

A GOD'S WORD FOR LIFE RESOURCE



COVENANT

AN INVITATION TO A RICHER
RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

LESSON GUIDE | SUMMER 2026



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God's Word for Life



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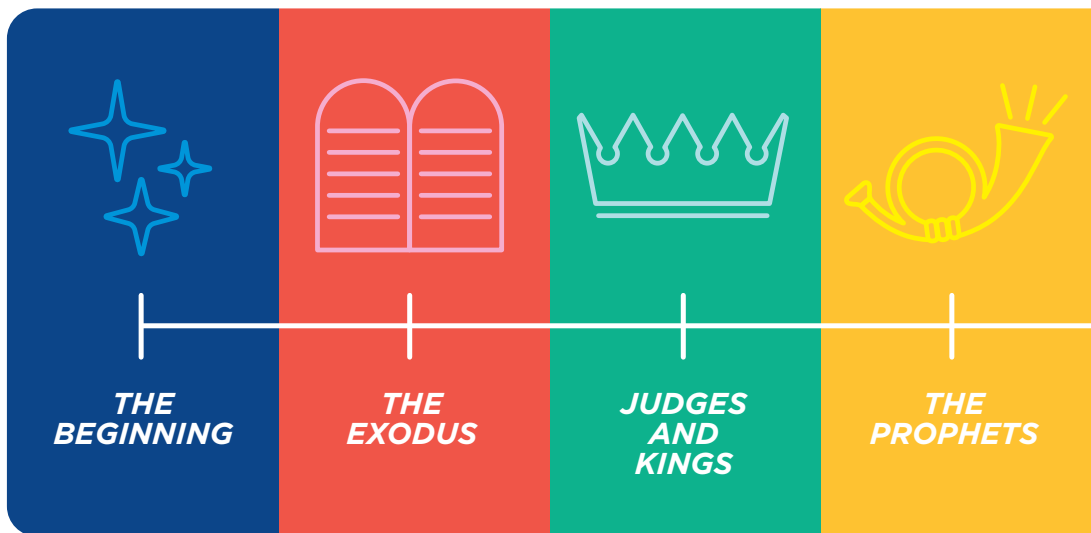


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WELCOME T

A ONE-YEAR JOURNEY THROUGH THE BIB



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.

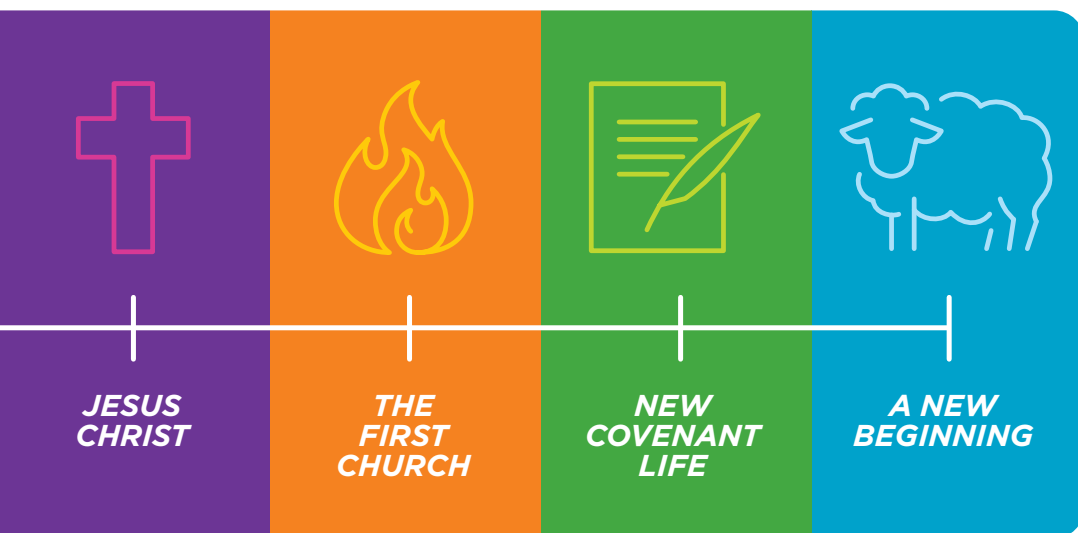
But every one of those stories tell a small piece of God's big story—God wants to be in covenant relationship with us. God willingly pledges His presence and faithful love to us as we follow Him.

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.

O COVENANT

LE TO A RICHER RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.



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.

