. The backwater, smaller kingdom of Judah seemed inconsequential, yet God had great plans for preserving Judah. Israel could have persisted if a certain king named Jeroboam had not committed such a perpetual sin that eroded the kingdom's faith in God and eventually led to its dissolution.

A. King Jeroboam

Rehoboam's counterpart in the north was King Jeroboam. Jeroboam was more a rival to Solomon than to Solomon's son, Rehoboam. Jeroboam had proven himself an able leader over Solomon's work crews. Like his ancestor Joseph in Genesis, Jeroboam possessed significant managerial skills. He also possessed political savvy.

In response to Solomon's disobedience and Rehoboam's arrogance, Jeroboam led a rebellion against the house of David. (See I Kings 11:26-12:24.) The foolish fledgling king Rehoboam played right into his hand. He lacked the political experience and expertise Jeroboam boasted, so when Rehoboam threatened the people, the nation divided. Jeroboam ruled over the majority of the tribes (the Northern Kingdom), but he predicted a problem in maintaining power. Like Rehoboam, he also made a disastrous decision with enormous consequences.

B. Jeroboam's High Places

In the ancient world, temples were not only houses of worship; they were also places that made money and centralized political power. The politically astute Jeroboam saw a huge problem in the Temple at Jerusalem. It was in the Southern Kingdom's capital city, and since God commanded His people to return there for three feasts every year, Solomon's Temple would generate a great deal of money. Worse yet for Jeroboam, his northern citizens might choose to reunite with their southern brethren.

To prevent that possibility of reunification and to enrich his own kingdom, Jeroboam built golden calves in the city of Bethel. These calves were initially giving the Northern Kingdom a convenient place to worship God so they would not have to travel all the way to Jerusalem. Jeroboam instituted places of idolatrous worship outside of Jerusalem, a sin that plagued the kings of the Northern Kingdom until its demise in 722 BC. (See I Kings 12:25–13:34.)

DISCUSS: *Although the golden calves were intended for Israel to worship the Lord, why did God have a problem with them?*

C. God's Mercy

Despite all their idolatry and wickedness, God still longed to show His people mercy. They were still His people, so the Lord sent a man of God to prophesy against Jeroboam so he would repent. But the rebellious Jeroboam lashed out in anger. When he stretched out his hand against the prophet, his hand withered. But even in this situation, God was showing mercy. When Jeroboam begged for his hand to be healed, the Lord restored him.

God cared for a man who had brought immense division to His people. After his miraculous healing, we would think Jeroboam would have repented of his idolatry and destroyed the golden calves at Bethel, but he did not. His pride and political ambitions ruled his heart and actions. His sin persisted as a growing cancer in the north. Because of his sin, we read a recurring refrain in the Old Testament of several kings of Israel: “He departed not from the sins of Jeroboam.” If only they would have repented of their idolatry, God’s mercy would not have had to give way to judgment.

D. I will rely on God’s mercy to reveal to me the error of my ways.

Jeroboam may have been too smart for his own good because he failed to change his ways when the man of God confronted him. We must be careful not to rely just on our own knowledge or wisdom. We must not allow the wrong type of ambition to lead us down the wrong path. Instead, we can pursue godly goals to advance God’s kingdom, not our own.

We need to humbly pray for God to reveal the error of our ways to us. Sometimes we can become so caught up in a situation that we cannot see clearly. God stands ready to forgive us. His mercy is new every morning, but we must repent of our sins and accept His mercy. If we do, we will not have to experience His judgment. V

DISCUSS: *What might be a “golden calf” in your life that you need to repent of? Are you willing to repent and give it to God?*

III. THE FALL OF BOTH NATIONS

To be true to His word, God must sometimes bring judgment. Although the Northern Kingdom was the first to fall, the Southern Kingdom did not escape the wrath of God. The nation of Judah was captured around 140 years after the nation of Israel was captured. The southerners are infamous for ignoring a warning sign God placed right before them when the nation of Assyria invaded Israel and killed or captured her citizens.

A. The Fall of Israel

The northern kingdom of Israel possessed fruitful seeds that led to economic prosperity. But they also held the rotten seeds of destruction from the idolatry of Jeroboam. Yet because of its monetary value, the kingdom was a ripe plum too tantalizing for the savage Assyrian nation to resist. After many prophetic warnings from godly men like Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, and Amos to repent and turn back to God—and many repeated rejections of those warnings—the northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria in 722 BC. (See II Kings 17:1-23.)

B. The Fall of Judah

But the smaller southern kingdom of Judah continued for over one hundred years after the fall of Israel. They had seen what happened to their brothers in the north, and the Lord let them know if they persisted in sinning, the same would happen to them. Unfortunately, the people and their rulers ignored the prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zephaniah, Habakkuk—not to mention the cautionary object lesson from the fall of Israel. After many prophetic warnings, the southern kingdom of Judah tragically fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC (II Kings 25; II Chronicles 36).

DISCUSS: *How can we better learn from others' mistakes so we don't have to make them?*

C. God's Covenant to the Whole World

Even in the darkest hours of dissolution of the northern kingdom of Israel and the exile of the southerners, God had a plan. In God's providence, the falling away of the Divided Kingdom would ultimately open the whole world to enter into covenant with Him. The Jews would begin thinking about their impact on the Gentiles. Zechariah prophesied that ten men would take hold of a Jew, desiring to accompany him because these Gentiles had heard that God was with the Jews (Zechariah 8:23). Even in His people's faithlessness, God remained faithful.

D. I will trust God to use even my failures for His glory.

We all make mistakes. Although we strive not to sin or allow our weights to overtake our lives, we can find ourselves struggling. Sometimes we may even fail. Although these moments might make us think God has forever broken His covenant with us, the Almighty demonstrates His great love for us by using our failures for His glory.

We should not willfully sin like the people of Judah and Israel and expect God to always bail us out. But neither should we hang our heads in despair and refuse to accept the forgiveness Jesus gives. After all, Jesus knew we all would fail Him at some point. Yet He loved us enough to die for us. No division is so great that He cannot heal it and reestablish His lasting covenant with us.

DISCUSS: *What division do you need to mend with God or others? How can you do so?*

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how we need to mend our divisions with God and with others.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Ulrich von Gradwitz and Georg Znaeym held on to a family grudge for years in Saki's short story, "The Interlopers." The warring clans fought over a small piece of property teeming with game. The two men traced the beginnings of their dispute back to a lawsuit between their grandfathers. Although the Gradwitzes won the case, the Znaeyms continued their illegal hunts on the Gradwitzes' property.

On a stormy night, Ulrich set out to trap and kill his foe. Both men viewed death as the only solution. When they spotted each other in the forest, they froze. In their hesitation, the storm made the first move. A bolt of lightning struck a nearby tree and trapped the two enemies under the fallen limbs. Unable to finish each other off, they raised their voices, accusing each other of thieving and poaching. They were trapped by their foolish arguments as much as by the felled tree, and they persisted in their war of words. Then they started to wonder whose team would arrive first to deliver the victor and kill the victim.

Surprisingly a kind gesture interrupted their hatred. Ulrich freed his arm and took a swig from his canteen. Then he asked if Georg could get a drink from the canteen if he pitched it toward him. But Georg remained committed to hatred. For some reason, Ulrich sought peace. He hoped the two could forgive and hunt on the same land. Maybe, just maybe, they could even become friends.

Eventually the thought of his enemy becoming an ally made Georg picture strange possibilities. Should the two men ride into town together, everyone would be surprised. But if Georg was a welcomed guest, not a trespasser, there was nothing to fight about. In that moment Georg had a change of heart, realizing their two feuding families could finally be at peace.

Committed to resolution, the men shouted to draw their search parties toward them. Each hoped his men would arrive first—not to hurt anyone but to lend a helping hand to a new friend. In the distance, Ulrich spotted nine or ten figures. Georg commented that his group was smaller, so it couldn't be his men. Squinting, he asked if it was Ulrich's group. Ulrich laughed uncomfortably. When Georg again asked who their soon-to-be saviors were, Ulrich revealed the awful truth. The figures were not men; they were wolves.

"The Interlopers" reveals that judgment looms if we are not quick to show mercy and mend our divisions. We must be especially careful to repent and reconnect with God if we have gone astray. The Lord will show mercy to us and reestablish His covenant. As we make things right with God, we may need to fix our relationships with others. We may even need to show others the mercy the Lord has shown to us. Learn from Jeroboam and Rehoboam and from Georg and Ulrich: mend your divisions so you can enjoy the fruit of peace.



WINTER 05

JANUARY 04, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Jonah 1-4

FOCUS VERSE

Jonah 4:11

And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

God will have mercy on whom He will have mercy.

The Prophet Jonah

I WILL
REJOICE WHEN
GOD IS
MERCIFUL
TO OTHERS
AND TO ME.

COVENANT CONTEXT

Beyond the section of Historical Books in our Bible, a significant section of the Old Testament contains the writings of prophets who spoke as they were moved by God. After God opened the door for the world to be in covenant with Him, He sent a prophet named Jonah to the Gentile nation of Assyria to preach repentance from sins. Although Jonah was reluctant to preach to Assyria, God was willing to show them mercy, thus extending covenant to people beyond the Jews. God's mercy is greater than we can imagine.

SG **TEACHING OUTLINE**

Icebreaker: What is the biggest excuse you have used to get out of doing something you didn't want to do?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to set up the story of Jonah refusing to do what God had called him to do.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. JONAH THE PROPHET?

- A. Jonah Prophesied Revival
- B. Jonah's Reluctant Prophecy
- C. I will overcome reluctance through obedience to God.

DISCUSS: *Why are we sometimes reluctant concerning an assignment God gives us?*

II. JONAH THE REPENTANT PROPHET?

- A. Repentance or Remorse? **V**
- B. Nineveh's Short-Lived Repentance
- C. I will turn to God with true repentance when I am disobedient.

DISCUSS: *How do you keep from feeling disqualified from God using you?*

III. JONAH THE REJECTING PROPHET

- A. Jonah Rejected God's Mercy

DISCUSS: *What steps could you take to help you grant mercy to someone who has wronged you?*

- B. Jonah Rejected God's Calling

DISCUSS: *What mission does God have for you to carry out? If you're not already obeying, what will you do today to obey?*

- C. I will live out my mission to share covenant with all who need mercy.

DISCUSS: *What actionable steps can you take to live out your mission of sharing God's mercy?*

Internalizing the Message **I**

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to give us a fresh revelation of His mercy
- For God to use us to reach people of all walks of life

LESSON CONNECTION

On November 18, 2012, thirty-six-year-old Salvador Alvarenga set off the coast of Mexico with his inexperienced crewmate, Ezequiel Córdoba. Fishing was the plan for the day, so they loaded a few items: sardines for bait, fishing hooks and lines, knives, and bailing buckets. In addition they took a few navigating tools: a mobile phone in a plastic bag to keep it dry, a GPS tracking device (not waterproof), and a two-way radio with a half-charged battery. What was supposed to be routine turned out to be disastrous. Suddenly the tiny crew found themselves ambushed by a storm. Battling and bailing against the water rushing in, Alvarenga and Córdoba worked furiously.

Frantic and freezing, they held on for life as the waves battered the small twenty-five-foot watercraft. With the storm lifting a bit, Alvarenga radioed his boss, “Willy! The motor is ruined!”

“Calm down, man, give me your coordinates,” Willy responded from the docks.

But Alvarenga would not be calmed. The GPS was not working and they did not have an anchor. He had noticed it was missing before pushing away from land, but he didn’t think he needed it on a deep-sea mission. Willy realized his friend was in trouble, so he set out to save him. As the sun disappeared and darkness overtook them, the storm pushed Córdoba and Alvarenga further and further out to sea. There would be no rescue. The men were lost at sea.

Over the next 438 days, Alvarenga battled dehydration, starvation, fear, loneliness, depression, and hallucinations. Córdoba only survived four months before he died of starvation, sliding off the boat and into a watery grave. Alvarenga did everything he could to survive. He fed off fish and fowl, using ingenious tactics for his next meal. Several times he was tempted to give up hope, but he kept fighting to live. Over fourteen months at sea, he had drifted nearly eight thousand miles off course, and Alvarenga washed ashore onto a small island at the southernmost tip of the Marshall Islands. Alvarenga had survived. He was saved.

We, too, have been saved. We have been saved by the mercy of God, having drifted off course from His original plan for our lives. Like Alvarenga, a life separated from God is nothing less than a survival mission. However, God’s mercy turns our survival into salvation. Throughout this lesson from the Book of Jonah, we will learn about the lengths God’s mercy will go to save people. God extends His mercy to those who are far from His ways, and He even helps those who lose their way, like Jonah.

BIBLE LESSON

I. JONAH THE PROPHET?

A. Jonah Prophesied Revival

It may seem odd to begin the story of Jonah with King Jeroboam II, but that is where the Bible begins Jonah's story. Jeroboam II reigned in Israel for forty-one long years, continuing the evil he inherited. His reign of terror was marked by idolatry, materialism, and disregard for people in need. Despite Jeroboam's wickedness, God still did not want to destroy Israel. Although Israel turned their back on God, God was not turning His back on them. He had every intention to save His people. God was not condoning their sin, but He was remembering His covenant with them because Israel was His people. Even though they broke covenant with Him, He would continue to protect them from their enemies. When God saw how vulnerable His people were, He sent them a prophet named Jonah.

The Scripture records of Jeroboam II: "He restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which he spake by the hand of his servant Jonah, the son of Amitai, the prophet, which was of Gathhepher" (II Kings 14:25). God used Jonah to help restore and reclaim Israel's borders and national identity.

B. Jonah's Reluctant Prophecy

God called Jonah, saying: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me" (Jonah 1:2). The Ninevites worshiped a goddess of love and war. Priding themselves on these two traits, the Ninevites flaunted a lifestyle of promiscuity and violence. Their sin reached a point where God was about to judge them, but first He sent Jonah to preach repentance to them. However, Jonah chose a different plan from the plan of God: "Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD" (Jonah 1:3). Jonah went in the exact opposite direction: he fled to Tarshish. If Jonah lived in 2026 and God called him to preach to New York City, we would find him on a flight headed to Los Angeles. Jonah disobeyed God because he could not understand why God would send him to wicked Nineveh.

Jonah even tried to flee from the presence of the Lord partly because he misunderstood mercy. Jonah was glad God was merciful to him, but he was reluctant to see God extend mercy to others, especially to a wicked people like the Assyrians. After God's reluctant prophet was seemingly safe on the seas, God sent a storm to get Jonah's attention. "But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken" (Jonah 1:4). Jonah did not expect the storm, but it brought him to repentance.

C. I will overcome reluctance through obedience to God.

We learn some lessons the hard way. Doing the will of God is not always easy, but it is always right. We will likely not understand God's whys and wherefores, but we don't have to understand; we just need to trust God knows what He's doing and thank Him that He includes us in His plan. If you feel reluctant to do what God is calling you to do, simply repent and say "yes, Lord" to the will of God. You will find what Jonah found—God is more merciful than we realize.

DISCUSS: *Why are we sometimes reluctant concerning an assignment God gives us?*

II. JONAH THE REPENTANT PROPHET?

A. Repentance or Remorse?

During the storm, Jonah's shipmates were out of options. They tossed out cargo and prayed to their gods, but nothing calmed the storm. Finally Jonah confessed that he was running from the call of God, and against their better judgment (yet at Jonah's request) they tossed him into the angry waters. Once Jonah sank into the sea, the storm calmed. Jonah was indeed the problem. But God was ready for him, and God had prepared a great fish to keep Jonah for three days and three nights. The fish opened wide, swallowed Jonah, and for the first time in the story, we read that Jonah prayed. Jonah 2:2 declares: "I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou hearest my voice."

▀ Although we cannot know his heart, we are left to wonder if Jonah was repentant or remorseful. There is a difference. Remorse may lead us to repentance, but remorse is incomplete without repentance. Sometimes God prepares storms to get our attention and help us return to Him, but God does not intend to harm us. He is always working toward our salvation. In the depths of the ocean in the belly of a fish, Jonah had begun to turn from his plans to follow God's plan. He vowed to do what God had called him to do, no matter how tough the task.

B. Nineveh's Short-Lived Repentance

After Jonah repented, God performed another great miracle: "The LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land" (Jonah 2:10). He began his march toward Nineveh with a simple, eight-word sermon: "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). Amazingly the Ninevites repented, much to his annoyance. They believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Even the king laid aside his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. From the king to the commoners, all of Nineveh repented. Unfortunately, their repentance was short lived. About 150 years later, God used another prophet named Nahum to prophesy to Nineveh of God's impending judgment in the book that bears Nahum's name.

At one point God had offered them mercy; now He was administering judgment. Under Jonah they had a chance to repent. Just how bad had Nineveh gotten? The Scripture

records: “There is a multitude of slain, a great number of bodies, countless corpses—they stumble over the corpses—because of the multitude of harlotries of the seductive harlot, the mistress of sorceries, who sells nations through her harlotries, and families through her sorceries” (Nahum 3:3–4, NKJV). Nineveh practiced their wickedness and even peddled it to corrupt the nations around them—an abomination in God’s eyes.

C. I will turn to God with true repentance when I am disobedient.

We must turn to God in true repentance any time we are disobedient. God is not willing for any of us to perish in our disobedience; rather, He offers us mercy so we can repent of our sins. Also note that God did not look for another man to carry out the task He originally gave Jonah. God does not take His giftings and callings from us when we fail. We can pick up these gifts of God and continue with the mission He gave us.