[illegible]

TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: What subject could you talk about for an hour right now with no preparation?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to our calling to be witnesses for Jesus Christ.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. JESUS' CHARGE

- A. **THE POWER OF THE Spirit**
 - DISCUSS:** When you think about the power that comes with God's Holy Spirit, how does that power show up in *your daily life*?
 - B. The spread of the Gospel [1]
 - A. I will share the gospel with my family, friends, and neighbors.
 - DISCUSS:** Besides speaking, what are some ways you can be a witness on a daily basis with your actions and lifestyle?
- II. THE KINGDOM OF GOD**
- A. Spiritual Power Versus Political Power
 - DISCUSS:** How does a shift in mindset away from political or earthly power and toward spiritual power change how you think about power?
 - B. I will invest my life and resources in the kingdom of God.
 - DISCUSS:** What are some of your life's resources (time, talent, and treasure) that you can invest into God's kingdom?
- III. ESTABLISHING THE KINGDOM**
- A. Sharing the Gospel
 - B. Making Disciples [1]
 - DISCUSS:** What does making disciples look like after someone has responded to the new start?
 - C. I will make disciples for Jesus.
 - DISCUSS:** How can we help one another to make disciples?

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

- For God to help us see the Holy Spirit's transformation in every aspect of our lives
- For God to help us to be witnesses not just with our words, but with the entirety of our lives

SG TEACHING OUTLINE

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

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

Budget worked as a finance counselor for a large university on the West Coast of the United States. For the most part, she enjoyed her job. The pay and benefits were generous for her area. She was comfortable in her knowledge of her subject matter, and she found a sense of accomplishment in guiding students in making wise financial decisions.

However, Bridget was not passionate about finance, nor was she overly passionate about higher education. Bridget was an artist. Her nights and weekends were consumed with all things artistic. She enjoyed finding new and unique ways to convey the images in her head onto canvases. Acrylics worked just fine if she did not have much time, but she also experimented with watercolor, oil, pastels, ink, and even charcoal. She had a small studio in her home where she painted portraits of couples and housewares into expressive art displays. When she needed a new blouse or dress for a special occasion, she preferred to make her own rather than browsing online clothing retailers. If nothing else, her hands found themselves crocheting or knitting unique items for whatever gift-giving holiday was next. Her art had found its way into her life, and she was happy to have it. She had happily married a tent at local outdoor art shows to display and sell her work.

One weekend a visitor showed up at Bridget's church. Bridget introduced herself warmly to the young lady, welcoming her to the church. During small talk, the visitor asked Bridget what she did for a living. Without thinking, Bridget replied, "I'm a finance counselor." Bridget's husband overheard her comment and quickly interrupted, "No, she's not, she's an artist; finance is just her job." The group shared a hearty laugh, and Bridget's husband proceeded to brag on his wife's accomplishments until she turned red with embarrassment.

Later Bridget reflected on what her husband had said at church. While he had commented lightheartedly, she realized there was truth in his words. At her core, she was an artist. Her identity as an artist showed up in every area of her life. Her artistic touch showed up at her work office, where the walls were plastered with stunning pieces she had created to assure and inspire students. Her artistry consumed her free time as she often spent quality time with friends in art galleries. Even at church, her pastor had harnessed her talent to create all of the church's social media graphics.

Bridget could see a spiritual analogy immediately. Just like her artistry touched every aspect of her life because that was who she was at her core, her identity as a follower of Jesus Christ also touched every aspect of her life. Even before she was an artist, she was a Christian. She knew that the Holy Spirit within her was designed to permeate every aspect of her being. Therefore, her thoughts, emotions, actions, relationships—yes, even her art—were different because of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

She bowed her head and silently prayed: Lord, if I allow the artistic gift You gave me to show up in all aspects of my life, let Your Holy Spirit show up even more so. I am an artist only by Your grace and mercy so I may be a witness to You in this world.

BIBLE LESSON

I. JESUS' CHARGE

Shortly before Jesus ascended into Heaven, He gathered His faithful followers together and gave His final words, a sure guarantee. They would receive the Holy Spirit and the power that only comes through the indwelling Holy Spirit. This promise reminded His followers that God's covenant relationship with His people was not over with the conclusion of Jesus' earthly ministry. God had always desired to dwell among His people and He would continue to be right there in their midst. Just as God once walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day, tabernacled Himself in the center of the Israelite camp, and became incarnate in human flesh, God would continue His eternal covenantal practice of abiding among His beloved.

A. The Power of the Spirit

Luke recorded Jesus' charge at the beginning of the Book of Acts, providing the context for every other event recorded in Acts. From the early outpouring in the upper room to Paul's witness in Rome and everything in between, none of the events of Acts would have been possible without the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was necessary not only to give Jesus' followers power but also to provide them with direction and clarity.