DISCUSS: *How do you keep from feeling disqualified from God using you?*

III. JONAH THE REJECTING PROPHET

A. Jonah Rejected God’s Mercy

Jonah understood God’s mercy, but he rejected it. Initially he refused to preach to the Ninevites because he understood God enough to know God would forgive them if they repented:

And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not. . . . But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry. And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil. (Jonah 3:10; 4:1–2)

The absurdity that Jonah would be upset because God extended His covenant to forgive others is spiritual blindness at its worst. Lest we look down on Jonah, we must examine our own hearts. When we willingly overlook our mistakes but point out the errors of others, we are missing the central point of mercy. Paul was right to write: “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Every one of us needs God’s mercy, so we should be quick to share God’s mercy.

DISCUSS: *What steps could you take to help you grant mercy to someone who has wronged you?*

B. Jonah Rejected God’s Calling

Jonah was not only rejecting God’s mercy, but he was also rejecting God’s calling: “And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live. And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death”

(Jonah 4:8–9). Jonah's story ended as it began: He wished to die instead of living out his prophetic calling. The story of Jonah mirrors the story of Israel on a smaller scale—rejecting God's covenant to be a witness to the Gentiles.

God wanted Israel to be a light, but they chose to stumble in darkness like the nations around them. Jonah and Israel had become so misguided that Jonah got to a place where he cared only for his comfort, showing how far he had strayed from God's call on his life. That led to the Lord's stern rebuke: "Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: and should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:10–11).

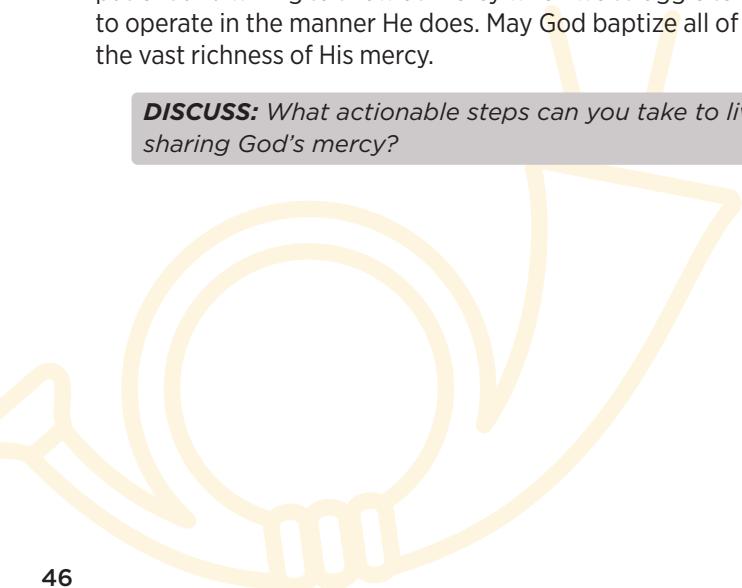
DISCUSS: *What mission does God have for you to carry out? If you're not already obeying, what will you do today to obey?*

C. I will live out my mission to share covenant with all who need mercy.

That last verse in the Book of Jonah summarizes the entire book. While God waited for Jonah to answer that question, God Himself already had answered it through His actions. He spared Jonah's life and was willing to hear him when he cried out from the depths of his despair. While God did save Jonah's life, it was partly so he would preach to Nineveh, so Nineveh would repent, and God would forgive. The Lord was leaving the window of mercy open to the Ninevites.

As people of God's New Covenant, we must live out our mission of mercy with all who need mercy. Yes we live in a wicked world, but so did Jonah. While wickedness was going up to God, God's mercy was coming down to humanity. Because we do not understand God's love at times, sometimes we magnify sin more than God's mercy. We become like Jonah, a quasi-prophet, and a contradiction of the very good news we preach and teach. Jonah confessed that God mercifully saved his life, but when God wanted to use Jonah to help save others, Jonah became angry. Thankfully, God is patient and willing to show us mercy when we struggle to understand why He chooses to operate in the manner He does. May God baptize all of us with a fresh revelation of the vast richness of His mercy.

DISCUSS: *What actionable steps can you take to live out your mission of sharing God's mercy?*



Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how we must be willing to show mercy and rejoice with others whom God forgives.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Chris was only ten years old on that Friday morning in 1974 when he got off the school bus in Coral Gables, Florida. A stranger told him he needed help decorating for a party for Chris's dad, only five days before Christmas. The ten-year-old jumped into the camper as the stranger drove out of town and into a secluded area where he suddenly stopped.

He pulled Chris into the middle of the RV and repeatedly stabbed him. His attacker stopped long enough to drive him down a country road in the Everglades known as Alligator Alley. He forced Chris outside the camper where he pulled out a gun, aimed it at ten-year-old Chris, and that was his last memory before he awoke in a hospital days later.

When he tried to open his eyes, he discovered he was blind in one eye. His dad told him the whole story. "Chris, you were kidnapped, you were shot through the head, and you were left to die in the Florida Everglades. And you were missing for six days." Trauma causes some people to run from God, but Chris ran toward Him, realizing he could trust the God who spared his life.

The police had one suspect, David McAllister, but not enough evidence to convict him. Twenty-two years later, the Sheriff's department called Chris to let him know they had found the man who tried to kill him. He was dying in a nursing home, and he confessed to brutally attacking ten-year-old Chris Carrier and leaving him to die in the Everglades.

Not long after that phone call, Chris walked into the room where his attacker David McAllister lay dying. Carrier told McAllister, "Mr. McAllister, I'd like you to know what's really been the source of my strength through all of this. . . . I want you to know there's nothing between you and me except our newfound friendship. I want you to know I forgive you." Chris prayed with David and shared the gospel with him. McAllister was blind and frail, but he grabbed Chris's hand, and weakly said through tears, "I'm sorry."

Chris needed God's grace and mercy. And for twenty-two years, God poured out His grace and mercy on a boy who was kidnapped, stabbed, and shot just five days before Christmas. And at the end of those twenty-two years, Chris prayed for God to pour out His mercy on the man who kidnapped and attacked him.

No doubt other people have hurt you or hurt people you love. Human nature wants to see them judged for what they have done, but God wants to bring them to repentance so He can forgive them. Part of that process is us being willing to share God's mercy and gospel with them and pray for God to forgive them, not judge them. Although we don't know how Jonah responded to God's probing question at the end of Jonah 4, we still have the opportunity to rejoice when God is merciful: merciful to us and to those who have hurt us. After all, as Jesus taught, only the merciful will obtain mercy (Matthew 5:7).



WINTER 06

JANUARY 11, 2026

LESSON TEXT

I Kings 18:19–24,
36–40

FOCUS VERSE

I Kings 18:21
And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

God gifts us with people to call us back to covenant.

The Prophet Elijah

I WILL
HONOR GOD
AS I HONOR
THE PEOPLE HE
PLACES IN MY LIFE.

COVENANT CONTEXT

During the dark days of the Divided Kingdom, the prophet Elijah lived as a Jehovah worshiper, even when the numbers seemed overwhelmingly stacked against him. His faithfulness to covenant often put him at odds with Israel's wicked kings but also inspired the Gospel writers to compare John the Baptist to him. This portion of covenant history shows that God was and is always calling us back to Him.

SG **TEACHING OUTLINE**

Icebreaker: What has been the most memorable or life-changing day of your life so far (besides the day of your new birth)?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to one of the prophet Elijah's most life-changing days.

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

I. THE REIGN OF AHAB

A. An Era of False Worship

DISCUSS: *What does success look like to you? How can you ensure you are worshiping Jesus and pursuing Him?*

B. An Era of False Prophecy

DISCUSS: *What sort of false spiritual speak are people believing today? Why do so many find these ideas attractive and convincing?*

C. I will inwardly resist the spirit of worldly compromise.

II. THE RISE OF ELIJAH

A. Elijah Stopped the Rain

B. Elijah Called Down Fire and Brought Rain

C. I will let my life display the power of God. **V**

DISCUSS: *What do you think it would take to see a national revival in our world today like Elijah saw?*

III. THE SPIRIT OF ELIJAH

A. John the Baptist Confronted False Religion

DISCUSS: *What makes it so hard to lovingly tell someone a hard truth? How do we correctly speak the truth in love?*

B. Jesus Confronted False Religion in His Day

C. I will outwardly stand for truth in the face of compromise.

DISCUSS: *Why is it important for us to have spiritual leaders who, like Elijah, are not afraid to challenge and confront us with our shortcomings?*

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to help us learn to receive correction with a humble spirit and respond with true repentance
- For God then to give us the ability to share the truth we have received with boldness and heartfelt love

LESSON CONNECTION

May 6, 1954—not many people today recognize the significance of that date, now over seventy years ago. However, it is a landmark date in the sport of track and field because on that day, British runner Roger Bannister became the first runner to finish a full mile run in less than 4 minutes (3 minutes and 59.4 seconds). For almost seventy years, runners across the world had been ardently pursuing that goal but to no avail. By the 1950s, most runners and coaches were convinced the four-minute mile was a human impossibility. The closest anyone had ever come was 4 minutes and 1.04 seconds.

Bannister's achievement is even more startling because he appeared to be the least-likely candidate to achieve such a grand goal. Bannister was decidedly a rebel, with little use for coaches and traditional training techniques and regimens. By all accounts, he was considered a lazy athlete. At one point, his training regimen consisted of only three half-hour sessions each week. Furthermore, the experts all agreed for the four-minute mile to be even *remotely* possible, the weather would have to be a perfect 68 degrees with no wind; the track must be hard, dry clay; and perhaps most importantly, there must be a large, enthusiastic crowd whose energy would spur the runner on.

However, on May 6, 1954, the day dawned cold and rainy, the track was wet and muddy, and the crowd was small and unenthusiastic. Against all odds, one man accomplished what an entire generation of experts was convinced was impossible. As they say, all records are made to be broken, and that day, it was Roger Bannister's turn. His story should teach us not to underestimate the power of one person's achievement. One race forever altered the perceived field of possibility for all runners and simultaneously set up a new barrier to break: the three-minute mile.

In today's lesson we will study an Old Testament figure who also defied the expectations and outlook of his own day. (He was also a pretty good runner, by the way [I Kings 18:45–46].) As we will see, the Israel of the prophet Elijah's day was far gone in idolatry and corruption, thanks to the evil King Ahab and his pagan wife, Jezebel. The idea of spiritual revival and renewal was a laughable absurdity; Israel's moral decay seemed unstoppable. But it only took one man—one prophet with a divine calling—to single-handedly tear down the stronghold of false worship that powerful King Ahab had raised up.

Today in our own era of spiritual decline and decay, God is still looking for individual, faithful men and women who will stand up in their homes, neighborhoods, communities, states, and nations to stem the tide of overwhelming evil that Satan is unleashing. And God will use each one who will commit to the cause of the Kingdom to spark a mighty renewal that will sweep our land.

BIBLE LESSON

I. THE REIGN OF AHAB

An apparent disconnect exists between the biblical account of Ahab's reign and the picture we see from the archaeological and historical record. Ahab and several other wicked kings are known as the Omride dynasty (I Kings 16:23–24; 22:39). Although they were kings, their reigns are overshadowed by stories of the prophet Elijah and his protégé, Elisha. However, archaeological evidence indicates that Israel under Ahab had “impressive cities that functioned as administrative centers” as well as a “standing army” and functional “international trade” (B. E. Kelle & B. Strawn, *The Historical Books of the Hebrew Bible*). In fact, Omri and Ahab are the first two Israelite kings to be named in non-biblical sources, indicating Israel was a significant leader in Ahab's day, something the writer of Kings chose to ignore. Why?

A. An Era of False Worship

Although the world would have lauded Ahab as successful, his reign as king over God's covenant people was failed because he introduced and spread the worship of the false god Baal. Under Ahab, the idolatry of the Northern Kingdom grew bolder and more brazen. Although Jeroboam's idolatrous golden calves were meant to worship Jehovah, the God of Israel, Ahab's idolatry was outright worship of a false god. He made no pretense; Ahab was not in covenant with Jehovah, the one true God.

DISCUSS: *What does success look like to you? How can you ensure you are worshiping Jesus and pursuing Him?*

Baal was not just *any* false god, he was the chief god of the Canaanites, the very people God had commanded Israel to drive out completely and never to imitate (Numbers 33:50–56). Under Ahab and Jezebel's evil influence, the worship of Baal—not Jehovah—became the official “state religion” of the Northern Kingdom. For the writer of Kings, no amount of economic success or international influence could offset this disastrous decline in covenant faithfulness. Remember, Ahab was not just leading people; he was leading God's covenant people.

B. An Era of False Prophecy

To no one's surprise, the rise of false worship was accompanied by the simultaneous rise of false prophecy. Gone were the days of the bold prophet Nathan who confronted David with his sin in II Samuel 12:7. In Ahab's day, roughly four hundred false prophets of Baal “prophesied” through elaborate signs and flowery speeches to tell the wicked king only what he wanted to hear, falsely claiming to speak with God's approval (I Kings 22:6, 11–12). These ancient frauds were likely paid well, coddled in the royal lap of luxury to ensure they remained aligned with Ahab's interests. Though he was surrounded with “spiritual” advice, Ahab had insulated himself from any real word from God. And then came Elijah.

DISCUSS: What sort of false spiritual speak are people believing today? Why do so many find these ideas attractive and convincing?

C. I will inwardly resist the spirit of worldly compromise.

As we survey the leaders and influencers in our world today, the attitude of Ahab is alive and well. Gurus and success coaches surround the wealthy and powerful—and even common folk—offering what they consider sage advice. Some even cloak their advice in spiritual speak and tell us how much God wants to bless and prosper us, but many offer no direction on how to get right with Him; they are often more concerned with wealth and fame. The road of true holiness remains untrod by many who even name the name of Christ. Like Nathan and Elijah and other faithful people of God, we must resist the urge to bow to the false doctrines of our day.

II. THE RISE OF ELIJAH

A. Elijah Stopped the Rain

Into this melee of pagan practices stepped the mighty Elijah the Tishbite. Unlike King Ahab, Elijah had no given pedigree; we do not know his father's name, nor are we sure of the exact location of his hometown of Tishbe. However, none of those details matter because the one crucial fact about Elijah stems from his name: it means "My God is Jehovah." Surrounded by a world saturated with symbols of Baal worship, Elijah stood out because he worshiped the only one worthy of worship.

Elijah's introduction into the story feels abrupt and confusing, but perhaps that was the writer's point. Elijah was meant to "appear out of nowhere," an emissary sent from the throne of God. His very first words were: "As the LORD God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word" (I Kings 17:1). That sounds strange. What does the threat of an extended drought have to do with overthrowing false worship? In the Canaanite family of gods, Baal was the storm god, the one responsible for sending rain so their crops would grow. But Elijah, the worshiper of Jehovah, was challenging Baal's "superpower" on his home turf (the ancient land of the Canaanites). When the heavens were drought dry for three years, Elijah proved that Baal was powerless and only Jehovah sends rain. Further, Baal had no control over the land, proving Jehovah and His covenant people rightfully possessed the Promised Land He had promised them.

B. Elijah Called Down Fire and Brought Rain

Through a series of miracles beautifully told in the rest of I Kings 17, God provided for His prophet during the drought. In their agrarian culture, a three-year drought all but guaranteed there would be no available food. The story of the widow of Zarephath reinforces the dangers of the drought-induced famine, which for the poor and needy especially meant certain death (I Kings 17:12).

In this crisis moment, Elijah once again almost magically appeared to confront the wicked Ahab and conclude this contest between Jehovah and Baal, a once-and-for-all war of worship. Elijah's proposed test was simple: Build an altar of sacrifice, and

whichever God or god answered by fire would be the one Israel should worship. Elijah seemed to tilt the odds in Baal's favor. As the god of storms, all Baal had to do was send one tiny lightning bolt to strike the already tinder-dry wood and a fire would surely ignite. And Elijah let the prophets go first.

The story is dramatically (even comically) dragged out. The false prophets of Baal cried to Baal from morning until noon, but Baal did not answer. Amused, Elijah began mocking them and their god. Maybe Baal was not answering because he was distracted, traveling, sleeping, or even in some translations, "using the facilities." The false prophets doubled down and cut themselves until their blood ran like water, but the heavens were still silent. No response. No thunder. No lightning. No flame.

It was Elijah's turn. Using twelve stones for the twelve tribes of Israel, he first repaired the old altar of the Lord that years of neglect and idol worship had broken down. Then Elijah ordered his servants to pour twelve barrels of water on the sacrifice. Water is pricey in a drought; it must have hurt the hearts of those who watched him soak a sacrifice when they could have used the water for cooking, cleaning, or even drinking. His audience probably mocked Elijah.

"You can't set a soaked sacrifice on fire."

Elijah likely smiled back. "You're right. I can't. But my God can."

In the short time it takes to read it, Elijah prayed a one-sentence prayer, and suddenly God sent a flame of fire from heaven so great it consumed the sacrifice and lapped up the water in the trench around it. Jehovah—the one, true, living God of Israel—had defeated Baal, and God's covenant people repented. By the end of the chapter, the long-withheld rain was pouring down on thirsty land.

C. I will let my life display the power of God.

In a world filled with false spiritual voices that will affirm anything a person might choose to believe, God often wants to establish the truth of our message through miraculous signs and wonders like the miracle of Mount Carmel. Jesus Himself affirmed this truth when He told His disciples that miraculous signs would follow those who believe, and these signs would confirm the preached Word (Mark 16:16–20). God not only wants you to proclaim His Word, but He also wants to work miracles in your life that will confirm it. Will you open yourself up to the miraculous power of God today? V

DISCUSS: *What do you think it would take to see a national revival in our world today like Elijah saw?*

III. THE SPIRIT OF ELIJAH

A. John the Baptist Confronted False Religion

Sadly the great revival sparked on Mount Carmel was temporary. Israel quickly returned to her idolatry, and Ahab's capital of Samaria fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC. When we fast-forward eight hundred years past Elijah, God's people had physically

returned to the Promised Land, but their hearts remained dangerously disloyal to God. Spiritually speaking, the Judea near the end of the “Intertestamental period” was not much better off than Israel in Ahab’s day. The nation lay crushed under the heel of Roman oppression with no real hope. Worse yet, the false prophets’ lies had been replaced by the false teachings of the scribes and the Pharisees.

Into this spiritual mess, God sent one final prophetic messenger, the herald of the coming Messiah, John the Baptist. Little is known about him other than the message he preached, which was an uncompromising demand for repentance in preparation for Jesus’ coming. To the corrupted Jewish leaders, he thundered: “O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: . . . I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: . . . whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor” (Matthew 3:7–8, 11–12).

John the Baptist did not court favor, nor did he mince words; ultimately, he lost his life for courageously calling out Herod Antipas for his sin of adultery. But Jesus spoke highly of John and his fiery ministry: “All the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elias [Elijah], which was for to come” (Matthew 11:13–14).

DISCUSS: *What makes it so hard to lovingly tell someone a hard truth? How do we correctly speak the truth in love?*

B. Jesus Confronted False Religion in His Day

Although Herod eliminated John, Jesus picked up right where John left off. Jesus’ message was also repentance. He preached: “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). Like John before Him, Jesus faithfully and vigorously confronted the Jewish leaders of His day, calling everyone to repentance so they could all be right with God.

C. I will outwardly stand for truth in the face of compromise.

It isn’t enough to simply “inwardly disagree” with unrighteousness and spiritual hypocrisy invading our culture. At some point, we must boldly take a stand for truth like Elijah, John, and Jesus stood. Yes, we risk being outcasts and even persecuted (a growing risk every day), but our mission is not to blend in and conform; our mission is to stand out and proclaim. In the parallel stories of Elijah and Elisha and John the Baptist and Jesus, we see a glimpse of a revival if we have the courage to reach out and believe God for it.

DISCUSS: *Why is it important for us to have spiritual leaders who, like Elijah, are not afraid to challenge and confront us with our shortcomings?*

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how records are often broken quicker when people believe it is possible. The following story may be a continuation of the Lesson Connection or a stand-alone story.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Roger Bannister's story is even more remarkable when we see what happened after he broke the seemingly unbreakable four-minute mile. Just forty-six days later, Australian John Landy ran a mile in 3 minutes and 58 seconds, breaking Bannister's record. Within a year, three additional runners broke the four-minute mile in the same race. Since that time, over one thousand runners have run a mile in less than four minutes.

The funny thing about the things we call impossible is that once someone does it, it seems like everyone does it. Some even call this phenomenon the "Bannister effect." In a way, we see it illustrated in the paired stories of Elijah and Elisha. Elijah was the first prophet to perform miraculous signs (seven of them), including one never-before-seen miracle of resurrection of the dead. (In the Old Testament, with its limited view of the afterlife, this miracle was especially astounding.) However, Elijah's protégé, Elisha, not only performed double the number of Elijah's miracles (fourteen), but he also performed two miracles of resurrection, the last occurring after he himself was dead (II Kings 13:20-21).

In their book *The Power of Impossible Thinking*, Yoram Wind and Colin Crook spend some time analyzing Bannister's impact on long-distance running. Pondering how his feat was possible,

they write: "Was there a sudden growth spurt . . . ? Was there a genetic engineering experiment that created a new race of super runners? No. What changed was the mental model. . . . When that limit was broken, the others saw that they could do something they had previously thought impossible" (hbr.org).

Humans have had the ability to run a four-minute mile (even before Roger Bannister); what we lacked was the belief that it was possible. When the "impossible" happens, it is no longer impossible. Perhaps that may be why in local congregations, we see miraculous events—physical healings, backsliders returning—forming clusters. Sister Jones testifies that God healed her terminal cancer, and it inspires Brother Smith to say, "If God can do that for Sister Jones, then He can surely take care of my glaucoma." Suddenly one miracle becomes a half dozen.

In Elijah's day, it only took one man to stand up for righteousness and refuse to compromise, and a mighty revival was sparked. Since God could do that in Elijah's day, imagine what would happen in our own day if each of us would take the challenge to stand for righteousness on our job, in our school district, or in our city, state, or province. Perhaps our long-prayed-for revival is waiting on us to stand up and speak up.



WINTER 07

JANUARY 18, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Ezekiel 36:37

FOCUS VERSES

Ezekiel 36:26-27

²⁶A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

²⁷And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

God is faithful to restore hardened hearts.

The Prophet Ezekiel

I WILL
YIELD
TO GOD'S SPIRIT IN
ORDER TO REMAIN
SENSITIVE
TO HIM.

COVENANT CONTEXT

As we begin a study of Ezekiel, we move into the section of the Old Testament (Major and Minor Prophets) that records how God spoke to Israel to call them back to covenant. After being exiled to Babylon, Ezekiel prophesied to the Jews of their need to repent and renew their covenant with God. Although they were hundreds of miles away from their land and the Temple, God made a covenantal promise through Ezekiel that He would pour out His Spirit and everyone—not just those in Judea—would have access to His glory.

SG **TEACHING OUTLINE**

Icebreaker: What is a common saying you don't understand or agree with?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to a saying the people of Israel used to quote which grieved God (such as, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge").

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. A PEOPLE IN EXILE

A. God Judged Wayward Judah

DISCUSS: *What are some of the drawbacks to our ability to travel to so many places so easily? How does that contribute to people's sense of "lostness" in our world?*

B. The Exiles' Hardened Hearts **I**

C. I will take responsibility to obey God's commands.

DISCUSS: *Why do we find it easier to blame others than to take responsibility for our own actions?*

II. A PROPHET IN EXILE

A. God's Glory

DISCUSS: *Where is the most unlikely place you have experienced the glory of God? What did that teach you about God's sovereignty?*

B. The People's Defilement

C. I will live my life in a way that brings honor to God's name. **V**

DISCUSS: *What can we do this week to glorify and honor God among our world?*

III. A PEOPLE RESTORED

A. The Promise of a New Heart

B. Restored Only by the Power of the Spirit

DISCUSS: *Since the outpouring of God's Spirit at Pentecost, individual believers have become the temple where God's presence resides. What are the greatest benefits of God's presence in your life?*

C. I will yield to God's Spirit in order to remain sensitive to Him.

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to help us see areas where we have grown spiritually lazy
- For God to transform our hearts with the proper motivations for serving Him

LESSON CONNECTION

During the height of World War II, Donald L. Miller was commissioned to fly a bombing raid over Germany. The American airman took flight and was well on his way when his plane was shot down and he was captured by the Nazis. Miller was sent to a notorious prison camp where his captors harshly treated and constantly watched him.

Life in the camp was extremely difficult. He and his fellow prisoners of war were fed little, faced freezing winters, and could get little to no privacy. Even though they were miserable, they worked hard to keep each other's spirits up. They created a secret network of resistance, including plans to escape, and ways to entertain themselves like theater and classes.

Months into his captivity, Donald Miller finally received a letter from his wife, Eleanor, from their home in Ohio. It had taken weeks to arrive and the Germans severely censored her letter. They blacked out several sentences before delivering it to her husband, their prisoner. Even still, her letter brought something Miller desperately needed: something to live for so far away from home.

He carefully, slowly read every word. Eleanor wrote how the seasons were changing and how their garden was growing. She told him how much she missed him. And she added a coded message, something she knew her husband would understand but the Germans would likely not. She wrote, "Our little fighter is practicing her parachute jumps around the house!" It was her way of telling him that their two-year-old daughter, whom he hadn't seen since she was a baby, was healthy and active. He closed his eyes and pictured what his two-year-old daughter looked like now. He pictured her jumping off chairs, pretending to parachute like her father. It filled him with a mixture of joy and sharp homesickness.

That letter fueled Miller with a will to survive, even in barely livable conditions. He carefully folded the letter, kept it in his pocket, and reread it time and time again. He shared the story of his daughter with his fellow POWs, and it too became a story of hope for many of them—a reminder of the world waiting beyond the barbed wire. When the war finally ended two years later, Miller was set free and returned home where he was reunited with Eleanor and his now four-year-old daughter.

Judah's prophet Ezekiel was on a mission to bring the Jews back to God, but Ezekiel was captured along with his fellow Hebrews. They were taken as prisoners of war to Babylon where God gave Ezekiel a vision of the heavenly throne room: a world beyond the "barbed wire." It was his lifeline during his captivity, and he promised God had something much better than what they were experiencing. In his heart, Ezekiel held hope that God would one day set them free and bring them back where he longed to be: God was going to bring His people home.

BIBLE LESSON

I. A PEOPLE IN EXILE

A. God Judged Wayward Judah

It is difficult for contemporary Westerners to imagine the traumatic reality of Judah's Exile in Babylon. In an era when world travel has become commonplace, it is difficult for us to imagine a world like the ancient Near East where leaving one's country was considered not only dangerous (everywhere outside one's homeland was enemy territory) but also its own kind of shameful disloyalty to one's family and especially one's god.

That is why we are supposed to be shocked by Abram's willingness to leave his country, his kindred, and his father's house in Genesis 12:1. In that era, when all aspects of one's identity (ethnicity, culture, and religion) were rooted in the people's birthplace, it makes sense that the ultimate curse for breaking God's covenant was exile from their promised homeland: "And it shall come to pass, that as the LORD rejoiced over you to do you good, and to multiply you; so the LORD will rejoice over you to destroy you, and to bring you to nought; and ye shall be plucked from off the land whither thou goest to possess it. And the LORD shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other" (Deuteronomy 28:63-64).

DISCUSS: *What are some of the drawbacks to our ability to travel to so many places so easily? How does that contribute to people's sense of "lostness" in our world?*

B. The Exiles' Hardened Hearts

In Deuteronomy 28:63 the loss of the land symbolized a loss of relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The exiles of Ezekiel's day refused to accept this reality. Even more importantly, they refused to accept that their captivity was the result of their own sins. In Ezekiel 18, the prophet responded to a common saying used as a sound-bite explanation of the current crisis: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezekiel 18:2). Mistakenly, these exiles were charging God with unjustly judging them for previous generations breaking God's covenant.

However, God moved them over five hundred miles from their homeland to Babylon to judge them for how their own sins had broken their covenant with God. As shown from their earliest days inhabiting the land, Israel's history was marked by a continual pattern of sin and rebellion against the Lord. (See Judges 2:12-19.) The judgment of the Babylonian Exile did speak to the sins of the previous generation, but the current generation was also guilty. Their hard-heartedness is what spurred God to send Ezekiel to confront them with his unusual methods. If the people would not *listen* to the Word of God, then God would *show* it to them.

C. I will take responsibility to obey God's commands.

Yet there was hope for these ancient exiles, and there is hope for us today. The same principle that holds us morally responsible for our sinful actions also allows us to

confess and repent. Immediately after this seeming pronouncement of doom, God said: “But if a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right . . . he is just, he shall surely live, saith the Lord God” (Ezekiel 18:5, 9). The ultimate lesson is not that we are doomed to judgment but that we are called to repent. We are called to own up to our wrongdoings, shortcomings, and blatant rebellions, and then to choose to walk a different path by the power of God. And it is a choice anyone can make.

DISCUSS: *Why do we find it easier to blame others than to take responsibility for our own actions?*

II. A PROPHET IN EXILE

A. God’s Glory

Before God called Ezekiel to be a prophet, he was already destined to be a priest at the Temple in Jerusalem. In fact, these two vocations were inextricably linked from the outset. Ezekiel was called as a prophet in his “thirtieth year” (Ezekiel 1:1), which is the age at which a priest was required to assume his duties (Numbers 4:3).

As a priest of the Jerusalem Temple, Ezekiel would have focused on maintaining the glory of God dwelling in the Temple. (See Isaiah 6.) God’s glory was the visible sign of His presence, described throughout the Old Testament as a cloud that settled first on Mount Sinai, then the wilderness Tabernacle, and finally Solomon’s Temple. Its presence signified the covenant between God and Israel, their mutual belonging that gave Israel her unique identity among the nations.

Imagine Ezekiel’s surprise when the great cloud of God’s glory appeared on the banks of a canal in Babylon. No longer confined to the sacred precincts of the Temple, God was demonstrating His sovereignty over all nations, literally invading the territory of the Babylonian high god, Marduk. So great was God’s desire to be with His people in covenant relationship, He had come to dwell with His (rebellious) people while they were in exile—while they were without the Temple.

DISCUSS: *Where is the most unlikely place you have experienced the glory of God? What did that teach you about God’s sovereignty?*

B. The People’s Defilement

After Ezekiel’s stunning vision of the heavenly throne room in his first chapter, Ezekiel 10 sadly demonstrates the departure of God’s glory from the Jerusalem Temple, symbolizing the certainty of Judah’s defeat, Jerusalem’s conquest, and the Temple’s complete destruction. The cause? Solomon’s Temple had become so defiled by the people’s idolatrous worship that God could no longer stand to remain in His own house. God’s people should have been holy, but their idolatry was so pervasive that the priests themselves were worshiping idols in the very precincts of the Temple.

Later, in Ezekiel 16, Ezekiel went on to describe Israel’s unfaithfulness in graphic and shocking terms. Rather than repent of their sins and trust in their covenant God, Judah formed expensive alliances with other nations for protection. On the surface those

alliances appeared to be the smart move, but they only proved how little they valued God. They had run a long way in the wrong way away from the Lord.

C. I will live my life in a way that brings honor to God's name.

We can learn much from the nation of Judah. We should do all we do for the honor of God's name, and that is more than just a divine ego trip where God could not abide being cast in a negative light. The proclamation of His name among the nations was the revelation to the world of His glorious power, grace, and forgiveness. It was the catalyst that should have drawn the nations away from their false gods to worship the one, true, living God of Israel.

God has always called His people to live a life separated from the ungodly ways of the world. It is a key way we are called to proclaim the uniqueness of our God. But what happens when the people who wear His name—who claim to follow this God who is so utterly unique among the many “gods” our world is worshiping—live a life no longer distinguishable from that of their neighbors? God's name, which should be glorified, is instead profaned and dishonored. Let us live to honor and glorify God's name and help draw people looking for Him closer to Him. (V)

DISCUSS: *What can we do this week to glorify and honor God among our world?*

III. A PEOPLE RESTORED

A. The Promise of a New Heart

Ezekiel knew Judah's transformation would take more than just renewed determination to “do better next time.” The people were so steeped in idolatry, living in blatant rebellion to God's Word, no simple reformation was possible. They needed a spiritual transformation. Little did Ezekiel know at the time, but his vision of God's glory as he stood by the Canal Chebar provided an important clue to God's solution to this perplexing problem. As God of all the earth (not just of the Promised Land), God could not be contained in any earthly Temple.

God revealed through Ezekiel that He never intended to dwell in a single Tabernacle or Temple. God wanted to deal with sin on an individual level; God wanted to indwell each individual through His Spirit. God's solution is found in Ezekiel 36:26-27: “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.”

B. Restored Only by the Power of the Spirit

Remember, God gave that promise to Ezekiel while he was in exile. God was promising a better, brighter day than the dark day Ezekiel was living. This stunning prophecy weaves together and radically transforms Ezekiel's other themes. Because God's Spirit would dwell *within* His people, that awe-inspiring glory of God seen in the opening

vision would be available to every Judean, no matter where they were. Although they would rebuild the Temple the Babylonians destroyed, one day a physical temple would no longer be required to provide access to God. As a result, the spiritual power needed for transformation was immediately and constantly available for those who would choose to rely on it. Finally, a people who had been completely transformed by the empowering presence of God would, by virtue of that reality in their lives, be effective witnesses for the glory of God's great name among the nations.

This transformation only happens through the indwelling of the Spirit. Without it, the gospel becomes nothing more than a call to try harder to be a better person. This is why Jesus told Nicodemus that the new birth required being "born of water and of the Spirit" (John 3:5; see also Acts 2:38). The gift of the Holy Ghost is not an optional upgrade to the plan of salvation; it is, as the prophet Ezekiel foresaw, its crucial completion.

DISCUSS: *Since the outpouring of God's Spirit at Pentecost, individual believers have become the temple where God's presence resides. What are the greatest benefits of God's presence in your life?*

C. I will yield to God's Spirit in order to remain sensitive to Him.

The gift of God's Spirit is the answer to the "stony heart" that eventually doomed the Jews of Ezekiel's day. It is impossible to live for God successfully without the Spirit's indwelling presence. But God's Spirit must be more than just our way to Heaven; we must live led by God's Spirit. Paul wrote: "Yield yourselves unto God" (Romans 6:13) and "quench not the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19). These admonitions make it clear that we can disobey the Spirit's convicting power with disastrous consequences. Maturing in our covenant with Jesus Christ is depicted as learning to walk in and be led of the Spirit instead of by our flesh (human nature). That means the more we yield ourselves to God, the power of His Spirit increases as the power of our own sinful habits and worldly ways of thinking decreases. Through the Spirit, we can live victoriously over sin's power.



Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how we should be more motivated by a desire to know and glorify God than by any other external reasons.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

“**E**very year, about 1,300 young men and women enter the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, New York. Only about 1,000 of them graduate. Of those graduates, a smaller portion pursue military careers beyond the mandatory five years of service. And fewer still are selected for early promotion” (science.org, “One Type of Motivation May Be Key to Success”). To understand the reasons behind these varied levels of success, two psychologists looked at fourteen years of data from over ten thousand incoming cadets.

The West Point application contains a series of scaled questions asking students why they are applying. Applicants must rate their desire on a scale between “Desire to be an Army officer” and “My parents wanted me to go.” The first is an internal motivator, focused on the value of the goal itself; the second is clearly external, focusing on some other benefit of achieving their goal. The two psychologists were interested in discovering whether internal or external motivations were greater predictors of overall long-term success.