Jesus plainly told His followers they would not understand the things that are in God's power, which includes knowledge of "His times or the seasons" (Acts 1:7). God's Spirit would provide power for a different, albeit specific, purpose: to be witnesses unto Jesus Christ. Being filled with the Spirit's power mandates that we understand and accept our roles as Spirit-filled witnesses, all the while understanding that not all God's power has been given to us. For example, God gives us power to testify to others of the grace of God, but He has not given us power to walk on water.

DISCUSS: When you think about the power that comes with God's Holy Spirit, how does that power show up in your daily life?

B. The Spread of the Gospel

Jesus charged His followers to be witnesses to all people in the known world, starting locally in Jerusalem, moving regionally into Judea, breaking social barriers into Samaria, and then into the furthest reaches of the earth. The geographic outline of the Book of Acts mirrors this pattern. What began in Jerusalem in Acts 1 rapidly expanded until this miracle-filled book concluded in Rome in Acts 28.

While some of Jesus' followers may have been surprised at Jesus' encouragement of a worldwide witness, those knowledgeable of Old Testament prophecy would have recognized salvation for all peoples was always part of God's covenantal plan. Abraham received one of the earliest prophecies of this promise: "In you and all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 22:18). Peter quoted this promise in

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.

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how our true passion should be to witness for Jesus Christ. The following story may be a continuation of the Lesson Connector or a stand-alone story.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Not everyone will have the artistic talent and drive of Bridget, the young lady from the opening story. However, many people can identify with having a deep-rooted passion for a topic or subject matter. For some, their passion may be business related, while others are deeply passionate about education. Some may find their passion in playing an instrument, while others might be passionate about building things with their hands. If you are not sure what your passion is, ask yourself: What subject could I speak on for an hour right now with no preparation? If you can answer this question, you might have found your passion.

Our passions typically consume the majority of our time. This is why our relationship with God must be our highest passion. God may not be calling us to give up our passions of business, construction, education, or art. As Spirit-filled witnesses, our relationship with God must show up in every aspect of our lives. Does the art we create reflect a deep-rooted relationship with God? Do we treat our employees and do business reflect a pure heart that only comes from being in right relationship with God? Can we find ways to honor God and be Spirit-filled witnesses to our coworkers, regardless

of our profession? Can we be witnesses unto God on the golf course as well as in the sanctuary?

Bridget changed her language after that interaction. She no longer introduced herself as a finance counselor. Instead, she described her profession with a bold proclamation: "I'm an artist." Her shift in mindset also changed how she spoke about God. She no longer simply told people she went to church as if that were the mundane summary of a boring Christian walk. She told anyone who would listen how much she loved God and how He had changed everything in her life for the better. Her coworkers, students, and art patrons noticed a difference in how she conducted herself as she observed the Holy Spirit radiating through every aspect of her life. Her thoughts and emotions were holier. Her speech was purer.

Her ability to spread the gospel and make disciples was exponentially revolutionized when she realized that, at her core, she was a witness. She was not only a finance counselor or even an artist. She was a blood-bought child of the King of Kings, a citizen of God's kingdom, filled to overflowing with the power-resisting Spirit of Almighty God. And she was living every day so others could have the same encounter with God she had.

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.

LEGEND

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



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



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



THE FIRST
CHURCH



SUMMER

01

JUNE 07, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Acts 1:1-14

FOCUS VERSES

Acts 1:6-8

⁶When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?

⁷And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.

⁸But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

TRUTH ABOUT
COVENANT

Jesus commissioned us to share His covenant with the world.

Jesus' Great Commission

I WILL
ESTABLISH
THE KING'S
KINGDOM
ON EARTH.

COVENANT CONTEXT

Although Jesus' earthly ministry had come to an end, His covenant with humanity continued in a new, closer way. He promised He would continue to dwell among His people by filling us with His Holy Spirit. As the Book of Acts demonstrates, He will give us power through His Spirit to be witnesses and make disciples for Him.

SG *TEACHING OUTLINE*

Icebreaker: What subject could you talk about for an hour right now with no preparation?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to our calling to be witnesses for Jesus Christ.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. JESUS' CHARGE

A. The Power of the Spirit

DISCUSS: *When you think about the power that comes with God's Holy Spirit, how does that power show up in your daily life?*

B. The Spread of the Gospel **I**

C. I will share the gospel with my family, friends, and neighbors.

DISCUSS: *Besides speaking, what are some ways you can be a witness on a daily basis with your actions and lifestyle?*

II. THE KINGDOM OF GOD

A. Spiritual Power Versus Political Power

DISCUSS: *How does a shift in mindset away from political or earthly power and toward spiritual power change how you think about power?*

B. I will invest my life and resources in the kingdom of God.

DISCUSS: *What are some of your life's resources (time, talent, and treasure) that you can invest into God's kingdom?*