The findings, reported in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, were clear and not totally surprising: “Cadets with primarily internal motives were about 20% more likely to make it through West Point than the average. For cadets who did not have primarily internal motivations—even if they were equally driven by internal motives and external motives . . . —their chances of graduation

were worse than average” (science.org). The findings help to confirm a long-held suspicion that internal forms of motivation are more important to the achievement of long-term goals. In other words, in the long run, success comes to those who desire the achievement themselves, not to those who are compelled by others to pursue it.

Ezekiel lived in a time when Judah lost all sense of internal motivation to serve the Lord. Instead, she had chosen to follow the spiritually destructive path of least resistance. Judah had turned a blind eye to the destruction that had befallen the larger northern kingdom of Israel just over a century earlier, merrily continuing down the same path of idolatry and faithlessness. Clearly, nothing would turn Judah from her destructive path unless she wanted to leave it—no warning stern enough, no threat drastic enough to turn her away.

But there was still hope because Judah’s God specializes in transforming stony, unresponsive hearts into sensitive, fleshly hearts. And He is the same God today, specializing in transforming not just who we are but who we want to be. God does not just take away our sin, but He replaces our craving for sin with a desire to live for the glory of God. To all those struggling with spiritual laziness, with a lack of proper motivation to pursue God’s plan and purpose in your life, let God do some “heart surgery” today. Although we will not be fully sinless this side of Heaven, each day we can grow closer to God.



WINTER 08

JANUARY 25, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Daniel 1; 3; 6

FOCUS VERSE

Daniel 1:8

But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

God will stand with us as we stand for Him.

Daniel and His Friends

I WILL
ENDEAVOR TO
LIVE IN
COVENANT IN
COMMUNITY
WITH MY FELLOW
BELIEVERS.

COVENANT CONTEXT

While in Babylon, four of the young Hebrew exiles were tested to see if they would remain true to their covenant with God. Daniel and his three friends stood up for their faith and God stood with them. Through His faithfulness and power, God showed His people and the rest of the world that He alone is God.

SG **TEACHING OUTLINE**

Icebreaker: What one decision, big or small, has had a lasting impact on your life in some way?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to the decision Daniel and his friends made to stand for God in the face of persecution.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. FOUR FRIENDS IN BABYLON

A. The Pressures of Palace Life

DISCUSS: *If you were Daniel or one of his friends, what would you be thinking if your captors were asking you to live as they did?*

B. The Friends' Decision to Resist the King's Meat

C. My decisions will be guided by God's purpose in my life.

II. THREE FRIENDS STOOD TOGETHER

A. The Pressure Increased

DISCUSS: *How do you think the three Hebrews' earlier decision around the king's meat influenced their decision to bow or be burned alive?*

B. Their Resolve Increased **V**

DISCUSS: *What does "but if not" mean to you? How do you reconcile living for God and worshiping Him even if He does not answer your prayers the way you expect?*

C. I will bow in worship to God alone.

III. DANIEL STOOD ALONE

A. Daniel Did Not Escape the Pressure

DISCUSS: *How do you think Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah's experience refusing to bow impacted Daniel's decision to pray in the face of a death sentence?*

B. Daniel Followed His Friends' Example

C. I will endeavor to live in covenant in community with fellow believers.

DISCUSS: *How can we foster closer community within our church and in the surrounding area we minister to?*

Internalizing the Message **I**

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to help us stand for Him, no matter the pressure we face
- For God to use us to inspire faith in others to stand for Him

LESSON CONNECTION

In 2009 most of the world knew her as Asia Bibi, but her real name is Aasiya Noreen. She was a Christian woman in her midforties living in Pakistan. She and a group of Muslim women were in the fields picking fruit when a fight broke out over drinking water. Some of the ladies offered her a drink of water, and when she drank, Bibi testified that they urged her to convert to Islam.

She refused, and they claimed that she had contaminated the water and the glass since she was a Christian. Immediately claims flew that she had dishonored their faith and insulted their leaders. Bibi was arrested and tried for blasphemy against Islam: a capital offense. A three-judge panel found her guilty and sentenced her to death by hanging. During the eight years she waited on death row, she faced immense pressure to convert to Islam to save her life.

Her case drew international attention and pressure, and in 2018 the Pakistani Supreme Court overturned her conviction, citing a lack of evidence and other issues with the case. Extremist groups protested and called for her execution anyway. Amid the chaos and danger, Asia Bibi escaped Pakistan with her family and flew to Canada where she continues to advocate for the rights of persecuted minorities. She valued her faith, even above her life, and refused to turn her back on Jesus Christ.

A man who had once been a Muslim and converted to Christianity was speaking with a Christian author and scholar. This man drew two circles and then drew a tiny dot inside each circle. He pointed to one and said, “For Muslims, the big circle is their faith, and the tiny dot inside it is their life. For Christians in Western society, the big circle is their life, and their faith in Jesus is just the tiny dot inside it.” Although that may be true of some Christians, as Asia Bibi and others prove, we understand that the covenant we have made to follow Jesus is more valuable, even than our lives.

BIBLE LESSON

I. FOUR FRIENDS IN BABYLON

A. The Pressures of Palace Life

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had established the greatest empire in the world through a mix of shrewd diplomacy and military conquest. This man was capable of the crudest psychological warfare. When King Zedekiah rebelled against him and tried to escape, Nebuchadnezzar caught him, killed Zedekiah's sons right in front of him, and then had Zedekiah's eyes put out so the last thing he would see was the death of his children.

For those who surrendered, like King Jehoiakim in the time of Daniel and his friends, Nebuchadnezzar employed a more political agenda to assimilate them into Babylonian culture. His plan was to bring some of the best and brightest young nobles into his palace, change their names, feed them from his own table, and turn them into loyal little Babylonians who would help him administer his empire.

The king was clever in his choices of name changes. Daniel meant "God is my judge," but the king changed it to Belteshazzar: "Bel protects him." Nebuchadnezzar may have hoped this young man would welcome the Babylonian god Bel as his new judge since the Babylonians appeared to be greater than the Hebrews. The pattern continued with Daniel's friends. Hananiah meant "God's gift," but Shadrach meant "Aku's command," referencing another Babylonian god. For Mishael, whose name meant "Who is like God?" the king chose Meshach, which meant "Who is like Aku?" Finally, for Azariah, meaning "whom the Lord helps," Nebuchadnezzar substituted Abednego, or "servant of Nego," another Babylonian deity. After all, how had the Lord helped them? Wouldn't it be wise to look for new, more powerful gods to serve?

To all this, Nebuchadnezzar added the apparent honor and kindness of offering these young exiles food from his own table. Surely it would be extremely rude to refuse the king's gracious offer. Nebuchadnezzar aimed to systematically erase their covenant identity and then inscribe the identity that best suited his purposes on the blank tablets they would become. The most cunning and powerful empire builder in the world was setting his will against that of mere teenagers. Could the result even be in question?

DISCUSS: If you were Daniel or one of his friends, what would you be thinking if your captors were asking you to live as they did?

B. The Friends' Decision to Resist the King's Meat

Daniel asked if he, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah would be allowed to eat a plain diet of vegetables instead of the rich food from the king. Even the young man in charge of the captives said he was in danger of beheading if the king knew he rejected his gracious offer. But Daniel proposed a simple, ten-day test, and at the end of that test, he and his friends looked and fared better than those who ate the king's meat and drank his wine.

Never in their lives had a single meal meant so much. What if Daniel and his friends had simply ducked their heads and eaten what was put before them? They could have blended in rather than standing out. It would have been the safer road. “But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself” (Daniel 1:8).

Daniel could have rationalized picking through the different dishes, avoiding the forbidden foods and eating the rest. He could have taken a full plate and scraped out part of it when no one was looking. But he decided he would not defile himself, publicly or privately. Daniel exercised godly leadership in that moment, and his three friends supported him and followed his example. They stood together and the course of their lives was changed forever. They drew their line, ready to face consequences to not conform. From that moment, their four lives and destinies were irreversibly entwined.

C. My decisions will be guided by God’s purpose in my life.

Even in captivity, God was standing with Daniel and his friends when they stood for God. As He graciously does, God rewarded these four who were bold and brave enough to stand up and stand out as God’s covenant people. (Read Daniel 1:17.) None of the other promising young Hebrew captives were ever mentioned again, but we are still telling these young men’s stories thousands of years later.

God is still looking for people who are unashamed to stand up and be identified as Jesus followers. Those content to blend in and be assimilated will not be able to fulfill their Kingdom purpose. But we must make our decisions based on the will of God we learn in the Word of God. Then we will find out what Daniel and his three friends found out: God will stand with those who stand for Him.

II. THREE FRIENDS STOOD TOGETHER

A. The Pressure Increased

They passed their first test, but it was not their final test. The pressure increased. Nebuchadnezzar was determined to unify his far-flung empire by imposing a single religion on every nation, regardless of their native gods or goddesses. The king ordered construction of a ninety-feet tall golden statue to tower over the plains of Babylon. He summoned every ruler, nobleman, and government official from every province of the empire to the dedication of this idol. Then the royal proclamation went out. At the sound of the orchestra’s music, everyone from the least to the greatest was to bow down and worship the king’s image. By royal edict, anyone who refused to bow would be bound and cast alive into the burning fiery furnace.

DISCUSS: *How do you think the three Hebrews’ earlier decision around the king’s meat influenced their decision to bow or be burned alive?*

B. Their Resolve Increased

Nebuchadnezzar's demand to bow to the idol directly violated the Lord's first commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). No doubt any true believer in Jehovah must stand, even if everyone else bowed. It may have been harder to stand if they had bowed to the king's demands about the meat. Compromise is a slippery slope.

Since Daniel is not mentioned in this story, he may have been absent from this assembly of Babylonian elites. But Daniel's three friends followed his previous example and once again stood up for God. As the music swelled across the plain of Dura, the assembled masses all fell to their knees, bowing like mown hay before a scythe—all except three young men. Imagine Hananiah looking at Mishael and Mishael looking to Azariah, each of them gaining courage just by seeing the others standing.

Those who were jealous of these three Hebrews' position in the kingdom had them dragged in front of the king by armed guards, but their resolve never wavered. Even when King Nebuchadnezzar offered to have the music played again so this time they could bow, they refused to even consider it. They boldly replied to the most powerful man in the world: "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not . . . we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up" (Daniel 3:17-18).

Nebuchadnezzar ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter, and he ordered his best and bravest to throw the three Hebrew rebels into it. When they found themselves inside, God met them there, and all that burned were the ropes that used to bind them. King Nebuchadnezzar, who thought of himself as the king of kings, looked in the furnace and saw a fourth figure in the fire. He was watching the very work of the true King of kings; the covenant God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was also the God of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. (V)

DISCUSS: What does "but if not" mean to you? How do you reconcile living for God and worshiping Him even if He does not answer your prayers the way you expect?

C. I will bow in worship to God alone.

For these three, their faith in Jehovah was all-encompassing, and their lives were negligible by comparison. Shouldn't it be the same for us? Should we not throw our lives wholeheartedly into living for our God? What is our life on earth after all? The Bible likens it to a vapor, a morning mist, the first dew on the grass, or the grass itself that grows and is clipped and dies. What is that compared with eternity?

III. DANIEL STOOD ALONE

A. Daniel Did Not Escape the Pressure

A regime change came years later, and King Darius of the Medes and Persians came to power in Babylon. Jealousy once again took aim at the Hebrews who had become

promoted in the empire. They tricked Darius into decreeing that anyone who worshiped or prayed to any man or deity besides the king himself for thirty days would be thrown into the den of lions.

Daniel was blameless and full of integrity, so this attack on his devotion to God was the only means his enemies saw of accusing him. What a testimony that the only area they could attack Daniel was his faith! They knew that Daniel prayed to Jehovah three times a day, bowing toward Jerusalem. So his enemies watched and waited to see if he would compromise or be condemned.

DISCUSS: *How do you think Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah's experience refusing to bow impacted Daniel's decision to pray in the face of a death sentence?*

B. Daniel Followed His Friends' Example

No doubt Daniel thought of his friends' courage and faith when they faced down the king and the fiery furnace as he himself contemplated how to respond to Darius's edict and the danger of the den of hungry lions. Daniel refused to compromise and worship the king; he was willing to trust in God. God had never let him down, and Daniel was confident God would meet him in the den of lions like He met Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah in the furnace. And God did. He saved Daniel's life and proved to Darius and the entire Persian kingdom that there is no God but Jehovah.

We may never know how much our decisions impact the lives of those around us, and it is not all one directional. A leader may influence those he or she serves while present, and those people may continue to follow that pattern when the leader is no longer around. But in the end, the leader too may be encouraged, strengthened, and emboldened by the actions of others. No man is an island. No one is always strong. We all need one another.

C. I will endeavor to live in covenant in community with fellow believers.

For these reasons it is crucial we live in community with fellow believers. Even when they are not physically present, the power of unity can still straighten our spine and stiffen our resolve. Knowing we are compassed about by a cloud of witnesses, both past and present, can give us the courage and fortitude to run the race set before us with patience and faith. Daniel and his friends inspired and strengthened one another when their faith was tested; let's do the same for each other.

DISCUSS: *How can we foster closer community within our church and in the surrounding area we minister to?*

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how our faith in God must remain firm, no matter the outcome.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

In the summer of 1940, more than 350,000 soldiers—most of them British—were trapped at Dunkirk, on the European side of the English Channel. German forces were on their way, and they had the capacity to wipe out the British Expeditionary Force. When it seemed certain the Allied forces at Dunkirk were about to be massacred, a British naval officer cabled just three words back to London: “But if not.”

“*But if not.*” These words were instantly recognizable to the people who were accustomed to hearing the Scriptures read in church. They knew the story told in the Book of Daniel. The message in those three little words was clear: The situation was desperate. The Allied forces were trapped. It would take a miracle to save them, but they were determined not to give in. One simple three-word phrase communicated all that.

For some reason—we are still not sure why—the Axis powers hesitated. They backed off, briefly, and what is known as the Miracle of Dunkirk took place. British families and fishermen heard about the poignant telegraphed cry for help and

they answered. They answered with merchant marine boats, with pleasure cruisers, and even with small fishing boats. By a miracle, as German dive bombers and fighters screamed down metallic death, they evacuated more than 338,000 soldiers to safety.

When you pray, God is able to heal you. But if not, will you still serve Him despite the pain or sickness in your body? When you give your problem to Him, God is able to solve it today. But if not, will you still trust He will turn it around in His time? If you give, God may well bless you in return monetarily. But if not, will you keep on giving, knowing that not all blessings are financial?

If you witness, maybe others will believe right away. But if not, will you keep on being a witness, an example, a light, and a prayer warrior for their souls? If you put your life on the line, God may save you. But if not, are you willing to even die for Him if that is what it takes?

May we live with that resolve in our hearts and resolution in our mouths: Our God will . . . but even if He doesn’t, we will still not bow.



WINTER 09

FEBRUARY 01, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Esther 4:5-16

FOCUS VERSE

Esther 4:14

For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

God is present even when He seems absent or silent.

Mordecai and Esther

I WILL
PARTNER
WITH GOD
IN FAITH TO
DO WHAT
HE CALLS
ME TO DO.

COVENANT CONTEXT

After the Medes and Persians conquered the Babylonians, a contingent of Hebrews remained in Persia. Among them was Mordecai and his young cousin, Hadassah. Again, God protected the Jews, even in a foreign land, and showed Himself faithful to His covenant people.

SG **TEACHING OUTLINE**

Icebreaker: If you could know the outcome of any present situation in your life, which one would you choose?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to the uncertainty Mordecai and Esther must have felt as they heard that the Jews were in danger.

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

I. MORDECAI'S CHOICE TO REMAIN FAITHFUL

DISCUSS: *What are some ways parents can raise their children to honor their heritage, their faith, and their God?*

- A. Mordecai Refused to Bow to Haman
- B. Haman's Threat
- C. No matter societal pressure, I will remain true to my covenant identity.

DISCUSS: *Have you ever felt pressure to compromise your identity as a covenant child of God? Explain.*

II. ESTHER'S CHOICE TO GET INVOLVED

- A. Mordecai's Challenge **V**

DISCUSS: *When was a time you recognized God had placed you in a particular situation for a specific purpose?*

- B. Esther's Courage
- C. I will not stand by while those I love are destroyed by the power of sin.

III. LOOKING BACK ON THE STORY

- A. The "Absent" God?

DISCUSS: *Share an instance when you looked back after a trial ended and saw how God's hand had been at work in that difficult situation.*

- B. God's Providential Plan
- C. I will trust God is working even when I cannot see or hear Him.

DISCUSS: *How do you know God is working, especially when you do not see or hear Him?*

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to grant us courage to stand firm in our faith during ungodly times
- For God to help us trust He is there even when we cannot see or hear Him

LESSON CONNECTION

During World War II, Irena Sendler was a young Polish social worker. She risked her life to save thousands of Jewish children from the Holocaust. When Nazi Germany occupied Poland and began deporting Jews to concentration camps, Irena joined the Polish underground resistance. She became a key member of Żegota, an organization dedicated to helping Jews escape persecution.

Irena devised an incredibly dangerous plan. Using her position as a social worker, she gained access to the Warsaw Ghetto under the pretext of conducting health inspections. She smuggled Jewish children out in boxes, suitcases, and even garbage containers. At great personal risk, she also taught children to memorize new identities and arranged safe hiding places in orphanages, convents, and with sympathetic Polish families.

Over the course of her mission, Irena saved approximately 2,500 children. To ensure their families could one day reunite, she wrote down each child's original name and new identity on a thin strip of paper, and she buried the papers in jars under a neighbor's apple tree. In 1943 the Gestapo discovered her activities and arrested her. She was tortured and sentenced to death, but her courage remained unshaken. Even under severe interrogation, she refused to reveal the identities of the children or her collaborators. Members of the resistance managed to bribe the guards and enabled her to escape.

After the war, Irena retrieved the buried records and worked to reunite surviving children with their families, though many of the parents had died in concentration camps. Irena Sendler's courage and selflessness remain an extraordinary example of standing against injustice, even in the face of immense danger. In 1965 she was honored as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations" by Israel's Yad Vashem. Her story, once nearly forgotten, has since inspired countless people worldwide. It's a testament to the power of courage and compassion.

We live in a world ravaged by sin, holding people captive and sentencing them to an eventual eternal death. Their only hope is to hear the saving message of Jesus Christ and the hope of the gospel. Our responsibility is to stand in courage and tell the message of God's love to those who will listen, no matter what it may cost us. Standing for truth will not always be easy, but the Lord will be our strength. We will never stand alone; He will always stand with us.

BIBLE LESSON

I. MORDECAI'S CHOICE TO REMAIN FAITHFUL

It takes a strong family to raise children who, in the midst of captivity in a strange land, stay true and faithful to their faith. Mordecai's family seems to have been such a family. Over one hundred years before the setting of this text, Kish—the great-grandfather of Mordecai—was taken prisoner and carried off into Babylonian captivity. However, over the years, it appears Mordecai was raised to fear and honor his heritage, his faith, and ultimately his God.

DISCUSS: *What are some ways parents can raise their children to honor their heritage, their faith, and their God?*

A. Mordecai Refused to Bow to Haman

Mordecai served in a position in the palace of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes). When the king promoted Haman the Agagite to second-in-command, Mordecai refused to bow to Haman, although the king had issued that command. To Mordecai, bowing would have implied worshiping anyone besides Jehovah. Day after day many of the king's servants close to Mordecai spoke candidly with him to remind him that he was transgressing the king's command by not bowing.

Haman was a descendant of Agag, king of the Amalekites, ancient enemies of Israel. When Saul disobeyed the Lord, Samuel had to finish Saul's unfinished job, and he killed the Amalekite king (I Samuel 15:1–33). Mordecai no doubt understood this new conflict was simply the same old fight by two new characters, so Mordecai refused to pay homage to Haman, the Agagite. Mordecai's refusal incensed Haman, and in an act of revenge and retribution, Haman plotted to kill all the Jews living in the kingdom ruled by Persia.

B. Haman's Threat

Haman approached King Xerxes with his sinister plan and complained, “There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them. If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed” (Esther 3:8–9). The plan appealed to the king's pride, and he quickly gave his permission for the decree to be signed.

Promptly, the edict was translated for all in the kingdom to understand and sent by couriers “into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey” (Esther 3:13).

When Mordecai heard what had been decreed, grief immediately struck him. Esther 4:1 tells us Mordecai “went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a

bitter cry.” He put on sackcloth and ashes. And he was not the only Jew to respond in such a way: “And in every province, whithersoever the king’s commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes” (Esther 4:3).

C. No matter societal pressure, I will remain true to my covenant identity.

Where was God in all of this? Hadn’t His people suffered enough? Had He forgotten His long-standing covenant? Perhaps many of the Jews felt this way and questioned these things in their hearts, but their response indicated their deep-seated faith in the Almighty. They had learned throughout their history that God is present even when He seems absent or silent.

Mordecai’s actions challenge us to remain true to our covenant identity, no matter the pressure to conform. Living for Jesus Christ is not always the easy choice. In fact, the longer we live and the more corrupt our world becomes, our commitment to covenant identity will become more difficult to maintain as we also battle our human desire to be accepted. The world’s acceptance cannot be our goal; our aim must be to please God in all things. When we seek to please Him, even in a strange land, He will take care of us.

DISCUSS: *Have you ever felt pressure to compromise your identity as a covenant child of God? Explain.*

II. ESTHER’S CHOICE TO GET INVOLVED

Many times believers are able to follow Jesus without doing so in the spotlight or under scrutiny. However, being in covenant with God marks us and will eventually require us to make difficult decisions. Eventually, someone will become offended. Eventually, the enemy will launch an attack. Eventually, those in covenant with Jesus Christ will have to make the choice: stand up and be counted or compromise our identity.

A. Mordecai’s Challenge

When Esther was first chosen to be part of the harem for King Xerxes to choose a new wife, Mordecai had counseled her to keep her Jewish identity a secret. Even when Esther made the final cut and was chosen to be the new queen, Mordecai remained convinced Esther’s secret identity would serve her best. That period of time allowed Esther to gain the king’s favor, love, and respect. And this favor turned out to be Esther’s greatest benefit, even above her beauty, when the coming conflict unfolded.

▀ As soon as the edict was signed, the letters sent, and the decree set into motion, it was decision time for Esther. Mordecai sent a message to Esther urging her to reveal her identity and ask the king to help her and her fellow Jews. But Esther’s response revealed her deep fear of making her identity known and doing so without being invited by the king.

But Mordecai did not go easy on Esther. His response to her hesitation revealed his understanding of God’s covenant and Esther’s place in God’s plan. He replied, “Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king’s house, more than all the Jews. For

if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this" (Esther 4:13-14).

DISCUSS: When was a time you recognized God had placed you in a particular situation for a specific purpose?

B. Esther's Courage

Mordecai's words hit Esther hard. She did not ask to be the queen of Persia. Nevertheless, a sense of destiny enveloped her and she made a choice. She chose to do what covenant people do. She called a fast and requested all her people to fast and pray with her. Then she sent this message to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16).

Esther did not pretend it would be easy or ignore the real risks she was taking. She knew protocol and procedure, but she also knew this was a matter of life or death: hers or the entire Jewish race. The Jews' enemies were trying to destroy them from the face of the earth, thus breaking God's covenant to always have a people called by His name. Esther's people were depending on her. She was a woman in covenant with Jehovah, and she knew He would never abandon His covenant with His people. With all the courage she could muster, Esther replied to Mordecai's plea: "If I perish, I perish."

C. I will not stand by while those I love are destroyed by the power of sin.

As people of covenant, we have the privilege of petitioning our King for the lives and souls of the lost all around us. They are facing a coming spiritual death, and we have been placed in a position to intercede for them. We cannot stand by while those we love are destroyed by the power of sin. We must stand up, call on the name of the Lord, and carry the hope of the gospel to those without hope in this world.

III. LOOKING BACK ON THE STORY

A. The "Absent" God?

When times are tough, we may wonder if God is even around. When we see inequity, we assume God has turned His back. When we see the atrocities of war, we cannot imagine God could be near. When we experience sadness and loss, we ask where God is in all of it. We often equate difficult times with God's absence. However, on the other side of the trauma, many times we can look back and clearly see God was there in the midst of our mess. God spoke through the prophet Isaiah that when we pass through difficult times, God is always there (Isaiah 43:2).

One night Haman could no longer abide Mordecai's dishonor. He built a gallows on which to execute Mordecai, and he knew the king would listen to him since Haman was his right-hand man. He immediately went to the palace to ask for Mordecai to be

executed on charges of rebellion. But on that same night, the king could not sleep, so he called for someone to read the chronicles to him. As he listened, he discovered Mordecai had foiled an assassination attempt much earlier. In a providential turn of events, when Haman came into the palace, King Xerxes ordered him to honor Mordecai in the greatest and most public way possible.

DISCUSS: Share an instance when you looked back after a trial ended and saw how God's hand had been at work in that difficult situation.

B. God's Providential Plan

Mordecai had saved the king's life, so there was no way the king would agree to execute him. In the middle of the story, we begin to see God at work. After Esther's three-day fast, she curried the courage to approach the king uninvited. He showed her grace and heard her request. She invited him and Haman to a pair of banquets where she would reveal what was heavy on her heart.

At the second such banquet, Esther told her story. She revealed her identity and the danger she and her people faced against an enemy bent on destroying them. King Xerxes could not believe what he was hearing. "Who?! Who would dare hurt my queen?" Esther pointed across the table and shouted with conviction: "This wicked Haman!" In another providential turn, the king ordered Haman to be executed on the same gallows he had built for Mordecai. Further, the king signed a second decree giving the Jews authority to defend themselves against their enemies. God was speaking through Mordecai and Esther and working behind the scenes, even though we do not read His name once in the entire book.

C. I will trust God is working even when I cannot see or hear Him.

As we consider Esther's story, we must ready ourselves. We will experience moments of great conflict that demand we make a decision. In those moments we have a choice: run and hide or stand up and do what covenant people do. Covenant people trust in the God of their salvation. Covenant people know God has not forgotten them. Covenant people trust that God is working even when they cannot see or hear Him. We learn from Mordecai and Esther that God is present even when He seems absent or silent.

DISCUSS: How do you know God is working, especially when you do not see or hear Him?



Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate God's love for us even when we don't see Him or realize He is there.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

One crisp autumn morning, sixteen-year-old Lila pedaled off to school, her backpack bouncing with every turn of the wheel. She didn't know that her father, Mark, was following at a distance in his car to make sure she made it safely. He wasn't overprotective by nature, but the world felt different after losing Lila's mom two years earlier.

This routine became his secret ritual. He would drive far enough behind her that Lila wouldn't notice and park just out of sight when she arrived at school. He'd wait for her to lock her bike and disappear into the building before heading off to work. One evening Lila came home unusually quiet.

"Everything okay, kiddo?" Mark asked, setting down his coffee.

"Yeah, just . . . weird," she replied, fiddling with her backpack. "Today a car stopped to let me cross, but this other one didn't slow down. It came out of nowhere. I thought for sure I was gonna get hit."

Mark froze. His heart raced. He had seen the near accident from his car that morning. In fact, it was his horn that startled the reckless driver enough to stop.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice steady but his hands trembling.

"Yeah. Just scared me a little," Lila admitted. "It's no big deal."

The next morning, as Lila rode off to school, Mark resumed his quiet watch. One day after school, Lila approached him in the living room, her face glowing with amusement. "So, Dad," she began, crossing her arms. "Do you think I don't notice your car parked behind that bush every morning?"

Mark's mouth opened and then closed. "You noticed?"

"Of course I did," she said with a laugh. "I see the reflection of your car in store windows when I'm riding."

Mark sighed, feeling caught, yet oddly relieved. "I just want to make sure you're safe."

Lila's expression softened. "I know, Dad. And thank you." She sat beside him, leaning her head on his arm. "It's kind of comforting knowing you're there."

Their bond grew stronger because she knew he would always be there. We do not always see evidence of God's presence, even in moments of desperate need. However, He has promised to always be there, and His Word reminds us of His great faithfulness. He is committed to the covenant He has made, so let us remain confident in Him and live each day with the faith to stand firm, no matter the situation.



JESUS
CHRIST



WINTER 10

FEBRUARY 08, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Matthew 3:1-12

FOCUS VERSES

Malachi 4:5-6

⁵Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD:

⁶And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

.....

Matthew 3:8

Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

God sent John to call people to repent in preparation for the Messiah.

John the Baptist



COVENANT CONTEXT

As the Old Testament closed, the New Testament opened with a feeling of anticipation. Breaking four hundred years of silence from God, John the Baptist announced the kingdom of heaven was at hand and called for repentance. His role was to point to the Messiah who was about to extend a New Covenant to take away the sin of the world.

SG **TEACHING OUTLINE**

Icebreaker: What is the longest you have had to wait for something or someone, such as a goal, a friend, or something else? Was the wait worth it?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to the hundreds of years God's people waited for their Messiah to come.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. MALACHI'S FINAL WARNING

- A. The Day of the Lord and the Coming of "Elijah"

DISCUSS: *How does God's final warning and call to repentance paint our view of Him?*

- B. The Long Silence **I** **V**

- C. In difficult trials, I will remain faithful to what I believe about God and His purpose.

DISCUSS: *How do Paul's words in Romans 8:28 equip us to remain faithful in times of difficulty?*

II. JOHN'S ARRIVAL

- A. The Spirit of Elijah on John to Announce the Kingdom's Arrival
- B. John's Message
- C. I will prepare my heart through repentance and follow Jesus.

DISCUSS: *What does repentance look like for someone first coming to God?*

III. JOHN'S DEPARTURE

- A. Jesus' Increase, John's Decrease

DISCUSS: *What makes John's humility so impressive? In what ways is this type of humility difficult?*

- B. Jesus Declared John to Be the Greatest Prophet
- C. Following John's example, I will live my life to point to Jesus.

DISCUSS: *How can we make our lives about pointing to Jesus: where we decrease so Jesus Christ may increase?*

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to grant wisdom to those who turn to Him in repentance, that they would know what repentance means for them practically
- For God to remove any unwarranted condemnation, that all would feel the call of God's love

LESSON CONNECTION

Of all the features he remembered of the old house, the great bay window stood out. From childhood on, Andrew recalled first looking up to it and thinking it more appropriate for a castle than for a home in a run-down suburb. The center window with its magnificent view onto the street below gifted him with a special place from which to watch passersby. From neighborhood kids to chance travelers, from the mail carrier to Jehovah's Witnesses, Andrew examined them all as they traveled up and down his childhood street.

Much of the time Andrew was watching for his mom. His patient and intense waiting could have been due to his unfettered love for the woman who gave him life, but there was another reason the rest of the family assigned Andrew to be the "lookout." Andrew's mom gave strict instructions when she would leave for work. Chores needed to be done, and Andrew's mother was a master delegator. "No play until the chores are done," she would say.

Andrew waited at the bay window for the blue SUV to appear on the horizon at the end of his street. As soon as he spotted his mom's vehicle, he was given strict instructions—which, ironically, he obeyed—to sound the alarm and raise the ramparts, signaling to the rest of the family to stop playing, grab a few dish towels, turn on the vacuum, and clean as if they had been hard at work for hours. There is no telling whether their hardworking mother actually bought their act, but she always smiled as if she was pleased—whether with a clean house or a stellar performance remains uncertain.

The reason for such antics was a promise attached to good behavior and a clean house: pizza at the arcade. Nothing said fun like cheese-topped cardboard and games that would leave your eyes and ears sore for days. Their well-executed, curated plan was worth waiting at the window. Andrew felt his recon mission was one of honor. He ensured the family enjoyed pizza, and his mother was none the wiser and happy with her hygienic house.

Now with a wily child of his own, Andrew thinks back on those days fondly. Watching as his son quickly shifts from devious to delightful when Dad walks in the room makes him smile inside (smiling outwardly would reinforce bad behavior). He often considers what his son would get away with if he had his own heralding prophet to warn of Dad's arrival. The walls and carpets would never be the same and the dog would need counseling. Thankfully, Andrew's son does not have the grace afforded by a watchman on the wall or a voice in the wilderness. For now his antics are contained by the silence of being an only child. Perhaps that silence will be broken if the face of the Lord shines favorably on him and his parents one day.

BIBLE LESSON

I. MALACHI'S FINAL WARNING

A. The Day of the Lord and the Coming of “Elijah”

The Day of the Lord was a favorite topic of the prophets, especially Isaiah. If all its variations of use throughout the Old Testament were numbered (both prophesying prosperity and judgment), the total references to the Day of the Lord would pass two hundred. With such frequency, we can know this day was of upmost importance. Even though the exact phrase “Day of the Lord” does not appear until midway through the biblical story (Amos 5:18–20), the theme of God’s hopeful rescue associated with that day rings throughout the entire Old Testament.

Interestingly, Amos’s first use of the phrase was in direct response to Israel’s sins, which included the usual list of idolatry, God-denying self-importance, and a lack of care for the poor and helpless. The Day of the Lord will ultimately lead to salvation even if it is through purifying judgment. God Himself will redeem, restore, and heal His people with His personal presence (Amos 9:14–15). What a promise!

After this destruction, there will be a time of complete, global renewal. Even the “foreigner” (one outside the ethnic people of Israel) will enjoy God’s great salvation and express their devotion toward Him (Isaiah 19:18–19; Micah 4:1–4; Zephaniah 2:11; 3:9; Zechariah 14:16–17). All the earth will participate in the restorative goodness of God’s action.

God promised a sign that would mark the impending arrival of the Day of the Lord. The last of the prophetic books in our Old Testament, the Book of Malachi, declares what that sign would be: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers” (Malachi 4:5–6). In other words, a prophet’s call to repentance would signal to the world that God was on His way.

DISCUSS: How does God’s final warning and call to repentance paint our view of Him?

B. The Long Silence

In between the last syllable of the final prophet until the time of Jesus lay an V approximate four hundred years of what has been called “silence.” This is an interesting label for those years because they were anything but silent. Israel experienced and produced much noise during this time, taking the form of war, revolt, Jewish victory, and establishment of a dynasty. Jewish writing also flourished. Though not Scripture to us, many of these texts served the Jewish people faithfully in times of extreme difficulty, and they also help us understand the time of Jesus and the apostles.

I The four hundred years were not silent in the strictest of terms. Nor do these “silent” years suggest God was not working in the world. God was indeed providing, protecting,

and leading His covenant people as He had promised. Moreover, God was setting the stage for the arrival of the kingdom of God through Jesus Christ and the apostolic church. The term *silent* is captured by the Book of Amos when it records: “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD” (Amos 8:11). In other words, these years were silent because they fulfilled the prophecy of Amos and lacked the authoritative voice of God. During those years, there appeared to be no fresh word from God for His people. God was present, but He was silent.

C. In difficult trials, I will remain faithful to what I believe about God and His purpose.

Israel was successful because their covenant-making-and-keeping God spoke to them. He gave them wisdom and guidance at every turn. He called them back to faithfulness. He gave them promises. We can easily see that an absence of the direct voice of the Lord would spark fear and uncertainty for Israel. But God’s final word left Israel with a promise to hold onto during the silence. To paraphrase: “Things are bad now—mostly due to your own poor choices—but there is coming a day when all of this will be turned around for good and My purposes will be forever established. Trust Me. Prepare yourself. I am on My way.”

We too have been called to live in the “in between” of God’s promises and their fulfillment. Just as Israel had to trust God through great difficulty, we are called to do the same. The good news is if we share the same call, we will also share the same outcome—God will indeed make good on His promises. Trust Him and remain faithful in hope. The apostle Paul’s words captured well the confidence of a trusting people when he said: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

DISCUSS: How do Paul’s words in Romans 8:28 equip us to remain faithful in times of difficulty?

II. JOHN’S ARRIVAL

A. The Spirit of Elijah on John to Announce the Kingdom’s Arrival

The New Testament picks up where the prophet Malachi said it would—introducing Elijah, kind of. The Gospel of Matthew records the appearance of John the Baptist and describes Him in unusual terms: a desert wanderer wearing camel’s hair clothing, eating bugs, living the good life (Matthew 3:1–4). This was Elijah-type behavior. Plus, John was prophetically announced in this way: “And he shall go before [the Lord] in the spirit and power of Elias [Elijah], to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17). Sound familiar?

The prelude to the Day of the Lord is here; Elijah has come. Jesus Himself, speaking of John, proclaimed that in John, Elijah had “come already” (Matthew 17:12). Since that was the case, the Day of the Lord had also arrived, the kingdom of God was breaking in, and the promises of God were manifesting. Late in John’s short life, he was thrown into prison for speaking the truth to a sinful Herod, and John sent people to Jesus to

ask the all-important question: Was Jesus really the arrival of the embodied Day of the Lord or did the long wait continue? Jesus responded by highlighting the fulfillment of Isaiah 35 that detailed the “signs” of God’s reign. (See Isaiah 35; Matthew 11:4–5.) In other words, the fruits of Jesus’ own ministry confirmed the ministry of John. Elijah had come and the Lord had followed.

B. John’s Message

John preached what God had called him to preach: repentance and preparedness to follow the Christ, the Lamb of God. This is what Luke meant when he wrote that John would turn the hearts of the people (Luke 1:17). John was specific too; he taught the greedy tax collectors and oppressive Roman soldiers who sought his guidance to turn from their evil ways. He commanded the religious leaders to produce the “fruit” of repentance. John was after a repentance that affected the heart and the hands—belief and practice. This type of holistic repentance was the only appropriate way to be “prepared for the Lord.” The truth of repentance rings in our lives today. We too must prepare our hearts to wholeheartedly follow Jesus Christ.

C. I will prepare my heart through repentance and follow Jesus.

No wonder a large portion of the apostle Peter’s message on the Day of Pentecost mirrored John’s own words. Peter first called the people to repentance; the other aspects of salvation always follow. In fact, the other parts of new-birth salvation remain closed to the unrepentant. In other words, the fertile ground in which the seeds of salvation can be sown is a repentant and prepared life. Let us not move past this moment in our walk with God too quickly. We must prepare our lives through repentance if we are to be good ground for God’s Word and Spirit, and this repentance must be in our heart and come out of our hands—our lives must change to be aligned with God.

DISCUSS: *What does repentance look like for someone first coming to God?*

III. JOHN’S DEPARTURE

A. Jesus’ Increase, John’s Decrease

As John continued his ministry, Jesus entered stage left. After John received so much attention, it would seem giving up his newfound fame would be difficult. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even at the beginning of John’s ministry, he proclaimed that someone was coming after him who was greater, whose shoes were too holy for John to touch (worn shoes were extremely gross in the ancient world). The Messiah would do more than John had done: John baptized with water unto repentance, but Jesus would baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire. When Jesus’ rise in popularity was brought to John’s attention, John the Baptist responded with the now famous line: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). John willingly decreased because Jesus’ arrival meant John’s prophetic role was complete. God performed what He had promised: The Lord had arrived.

DISCUSS: What makes John's humility so impressive? In what ways is this type of humility difficult?

B. Jesus Declared John to Be the Greatest Prophet

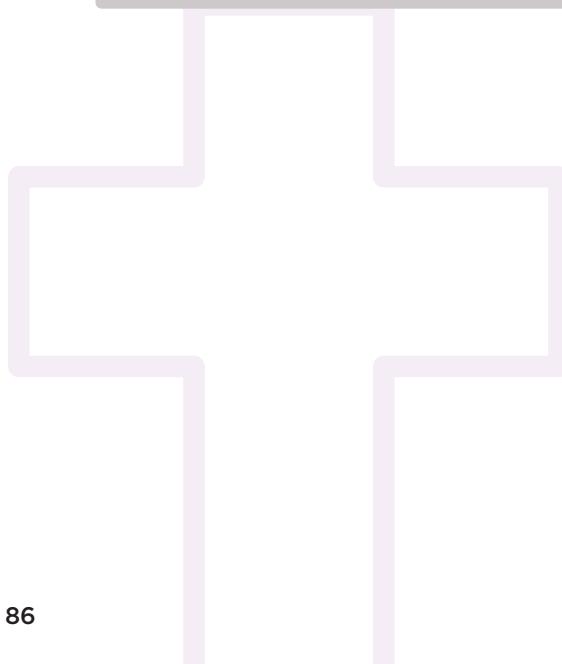
John was willing to step aside humbly, but Jesus gave him due praise. Of John, Jesus announced: "For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist" (Luke 7:28). Why was John so great? John was great because he held the great privilege of announcing the greatest of the Old Testament prophecies: the Messiah is here.

Jesus' words did not stop with a simple praise of John. Jesus continued, "But he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he [John]" (Luke 7:28). What did Jesus mean by this statement? Jesus was highlighting the superiority of the New Covenant. The great fulfillment of what the prophets, including John, had pointed toward warranted Jesus' praise. John was privileged to announce the kingdom of God's arrival, but those after John—including us—get to live in the kingdom of God. What a privilege!

C. Following John's example, I will live my life to point to Jesus.

John served a temporal, transitional role, but his example still serves us well today. John's entire life revolved around pointing to the one who would ultimately save and make the difference the world so desperately needed. We are called to live out a similar role. The apostle Peter declared we are brought to Jesus Christ so we can proclaim His praises to others (I Peter 2:9–11). The apostle Paul called us "ambassadors" for Christ (II Corinthians 5:20). In Acts 1 Jesus Himself called those who would receive His Spirit *witnesses*. All this adds up to a special purpose for the life of every Christian. We are to be signposts that lead others to Jesus. Like John, we must decrease so Jesus Christ may increase. We must point to the one who is greater than we are.

DISCUSS: How can we make our lives about pointing to Jesus: where we decrease so Jesus Christ may increase?



Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how repentance and obedience are always right for a child of God. The following story may be a continuation of the Lesson Connection or a stand-alone story.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Andrew and company did not always execute their plans perfectly. Sometimes their mom returned home early. Other times Andrew missed his watch, and the remaining brigade was caught off guard when their mother unexpectedly walked in the front door. Those days were the worst. Getting caught playing while the house was a mess was never good. The matriarch's march into the room in deliberative, authoritative fashion to pronounce judgment on the unrepentant, unwatchful sinners struck fear: You're grounded for a week, no going to see friends after church, and no games. After receiving their sentence, with heads hung low, the children trooped about the house fulfilling their delayed duties—the house would be clean one way or another.

After one of those unexpected entrances, and perhaps in a true act of repentance, the maturing miscreants decided they would simply do their chores on time from then on. If they were going to have to bow their knees to cleaning regardless, it made the most sense to complete their chores so at least they would have a reward for their labors. A real change had occurred, a change that brought about the blessings of their mother in the form of pizza and praise.

Paul tutored the church of Thessalonica with these words:

For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. . . . For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him. Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do. (I Thessalonians 5:2–5, 9–11)

God's desire—just like Andrew's mother's desire—is to protect and reward His children. Just like Andrew and his siblings' awareness of their mother's return, we are aware of Christ's return. First Thessalonians 5:5 teaches that we are "children of the day." Knowing that God's goodness and patience leads us to repentance, let us come before God wholly prepared for His arrival in our lives and His return to the world. Through repentance let us prepare our hearts for our King to come back.



JESUS
CHRIST



WINTER
11

FEBRUARY 15, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Luke 2:25-38

FOCUS VERSE

Luke 1:35

And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

**TRUTH ABOUT
COVENANT**

Through the Incarnation, God came to be in covenant with us.

The Incarnation

I WILL MAKE MY
COMMITMENT TO
KING JESUS
THE CORE OF MY
IDENTITY.

COVENANT CONTEXT

Four thousand years of prophecies and practices have pointed to this moment: the Incarnation. God had come in human flesh. The coming of the Messiah was a common theme throughout the Old Testament and was fulfilled in Jesus' birth. His coming ushered in a New Covenant with God through the gospel, available to all humanity.

SG **TEACHING OUTLINE**

Icebreaker: Who is the most important person you know personally?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to what it must have been like for Mary to realize the messianic prophecies all pointed to her Son.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. JESUS' BIRTH

A. Jesus Born in Bethlehem as the Son of David

Discuss: *What do the circumstances of Christ's birth tell us about Him? As King, why would He come in such a way?*

B. Angels Declared Messiah Is Here

Discuss: *What do we learn about God when we see He chose to make His birth announcement to shepherds in a field?*

C. Like the shepherds, I will seek the Messiah.

Discuss: *Why do you think the angels' announcement warranted such a quick response?*

II. JESUS' DEDICATION

A. Faithful Observance of the Law and Formal Bestowal of a Name **V**

B. Simeon and Anna **I**

C. I will prayerfully await God's fulfillment of His promises.

Discuss: *Why is patience so important as it relates to God's promises?*

III. MESSIAH HAS COME

A. The Glory of Israel and the Light of the Gentiles

B. The Redeemer and King

Discuss: *If you were Mary, how would you have responded to Simeon's announcement?*

C. I will make my commitment to King Jesus the core of my identity.

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to fill each heart with His love
- For God to reveal His passionate desire for lordship in each life

LESSON CONNECTION

James grew up in drugs, violence, and domestic abuse. His rough upbringing fitted him with a set of dark lenses, blinding him to the possibility that things could be different. He would continue in poverty like his parents, brokenness like his siblings, and anger like all the other young men in his life. James saw life as a war to be fought.

Much of James's life during those years in the '70s was a blur (mostly because of drug addiction). He had a few good friends left who checked on him from time to time or gave him a place to stay when he needed to "sleep one off." The best of these friends was Stephen. Stephen believed in God. He was one of "those" Christians who talked often about how God could change our lives. But as long as James had a place to sleep, he would listen to just about anything.

One day James crashed through Stephen's door needing a place to recover. As he entered the living room, he saw Stephen kneeling over a yellowed, floral couch, and he seemed to be crying. Uncomfortable with emotion, James recoiled quickly with, "You OK, dude?" Wiping tears from his eyes, Stephen faced James, standing now, and spoke with boldness James had not seen in his friend before: "I've been praying for you, man, and God told me to tell you, 'It is time to repent.'"

James stood still and silent. Seeing an opening, Stephen continued: "James, you have lived a life of anger and brokenness long enough. God is willing to forgive you and rewrite your story, but you must repent and turn to Jesus." Regaining his bearings, James felt a familiar anger rising up in him. He turned and left the house in a huff, all the while thinking to himself, *Who does he think he is talking to me like that? He doesn't know what I have been through. He doesn't know who I am. Life made me this way. If God wanted it different, why didn't He do anything to change it?*

Just then, Stephen called to James. Startled from his internal stewing, James turned quickly to face his friend, "Man, I know you're all about that Jesus stuff, but I'm not, OK?"

"You may not be about Him, James, but He is about you," Stephen replied softly. "In fact, Jesus came and died for you. He died so you could live a new life. You don't have to hold onto anger anymore."

James wanted to ward off his persistent friend, and he tried to answer quickly. "It's all I . . .," James's voice broke. "It's who I . . .," he began again.

Seeing his friend fighting back tears, Stephen placed his hand on James's shoulder and said, "I know, but it doesn't have to be." Feeling the weight of Stephen's words, James collapsed into his friend and wept.

BIBLE LESSON

I. JESUS' BIRTH

A. Jesus Born in Bethlehem as the Son of David

The birth of the Messiah surprised so many. Jesus was not wrapped in silk cloth, laid in a golden crib, and given a silver pacifier. No, Jesus was born into less-than-royal accommodations. Nevertheless, even if His birth took a surprising shape, His arrival was not unexpected. The prophets had long predicted the arrival of their King who would possess certain moral characteristics and be anointed by God Himself (Isaiah 11:1–5). The prophesied Savior would bring peace, comfort, and power to govern the people of God (Isaiah 9:6–7). His job description included setting captives free, restoring joy, and proclaiming God's favor over humanity (Isaiah 61:1–3).

Specifically, this King would come from the line of the greatest king Israel ever knew—King David—and would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David. It is no accident that Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus began with: “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, *the son of David, the son of Abraham*” (Matthew 1:1; compare to Luke 1:32). After the Magi were tasked with finding the newly born Jesus, they followed a star and found Jesus exactly where He was supposed to be—in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1–11).

Discuss: *What do the circumstances of Christ's birth tell us about Him? As King, why would He come in such a way?*

B. Angels Declared Messiah Is Here

The precise fulfillment of Scripture up to this point should be enough, but God was not finished. The Gospel of Luke records a seminal night in the shepherds' field. As a group of shepherds tended their sheep, the skies ignited with light and an angel appeared to them. Understandably afraid, the shepherds needed to be calmed, which took the form of an announcement. Thankfully, the angel of the Lord had not come to destroy them but to bring good news. The angel declared: “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). Immediately after the angelic announcement, a host of angels appeared and continued the celebratory moment with praise to God and a proclamation of peace and good will toward humanity.

Remarkably, the angels' words help break four hundred “silent” years. How wonderful! Some of the first words from God that broke the silence heralded the covenant Messiah and the good will of God toward humanity. It was not a word of judgment or rebuke; it was a word of hope and salvation. The salvation of God had arrived in Bethlehem as promised, and all of humanity would benefit. Glory to God, indeed.

Discuss: *What do we learn about God when we see He chose to make His birth announcement to shepherds in a field?*

C. Like the shepherds, I will seek the Messiah.

The shepherds immediately hurried to Bethlehem to see this newborn King. The moment all Israel—indeed, the world—had been waiting for had come. They had no more reason to wait. The announcement created a moment of urgency—not of fear—and anticipation. Since the Incarnation (how we refer to Jesus' birth) means God is with us, our response should mirror that of the shepherds. We should *now*, with eagerness, seek Jesus the Messiah. Delay seems to be a poor response to the offer of God's salvation. Like the shepherds, we must seek after the Messiah to “see this thing which is come to pass.” In other words, we should go see for ourselves that God's Word is true: God came in human flesh to be with us.

Discuss: Why do you think the angels' announcement warranted such a quick response?

II. JESUS' DEDICATION

A. Faithful Observance of the Law and Formal Bestowal of a Name

The Jewish people were a covenant people, and their covenant with God had certain ways to mark people as part of that covenant. One of these markers was circumcision, which happened on the eighth day of a male child's life. Mary and Joseph faithfully kept covenant with God and followed this command exactly. Additionally, they offered the required sacrifice associated with firstborn males (Exodus 13:2, 12; Leviticus 12:8; Luke 2:22–23). (And we thought hospital paperwork was complicated.)

During all this covenant keeping in the holy city of Jerusalem, Mary's Son was given a name: Jesus. But Mary and Joseph did not just think of His name on their own; God Himself assigned the name through an angelic messenger, for the name holds significant, prophetic, covenant meaning. We hear the angel's words through Matthew's Gospel: “And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: *for he shall save his people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21). As the Gospel of Matthew continues, we read that this event—Jesus' birth through Mary and the presentation of His name—fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23). The King was coming, and He would rescue God's people. In other words, Jesus' God-given name (translated “Jehovah saves”) marked Him as the one in whom God's covenant salvation had arrived.

B. Simeon and Anna

As Mary and Joseph entered the Temple in Jerusalem, two witnesses—both enabled and led by God's Spirit—met them, which further confirmed the importance of the Christ child. Simeon, the first witness, took Jesus into his arms and praised God for His salvation through this newborn baby. This child was meant to be “a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of . . . Israel” (Luke 2:32). Anna, the second witness, praised God “likewise” and “spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38). Both witnesses bore a similar description; each of them was faithful in waiting for God's kingdom to arrive. Moreover, each of them believed their long wait was over. In Jesus, God had come to save.

C. I will prayerfully await God's fulfillment of His promises.

God rewarded the prayer-filled patience of the two witnesses. While God's promises may seem far off, they are always sure. Nothing in Simeon and Anna's world suggested salvation was on the horizon, except for John the Baptist's message of the kingdom of heaven. Nevertheless, Israel was still occupied by a ruthless Roman government. The Jewish religious system was in cahoots with the Romans, and many of the Jews of that day thought compromise was the only answer. In the face of this mounting opposition to their own faith in God, Simeon and Anna maintained trust and patience as they waited for God to fulfill what He had promised.

Thankfully, these two important characters of Scripture are not the only persevering believers rewarded for their faithfulness, nor is the entire cast of faithful biblical characters the only group of people to experience God's faithfulness. History is full of Jesus followers who have met their reward after a time of patience. Does this take trust? Yes. Does it require prayerful watching to maintain a calm mind and spirit? Yes, but God always keeps His promises. So, like Simeon and Anna, let us prayerfully await the fulfillment of God's Word to us.

Discuss: *Why is patience so important as it relates to God's promises?*

III. MESSIAH HAS COME

A. The Glory of Israel and the Light of the Gentiles

As Simeon's words continued to ring in Mary and Joseph's ears, they likely considered what the words meant; Mary had already pondered others' words about her Son in her heart. The Messiah as the glory of Israel made perfect sense, but a light to the Gentiles seemed odd to a people currently occupied by the strongest of the Gentile nations. Even still, the words of Simeon recalled one of Israel's favorite prophets, Isaiah, and pointed his prophecies toward Jesus. Perhaps speaking of Israel as a nation at first, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed God's desire to use His servant Israel to be a light to the nations, to call the Gentiles to covenant with God (Isaiah 49:6; 60:3). As Isaiah continued this theme, it becomes clear the prophet was pointing to the Messiah, not just the nation of Israel. The Servant of God who would call the entire world into covenant would not be a nation of people; He would be a man, a man born as a baby boy in Bethlehem.

B. The Redeemer and King

One of Isaiah's most memorable prophecies of the suffering Servant, now identified by Simeon as Jesus, was as a man of sorrow. But His sorrow was not because of His own wrongdoing; He would carry all humanity's griefs and sorrows. Isaiah 53 powerfully details the role of the Servant's suffering: "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have

gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:4–6).

Because Jesus was willing to carry all our sins, sorrows, griefs, even sicknesses, we can be redeemed from our sins and called into covenant with Almighty God. Although Jesus came as a Lamb at His incarnation, when He returns, He will return as the King of all the earth. The same Isaiah who prophesied Jesus would suffer also prophesied He would be exalted. In fact, one day kings will stand speechless in the presence of the Lord when they see Him for who He is. (See Isaiah 52:15.)

Others listening to Simeon's prophecy must have rejoiced that their King had been born to one day set them free, but Mary and Joseph must have felt the pang of fear, knowing what that freedom would cost their Son. To Mary, Simeon grimly announced: "A sword shall pierce through thy own soul" (Luke 2:35). Here at the birth of Christ, we learn of His death, which would bring about life for so many and would lead to His coronation. Before any of it had happened—while Jesus was yet a newborn in His mother's arms—we learn that Jesus is both our Redeemer and our King.

Discuss: *If you were Mary, how would you have responded to Simeon's announcement?*

C. I will make my commitment to King Jesus the core of my identity.

God's desire for covenant relationship finds no better portrait than that of the King enthroned and crowned on a blood-stained hill. He was first enthroned on a cross and crowned with thorns, but He was still as powerful as He has ever been. He was still on the throne of Heaven even when He was on the cross. The Jews considered it scandalous and the Greeks thought it foolishness that Jesus was crucified, but to us who believe, the gospel is the power of God. Believing in this glorious gospel is who we are. Like the apostle Paul, we are not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. Since King Jesus forgave our sins and saved our souls, let us share this glorious gospel with others around us. God wants to invite them into covenant with Him as He has invited us.

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how the gospel still changes lives. The following story may be a continuation of the Lesson Connection or a stand-alone story.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

After Stephen and James collected themselves, they agreed that crying on the street wasn't exactly cool. They returned to Stephen's house where James could get the rest he needed. After James awoke, Stephen was quick to continue their sidewalk conversation. "James, you need a Bible study."

"A what?" James replied, confused. "A Bible study," Stephen firmly replied. "You need to know what the Bible says about Jesus."

Content to hear his friend out, James agreed. Stephen grabbed his Bible from the table near the yellowed, floral couch and opened it to the Gospel of Matthew and began to read. Confused by all the names and family trees, James fell into a glazed trance. Stephen rebuked his friend for not taking the Bible seriously; he had no patience for any perceived irreverence, even if James was literally "fresh off the street." Feeling to defend himself, James retorted, "What do you expect? This stuff is confusing."

Seeing that one Bible study would not be enough, Stephen dismissed their meeting for the night and set up a time to meet each week after Stephen got off work. In the meantime, Stephen promised James room and board if he would do his best to get off drugs, get a job, and go to church with him. As James didn't really have any other options, he cautiously complied with his friend's request. James got a job and attended church with Stephen. The drugs presented a more difficult problem, as addictions often do.

One Sunday, Stephen's pastor happened to be preaching on the meaning of the name Jesus from the opening of Matthew's Gospel. "The name of Jesus means Jehovah saves," the preacher exclaimed. "The name of Jesus means God is with us," the now jumping man continued. "And how do we know He is true to that name?" The man peered over the large wooden pulpit at his congregation as if expecting a reply. "Because He saved then, and He is still saving now." The congregation erupted in passionate applause; even Stephen was compelled to raise his hands in agreement.

"But how did He save?" the preacher asked with sincerity in his voice. "He saved by dying on a cross in our place, so we could experience a new life in Him. And how do we take hold of that new life?" James was leaning forward in his seat, wanting to know the answer. The preacher continued, "By repenting of our sins, by being baptized in that wonderful name of Jesus, and by receiving His Spirit, which we will know has happened when we speak in tongues."

More desperate for change than confused by what it meant to speak in tongues, James walked forward, repented, took on the name of Jesus in baptism, and came out of the water speaking in tongues, just as the preacher had said. James wouldn't know until months later, but he was freed from drugs that day.

Returning to his house, Stephen kneeled at his yellowed, floral couch and began to weep in prayer, saying, "Thank You, Jesus. Thank You, Jesus."



JESUS
CHRIST



WINTER 12

FEBRUARY 22, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Luke 4: 7:18-23

FOCUS VERSES

Luke 4:17-19

¹⁷And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, ¹⁸The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, ¹⁹To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

Jesus is the fulfillment of the covenant.

Jesus in the Wilderness

I WILL DO MY
PART TO SEE THE
COVENANT
FULFILLED
IN MY SPHERE
OF INFLUENCE.

COVENANT CONTEXT

Now that God had come in flesh, Jesus faced every temptation we would face to show us it is possible to win against the devil and against our own human nature. Yet, people in His hometown did not believe He was who He said He was, so they rejected Him. Jesus set up His ministry outside of Nazareth, where He worked miracles signaling His rightful claim as the Savior.

SG **TEACHING OUTLINE**

Icebreaker: If you have ever been lost in an unfamiliar place without cell service, how did you find your way?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to point out how fearful it can be in an unfamiliar place with no way to know how to get out safely.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS

- A. Jesus Overcame Every Temptation We Face
- B. Jesus Showed It Is Possible to Win in the Wilderness **V**

Discuss: *How does Jesus' victory in the wilderness give you personal confidence to win your battles against temptation?*

- C. Through God's grace, I will win in the wilderness.

II. JESUS IN THE SYNAGOGUE

- A. Jesus Claimed Isaiah 61 for Himself
- B. Jesus Was Glorified in Galilee, but Not in Nazareth **I**

Discuss: *How can we be sure we don't presume to know all about Jesus and lose out on what He wants to do as the sovereign God of creation?*

- C. I will believe Jesus is sovereign and can do whatever He pleases.

III. JOHN IN PRISON

- A. John Was in Prison for Telling the Truth

Discuss: *If you have ever softened the truth or refused to tell the truth because of the possible consequences, how did you feel afterward?*

- B. John Questioned Jesus' Messianic Identity
- C. Jesus' Response Proved His Messianic Identity

Discuss: *What does Jesus' method of answering John tell us about how the Lord viewed His own ministry?*

- D. I will do my part to see the covenant fulfilled in my sphere of influence.

Discuss: *What are some specific ways we can bring God's covenant promises to those in our sphere of influence?*

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to give strength and grace to those in need
- For God to fill everyone with the wisdom needed to thrive in difficult seasons

LESSON CONNECTION

Luke finally achieved the feat of turning twelve years old; preteen pride filled every ounce of his eighty-five-pound frame. Twelve—was the wait truly over? Indeed it was, and Luke's dad felt the excitement and ambition reaching a boiling point in his young man-child. Luke's excitement stemmed from a family rite each of Luke's four older brothers had already passed through—a rite that transitioned boys into men: hunting with Dad.

The boys' dad had granted every one of his twelve-year-old sons the right to pack their bags and head for the woods for a weekend of roughing it in the backcountry—at least, roughing it for a twelve-year-old. Luke could hardly stop the churning in his stomach from his excitement to be with his dad in the wilderness. Becoming a man was no small deal. People, especially the young ladies, would surely notice he no longer smelled like the plush aromas of a home filled with candles. No, he would smell like the woods, like a man, like someone who had passed from death to life, from childhood to manhood. Like the Spartans before him, Luke would face the fears of nature head-on and win.

Luke's dad, Mark, loaded the truck with the necessary equipment: food, clothing, camping gear, rifles, and ingredients for s'mores (the most important). Luke nearly flew into the front seat of his dad's truck, buckled himself in, and stared straight ahead as if already looking for his target. He gabbed the entire drive about how he was going to cook up his bounty. Mark laughed, thankful for his son's excitement and for the opportunity for one-on-one time with him.

As the brakes whined, the truck came to a stop at what would be their home base for the weekend. Luke flew out of the truck with even more gusto than he got in. Surveying the land and checking the perimeter, he concluded proudly, “This will do just fine, I think.”

“I agree,” concurred his grinning father. “Now let's set up our tents and get some sleep. We've got to be up early.” Luke frantically darted into action, setting up the tents first, camping gear next, food supplies, and rifles. Finally, Luke ran back to the truck and pulled out all the s'mores supplies. After dinner, an exhausted Luke curled up in his sleeping bag and slipped into the sweetest rest he had ever known. Just before dozing off completely, he thought to himself, *Tomorrow . . . I'm going to be a man.*

Morning came faster than he would have liked—the sun wasn't even up yet. His dad gently shook him awake and told him to get ready and stay quiet. Zombie-like, Luke followed his dad out of the tent and into the dark woods. Slowly waking up and hearing the deafening silence that was only broken by strange bumps and thuds in the night, Luke realized a terrible truth about himself: he was afraid.

BIBLE LESSON

I. JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS

A. Jesus Overcame Every Temptation We Face

The wilderness was an appropriate arena for a cosmic battle between Heaven's Son and Earth's enemy. God in human flesh was alone in the desert and hungry when Satan approached Him. Understandably, Satan first attacked Jesus' previously mentioned hunger. Jesus had been fasting for forty days, but Jesus parried by reminding the devil what was written: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God" (Luke 4:4). With a quick slip and a counterpunch, Jesus rebuffed Satan's attempt to draw Him into shortcircuiting and self-reliance. The bell rang—round one to Jesus.

Round two began as Satan placed the world and its kingdoms before Jesus with a promise He could have it all if He worshiped Satan. But idolatry, the oldest and most destructive of Israel's habits, had no hold on Jesus. He slid His feet, swung left, and delivered a gut punch. "It is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve" (Luke 4:8). The bell rang again—round two to Jesus.

The final round of the bout began, and Satan came out swinging with an appeal to the Christ's special status: "If thou be the Son of God," quipped the devil (Luke 4:9). Jesus saw it coming a furlong away. Jesus would not use His status to tempt the Spirit of God into action. With a final swiftness, Jesus ducked the attack, set His feet, and delivered the decisive blow. "It is said, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God" (Luke 4:12). Satan was down for the count. Jesus stood victorious over every temptation we face: the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life. Most importantly, Jesus stood victorious over Satan himself.

B. Jesus Showed It Is Possible to Win in the Wilderness

While Jesus' victory over Satan is worthy of celebration, something even deeper happened that day. Note the details. Jesus, the Son of God, was alone in the *wilderness* for *forty days*—an allusion to Israel's wilderness wandering for forty years. Like Israel, also called God's son in the Exodus narratives (4:22–23), Jesus was without food in the wilderness. Israel complained and called Moses and God to account for their hunger. But Jesus trusted God and craved the words of God more fiercely than food alone. Although Israel displayed an unwillingness to remain faithful to their covenant during difficulty and temptation, Jesus remained faithful, submitted, and humble while trusting God. In other words, Jesus did what Israel did not; He lived faithfully in the wilderness.

DISCUSS: How does Jesus' victory in the wilderness give you personal confidence to win your battles against temptation?

C. Through God's grace, I will win in the wilderness.

Jesus' method for winning in the wilderness instructs us well. He responded by quoting Scripture, which was more than just reciting God's Word. He was fully depending in

and obedient to the Word of God. God promised that faithfulness to and humility before Him would cause life to flourish. Why? Because the words of the Lord are good and because the God of covenant—the giver of Scripture—would uphold those who trust in Him by keeping His word.

Thankfully we are not left alone to keep the commands of God, something Israel struggled to do throughout its history. God has empowered us. While no work of God excuses laziness in serving Him, we are given every bit of strength we need through His Spirit. God's Spirit teaches truth (John 16:13), offers wisdom (I Corinthians 2:10-16), strengthens us (Ephesians 3:16-17), gives us joy and peace (Romans 14:17-18), and provides everything we need to live for God faithfully (II Peter 1:3). By depending on God's grace in the forms of His Word and His Spirit, we can win in the wilderness.

II. JESUS IN THE SYNAGOGUE

A. Jesus Claimed Isaiah 61 for Himself

Faithful first-century Jews used to gather in the synagogues to read the Scriptures, and someone would provide commentary on the text. Luke 4 records one of these moments. Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath and—in line with custom—was offered the scroll of Isaiah, chapter 61. Jesus began to read: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (Luke 4:18; compare to Isaiah 61:1). The synagogue attendees knew this passage well and loved it. Perhaps they pictured the glorious day Israel would again be free and restored to her former glory during the rightful reign of their Messiah. Isaiah 61 was central to Israel's faith.

The room likely filled with prayer and praise as the people of Nazareth longed for the day of which Isaiah spoke. Then Jesus surprised everyone in the room. His commentary on the passage was short. He began: “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears” (Luke 4:21). As Jesus continued, it became clear He was pointing these messianic prophecies to Himself. Jesus was claiming to be the very messenger who would herald the restoration of the people of God. As exciting as that would have sounded to ancient Israelites, their response to Jesus revealed doubt and unbelief toward Him: “Is not this Joseph's son?” (Luke 4:22).

B. Jesus Was Glorified in Galilee, but Not in Nazareth

I Jesus then confronted their doubt with a rebuke, much like the prophets rebuked ancient Israel when they rejected the prophets. He lambasted the people of Nazareth and told them of their fate: they would have no part in the workings of God. The Gospel of Mark records that Jesus was shocked at the level of unbelief found in Nazareth and quotes what appears to be a proverbial saying: “A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house” (Mark 6:4). This unbelief produced the dismal results of Mark 6:5: “And he could there do no mighty work.” Although Jesus healed the sick and lame and raised the dead outside of Nazareth, the blind did not see, the lame did not leap, and the dead did not rise in Nazareth. In an ironic turn, the people who knew Jesus the most actually knew Him the least.

Discuss: How can we be sure we don't presume to know all about Jesus and lose out on what He wants to do as the sovereign God of creation?

C. I will believe Jesus is sovereign and can do whatever He pleases.

Nazareth's unbelief is shocking to twenty-first-century Christian readers, but it is no stranger in our own lives. Our unbelief surfaces often and even unexpectedly. When God uses people we are not fond of, when our plans do not work out, or when God seems to answer everyone else's prayers but ours, we see our own unbelief. Like the assembly at Nazareth, our problem is not with the idea that God is working in the world, but rather with the ways in which He does. Our problem is we are not the center.

A true and faithful understanding of God bows to His sovereignty. There is one God, and we are not Him. As much as this ruffles feathers, humility before the God of Heaven is required for those who follow Him. While the Lord can and does do whatever He wants however He wants, He always works for the good of those who love Him and work toward His purpose (Romans 8:28).

III. JOHN IN PRISON

A. John Was in Prison for Telling the Truth

Shortly after this surprising scene in Nazareth, Luke shifted his focus back to John the Baptist. Around the time Jesus' ministry began, Herod threw John into prison for calling him to repentance, specifically for his immoral marriage to Herodias. Herod's response to John's preaching was exactly the opposite of repentance; Herod imprisoned John just because John told the truth. John sat in prison for faithfully obeying God's will.

Discuss: If you have ever softened the truth or refused to tell the truth because of the possible consequences, how did you feel afterward?

B. John Questioned Jesus' Messianic Identity

Prison changes people, or so some say. John began his ministry with great confidence. He boldly declared the soon arrival of the Messiah and praised Jesus when he saw Him for the first time. John called Jesus "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). That was messianic language, but that seemed like a lifetime ago. Prison curated a moment of doubt for John, or at least a moment requiring some confirmation. Facing his execution, John wanted to know whether his ministry was true or if it was all for naught.

C. Jesus' Response Proved His Messianic Identity

The prophets often spoke of God's return to Israel. He would forgive, restore, and rule over His people in a new and invigorating way. Language of abundance, life, and the outpouring of God's Spirit gave God's people hope. These images were meant to paint a portrait of God's covenant reign. One such prophetic moment is found in Isaiah 35:4. Isaiah cried out: "Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompence; he will come and

save you.” Isaiah continued to zoom in on what would happen when God would “come and save” in the following verse: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.”

Doubtless knowing these prophecies, John sent messengers to Jesus to ask whether He was the Messiah or should they look for another ruler to reign in righteousness. A simple yes would have done it, but Jesus wanted to make a point. His response echoed Isaiah: “Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matthew 11:4–5). Again Jesus claimed for Himself the fulfillment of God’s Old Testament promises. In Jesus Christ the reign of God had arrived.

Discuss: *What does Jesus’ method of answering John tell us about how the Lord viewed His own ministry?*

D. I will do my part to see the covenant fulfilled in my sphere of influence.

Jesus’ words to John did not end on a high note. Then Jesus left a final word: “And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me” (Matthew 11:6). John sat in prison and heard of Jesus’ wonder-working ways, but he received no reassurance of release. Instead, he received instruction to resist being offended against Jesus since John’s life had turned out much different from what he expected. John had done his part, fulfilled his role, and was now called to submit his life to the will of God. The true center of the story was Jesus, not John. Yet John was a smashing success as the forerunner of the Messiah.

John’s own willingness to resist bitterness and focus on his role in seeing God’s covenant fulfilled gives us an example to follow. We are called to surrender our lives to God in order for His promises to be fulfilled in our world. This will look different for everyone but the call remains the same. Jesus’ words remain instructive for us: blessed are we if we are not offended (more concerned for our own lives) because of Him. We may not know how our story ends, but we are called to be faithful as the Author of our faith writes and will one day finish our story.

Discuss: *What are some specific ways we can bring God’s covenant promises to those in our sphere of influence?*

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how we can win in the wilderness because of Jesus' victory there. The following story may be a continuation of the Lesson Connection or a stand-alone story.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Luke's pace sped up as he got closer to his father, causing quite the racket as he tried. Hearing what sounded like a herd of elephants behind him, Mark turned to see what was wrong. "What are you doing?" Mark asked quietly with a puzzled look.

"I'm scared," replied Luke, more as a boy now than a man. Luke continued in hushed tones, urged by his father's mime-like shooshing: "What are those noises?" With a renewed softness on his face, Mark knelt and looked Luke in the eye as best he could in the darkness. The dad began: "I know it seems scary out here, and you do need to keep your eyes and ears open, but you can do this. Much of what is out here is more scared of you than you are of it, not to mention you have me to protect you. You don't think I would let anything happen to you, do you?"

"No," replied Luke, still a bit taken by his fear. "All you have to do is follow my lead," reassured Mark. "Put your feet where my feet go, and you'll be fine. Can you do that?"

"I think so," answered Luke, now with a bit more courage in his voice. Mark straightened his son's shoulders like a brave soldier and set off again into the darkness. Left foot, right foot—Mark walked with consistent and purposeful cadence with his son in tow. Luke tried his best to land

his feet in the soft imprints of his father's footsteps. Slow at first, Luke's bravery began to build; he was getting his nerve back. Left, right, left, right, on they went into the darkness. When they reached their tree stand, Mark sent his son up first. Once both were seated, Mark leaned over to his son and whispered, "The sun should be up any minute now."

The sun began to peek over the horizon and through trees, igniting the once formless and void woodland wilderness into a beautiful display of shape, color, and—in ever increasing volume—life. The few remaining leaves shook in the breeze, the owls hooted, the crows cawed, and the occasional turkey gobbled in the distance. Out of the darkness came abundant life and Luke was reinvigorated. With his eyes forward in an unrelenting search, Luke now waited with the light of the sun to help him.

Luke found success that day, but not simply in the hunt. Luke stood triumphant because his father had done so before and graciously imparted the wisdom of his victories into Luke's young life. In our spiritual life, it is so with us. We can conquer the dark woods of our day only because we share in the riches of Jesus Christ's victory and the bounty of His graciously-given wisdom. Let us, like Luke, follow in our Father's steps. Jesus won in the wilderness; so can we.



JESUS
CHRIST



WINTER
13

MARCH 01, 2026

LESSON TEXT
Matthew 5:1-12

FOCUS VERSES

Matthew 5:6; 6:3

⁶Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

³³But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

**TRUTH ABOUT
COVENANT**

Jesus redefined covenant as a law of love.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount

I WILL
CONTINUE TO
CULTIVATE
A PASSION FOR
JESUS AND HIS
RIGHTEOUSNESS.

COVENANT CONTEXT

In a similar manner as Moses, Jesus climbed a mountain and shared God's covenant with His people. Much of His Sermon on the Mount centered around living in the kingdom of God, which pointed out our internal motives direct our external actions. At the end of His life, Jesus specifically pointed to the gospel as the new covenant He was offering humanity.

SG **TEACHING OUTLINE**

Icebreaker: Whom do you want to emulate most in your life?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to first-century followers wanting to emulate and be around Jesus during His ministry on earth.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. JESUS' POPULARITY

- A. Jesus' Growing Popularity **I**
- B. Jesus' Foundational Teaching

Discuss: *What is your favorite part of the Sermon on the Mount? What about the most challenging part?*

- C. I will recognize the words of Jesus as God's Word.

II. JESUS' TEACHING

- A. Jesus' Countercultural Teaching **V**

Discuss: *How does a focus on the heart make "law keeping" more difficult yet more rewarding?*

- B. Jesus' Marvelous Teaching
- C. I will ask God to increase my desire for His righteousness.

Discuss: *How does Jesus' desire for righteousness affect our view of what is truly important in following Jesus?*

III. LOOKING TOWARD THE SPIRIT

- A. Jesus Pointed Forward to His New Covenant
- B. Walking in the Spirit

Discuss: *In what ways can we cultivate a stronger connection to God's Spirit daily?*

- C. I will actively walk in the Spirit to live as Jesus taught.

Discuss: *How does Scripture specifically help us "walk in the Spirit"?*

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to enliven each heart with the truth of His Word
- For God to fill and refill each life with His personal presence

LESSON CONNECTION

Jacob remembers walking into “that class” for the first time. It was a simple introduction to theology course—the flagship course that beckoned the most eager of learners to its lectures. Professor Black had built a reputation as the most engaging, most impactful, and most uniquely interesting professor in all the school. He was known for using different voices for different Bible characters during his performative yet precise lectures. He had acquired quite the name for himself, although he had no hand in intentionally pushing his popularity—he simply loved what he did, so students loved his classes.

The first class was standard: running through the syllabus, going over requirements and expectations, and glancing at the course textbooks. What was not standard—or expected—was what happened at the end of class. Professor Black began to tell the young students that he believed in them and, better yet, God believed in them. After a time, he prayed: “Lord, I call down Your blessings.” Soon into this prayer, the Spirit of God overwhelmed the students’ hearts. Tears fell over the brims of eyes. Jacob could not explain that he was feeling the presence of God calling Him to purpose; he just knew somehow that moment was holy.

He continued to attend class faithfully. All the professors at the college were skilled and passionate about their subjects, but there was something special about Professor Black. Jacob was a freshman and desperate for knowledge, particularly about God, so he hung on every word Professor Black spoke. If the professor taught that gravity did not exist, Jacob would have tried to fly. Of course, Professor Black would never dream of teaching such false and silly things; Truth with a capital “T” was his passion.

Each class period came to an end with the same invocation of blessing and more overwhelmed hearts and brimming eyelids. Likewise, every class ended with a faithful horde of “disciples” who vied for more of their teacher’s attention. Jacob was less courageous than the rest and remained near the back. The outskirts seemed safer to him. Each of the faithful mob wanted the great teacher’s affirmation and to be identified with him; they wanted to be like him.

The professor could not cover many of them with his wing, but he did adopt a few, which afforded them special status in their small college community. By “adopting,” Professor Black put them to work. Running classroom logistics, gathering needed materials, and communicating with other students appeared frequently on the rabbi’s list of discipleship requirements. As long they were close to the teacher, they were willing to do routine, even mundane, work for him.

Since so many students wanted to be close to the professor, Jacob was not able to be in the first group, but one day Professor Black kindly invited him to be a teacher’s aide. It was the opportunity Jacob had longed for: an opportunity to follow a man who was passionately, faithfully following Jesus.

BIBLE LESSON

I. JESUS' POPULARITY

A. Jesus' Growing Popularity

Jesus' ministry garnered Him much popularity. Traveling the countryside, preaching and teaching with authority, healing people, and casting out devils are sure ways to stir up a following. Scripture records as much. After Jesus' first tour on the road, His fan base spread throughout all Syria. The next verse in Matthew 4 continues describing Jesus' rise to fame: "And there followed him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judaea, and from beyond Jordan" (Matthew 4:25).

B. Jesus' Foundational Teaching

As Jesus saw the crowds following Him, He ascended a mountain—a natural location for divine revelation (think about Mount Sinai). In a way, the crowd may have seen Jesus as the Old Testament Israel saw Moses: delivering God's covenant to God's people. After Jesus sat down, He began to teach some of the most famous lessons throughout all of history: Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:3–6). Their hope—the covenant kingdom of God—had arrived.

After continuing to teach on the kingdom of God, Jesus ended His discourse by highlighting the authority and sobriety of His words. Those who hear and heed would be like a house built on a firm foundation that stands in the storm, but those who hear and ignore would be like a house built on sand that collapses in the storm. Blessing and warning bookended Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Indeed, these words have been a keystone message for generations of Christians seeking to be Jesus' disciples.

Discuss: What is your favorite part of the Sermon on the Mount? What about the most challenging part?

C. I will recognize the words of Jesus as God's Word.

Jesus' final admonition on the dire consequences attached to His words strikes at our hearts. In Matthew 7:21–23, He taught that many will come to Him at the end of the age to enter the kingdom of God, and He will rebuke them as strangers. This frightful and weighty moment of rebuke was attached to what Jesus said next with a "therefore" (Matthew 7:24). This transitional word leads into Jesus' teaching on the two responses to His words—house on the rock or house on the sand—and links our ability to enter the kingdom of God with us hearing and obeying His words. Since this is the case, let us live and love Jesus' words all the more, for these words grant access to life in His kingdom. They are the words of God.



II. JESUS' TEACHING

A. Jesus' Countercultural Teaching

Many of the topics He addressed while on the mountain were in popular debate among religious leaders and faithful Jews of His day. Questions of divorce and remarriage, how to apply the Torah to first-century life, and questions regarding the kingdom of God all filled Israelite religious dialogue. But Jesus' teaching was unique because He taught with authority, not like the other rabbis who simply taught what others wrote. When Jesus taught, it was as if He wrote the words Himself. (Quite truly He did for His words are the words of God.) Further, He taught with an intense focus on the heart: the internal motivations of keeping God's law.

▀ Our external behavior of keeping God's law does matter to Jesus, but He knew the true source of keeping God's law begins in the heart. Lust leads to adultery; hatred or viewing someone as worthless (calling them *raca* or fool) leads to murder. In many cases Jesus' teaching was countercultural and stood against the religious leaders' and teachers' obsession with the strict *external* adherence to the Law. For the most part, the external requirements the religious leaders placed on the people were extrabiblical and went beyond the basic requirements of the Law, even contradicting it at times (Matthew 15:3–6). Jesus sought to return God's holy law keeping to its rightful place, in the heart and, only then, in the hands.

Discuss: *How does a focus on the heart make "law keeping" more difficult yet more rewarding?*

B. Jesus' Marvelous Teaching

Jesus' teaching often left His hearers astonished or amazed. Their amazement was due to the aforementioned reasons: Jesus taught with unique authority and placed a unique emphasis on the heart. In addition, Jesus also spoke in ways that were simply "strange" or at least seemed out of place given His audience. For example, Jesus taught the poorest of an oppressed and overtaxed people that they were the light of the world. Rome stood atop them in oppressive fashion, flaunting its riches and ability to stamp out the culture of the people they had conquered, but Jesus claimed no special status for His followers. Instead, the poor in spirit, the meek, and those who desire righteousness (right living and relationship between God and others) stand as exemplars of the good life, the covenant life.

C. I will ask God to increase my desire for His righteousness.

Since Jesus' words are true, they should be our guiding light. Thankfully, Jesus gave us some signposts to lead us home. His teaching traversed a great deal of ground in Matthew's three chapters, but much of it comes under the umbrella of the kingdom of God and the corresponding requirement of living a life of righteousness. Righteousness is living in right relationship with God and others, doing right by them.

To a people living under Roman rule, Jesus praised those who would hunger and thirst after righteousness, which He quickly followed up with a teaching on mercy to ensure their desire for righteousness was not a guised craving for revenge-based "justice."

Jesus continued to surprise and even anger His audience by praising the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who were persecuted “for righteousness’ sake,” pointing to them as those who will inherit the kingdom of God. More pointedly, Jesus placed two things as the pinnacle of all Christian pursuit when He said: “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, *and his righteousness*; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33). Even Christ’s baptism was to “fulfil all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). Through Jesus, God and humanity come back into full, right relationship.

In other words, the unquenchable striving to live in right relationship with God and others should guide us to live out Jesus’ commands. Perhaps we have heard it another way: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37–40). Lord, help us desire righteousness with You and with those around us—to love You with all and to love others around us.

Discuss: How does Jesus’ desire for righteousness affect our view of what is truly important in following Jesus?

III. LOOKING TOWARD THE SPIRIT

A. Jesus Pointed Forward to His New Covenant

From the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, He preached the arrival of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not simply a thing or a place believers are trying to get to—the kingdom of God “arrives,” after all. No, the arrival of the kingdom of God is the arrival of God’s active reign, His authority in the realm of humanity. God’s authority in Christ was manifested through exorcisms, healings, forgiveness of sins, and several other miracles and wonders as a demonstration that God’s reign had truly and finally arrived. While this was good news, the fullness of God’s kingdom would only come about after Jesus Christ had suffered, died, and risen. When knowing His crucifixion was at hand, Jesus invited His disciples to share a Passover meal with Him, with a twist. Jesus relabeled the traditional elements of the meal (bread and wine) that represented God’s rescue of Israel out of Egypt to capture the significance of His own sacrificial death (Luke 22:1–20; compare to Exodus 12). Then Jesus made clear that the gospel is the New Covenant He had come to extend to humanity: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you” (Luke 22:20, NKJV).

Certainly Jesus performed many signs and taught amazing lessons to testify that God’s kingdom had arrived, but His true purpose was to inaugurate a new covenant. This covenant was not new in the sense that God had just thought it up as a backup plan for humanity failing the Old Covenant. That would betray the Old Testament promises that kept pointing forward to this “new” covenant. But this covenant was new because it contained a new work of God as He lived righteously with humanity as a man, and He would soon offer the remission of sins through baptism in His name and the infilling of His Holy Spirit.

B. Walking in the Spirit

The giving of the Spirit—in tandem with the forgiveness of sins—allows us as believers to walk faithfully with Jesus Christ. Paul stated it plainly: “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25). In other words, Paul did not expect the reception of the Spirit to be the final experience with God; the entire life of a believer was to be led and empowered by the presence of God. Being born again (repenting of our sins, being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, and receiving the Holy Spirit) is only the beginning of us following Jesus.

But how do we walk in the Spirit? A full answer would require entire libraries to work out the beauty and intricacies of what it means to walk in the Spirit, but it implies a constant connection with and dependence on God. We do that through prayer. The early church encountered God’s presence in times of prayer (Acts 4:31). They were called to pray in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:18). Paul prayed they would receive the strength and revelation the Spirit gives (Ephesians 1:15–17). Even when believers did not know what to pray, Paul taught that the Spirit would make “intercession for [them] with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Romans 8:26, possibly referencing speaking in tongues).

Worship is another way to encounter God’s Spirit. Paul instructed the early church to worship and sing spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16). God Himself will inspire songs that edify and instruct His church. Amazing! Tied to Paul’s teaching about Spirit-inspired singing is the initial admonition of the same verse: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” Reading, studying, and hearing the Scripture are perhaps the best ways to ensure we walk in the Spirit because the Word of God defines what a life in the Spirit looks like. The Word of God is our anchor.

Discuss: *In what ways can we cultivate a stronger connection to God’s Spirit daily?*

C. I will actively walk in the Spirit to live as Jesus taught.

With the strength of God’s Spirit on offer, our response should be thankfulness and obedience. We should pursue all avenues of allowing the Spirit of God to actively shape and lead our lives. How do we know the Spirit is doing that? Our lives will align with the teachings of Jesus and the whole of Scripture. We will want to be just like our Jesus as we walk closer daily with Him.

Discuss: *How does Scripture specifically help us “walk in the Spirit”?*

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how we are called to follow Jesus, no matter how difficult it may be. The following story may be a continuation of the Lesson Connection or a stand-alone story.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Jacob knocked on Professor Black's office door Wednesday morning to report for duty. Jacob bade his boss good morning and asked what he could do. Hoping to be given a much-deserved—due to his many years of teaching experience—opportunity to lead the morning lecture, Jacob was disappointed to learn that his first task would be alphabetizing quizzes submitted at the end of the class period.

Nevertheless, Jacob faithfully continued in his service. On certain occasions he felt rewarded with walks out to Professor Black's car, teeming with intriguing conversation about how the class went, changes the professor would make in the future, and questions regarding Jacob's own interests and studies—the last being Jacob's favorite topic. After allowing young Jacob to ramble on about this or that theological topic, Professor Black would nod with approval and say, "That sounds fascinating. I believe in you." With those words of affirmation, Jacob would wander off into the rest of his day inspired to pursue life with Professor Black's "stamp of approval."

On one of those journeys from the classroom to the car, Professor Black noticed Jacob had little to say. The young student seemed distracted and uninterested in the conversation, even when the topic switched to his studies. Concerned, Professor Black asked, "Is everything OK, Jacob?"

The tidal wave released by that question caught both parties off guard. Jacob

shared, "I feel like I'm not going anywhere in life, like I am not good enough to pursue my goals. Every time I try, I get stuck and discouraged. I don't know what to do."

In what would change young Jacob's life, Professor Black leaned in to the young man's despair. "Listen, there was a time when I didn't think I could do what I am doing right now. If I'm honest, I almost gave up."

"You did?" marveled Jacob. "Absolutely," Professor Black retorted. "What made you stick it out?" Jacob was desperate for an answer at this point. The professor replied, "I knew that God had called me. He had called me into covenant, yes, but He also called me to do the very thing I thought was impossible."

Seeing Jacob's eyes glowing, Professor Black continued, "Jacob, God has called you to this. And because He has, you can do it. In fact, anything God requires of you, or anybody, is possible. Not because we are capable by ourselves, but because God has a keen interest in seeing it done—such an interest that He filled each of us with His personal presence. Following Christ is not always easy, but it's possible. Keep at it, OK?"

With what felt like a prophetic oracle fashioned just for him in that moment, Jacob left that night renewed, knowing God was with him. Now Jacob's encouragement is ours. We can follow Jesus because Jesus Christ Himself endows us with the ability to do so.



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