III. ESTABLISHING THE KINGDOM

A. Sharing the Gospel

B. Making Disciples **V**

DISCUSS: *What does making disciples look like after someone has experienced the new birth?*

C. I will make disciples for Jesus.

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to help us see the Holy Spirit's transformation in every aspect of our lives
- For God to help us to be witnesses not just with our words, but with the entirety of our lives

LESSON CONNECTION

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While some of Jesus' followers may have been surprised at Jesus' encouragement of a worldwide witness, those knowledgeable of Old Testament prophecy would have recognized salvation for all peoples was always part of God's covenantal plan. Abraham received one of the earliest prophecies of this promise: "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 22:18). Peter quoted this promise in

Acts 3:25 and Paul quoted it in Galatians 3:8. In both places, it was used to invoke the continuation of God's ongoing covenant relationship with humanity.

Other Old Testament passages also foresaw the eventual salvation of all Gentiles. Psalm 22:27 prophesied: "All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the LORD." Isaiah 49:6 foretold that the coming Messiah would be "a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth." Malachi 1:11 promised the Lord's "name shall be great among the Gentiles." Memorably, the prophet Jonah begrudgingly witnessed to Nineveh, the capital of the Gentile kingdom of Assyria, and thousands of Gentiles received a taste of God's grace and mercy that was later fully realized in the Book of Acts.

C. I will share the gospel with my family, friends, and neighbors.

As believers who seek to be like the New Testament church in Acts, we are now called to receive the Holy Spirit, the indwelling presence of God. However, being filled with God's Spirit comes with a responsibility to be a witness to all with whom we interact. The indwelling Holy Spirit permeates our entire being, influencing our thoughts, words, emotions, actions, and lifestyles. Thus, we are called to be witnesses with our entire being. We often associate being a witness with speaking, but we also witness by what we think about and dwell on, what we care about, how we respond to others, how we live in an unholy world. Let us allow the Holy Spirit to saturate us until we are witnesses with every part of our lives.

DISCUSS: *Besides speaking, what are some ways you can be a witness on a daily basis with your actions and lifestyle?*

II. THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The statement that God is on our side is somewhat of a misnomer. It is more accurate to say we need to make sure we are on God's side by living as citizens of His kingdom. Yes, if we are filled with His Holy Spirit and endeavoring to do His will, then He is on our side, but before that happens, we must make sure we are on His side, living in covenantal relationship with God Almighty.

Jesus encouraged His followers to pray for God's kingdom to reign on the earth and to pursue God's kingdom first and foremost. (See Matthew 6:10, 33.) By shifting humanity's focus away from the temporal and onto the eternal, Jesus hoped we would reprioritize our covenant relationship with God, correctly bringing our thoughts and actions in line with God and His will.

A. Spiritual Power Versus Political Power

The question the disciples asked in Acts 1:6 betrayed a sad reality: Despite hearing Jesus' teachings, seeing His miracles, and even witnessing His resurrection, the disciples were still looking for Jesus to sit on a throne in the heart of Jerusalem and set up His earthly kingdom. Jesus' response was a gentle reminder not to be concerned with such things because that power was not granted to them.

The two references to *power* in verses 7 and 8 provide an important distinction regarding God's kingdom and the power He gives us. His responsibility is overseeing the times and seasons, such as setting up kingdoms and bringing them down. He has not granted that power to humanity. Jesus' statement would have reminded His audience of the prayer in Daniel 2:21, which affirmed that only God could change "the times and the seasons," and only God "removeth kings, and setteth up kings." The Jews in the first century would have loved to overthrow Rome, but that was not up to them; that power belongs to God.

By contrast, the power granted to us is for the specific purpose of being witnesses of the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world. This commission crosses language lines and national borders by calling Spirit-filled followers into "the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). God's kingdom on earth would not come by military campaigns and conquests, but by His Spirit encompassing the entire globe.

DISCUSS: *How does a shift in mindset away from political or earthly power and toward spiritual power change how you think about power?*

B. I will invest my life and resources in the kingdom of God.

We are most in tune with God's Spirit when we get right what the disciples initially got wrong: We must understand what power belongs to us and what power belongs only to God. When we operate in our assigned roles—we invest all we are and everything we have into God's kingdom—we are acting in covenant with God. Just as Jesus gave His all for us by dying for our sins, rising again to conquer death, and abiding with us through the Holy Spirit, so now we give our all by being witnesses with our whole being. Such is the nature of our covenant relationship with God; He gave His all, and in response we give our all.

DISCUSS: *What are some of your life's resources (time, talent, and treasure) that you can invest into God's kingdom?*

III. ESTABLISHING THE KINGDOM

By filling us with His Spirit, God writes His covenant on our hearts. (See Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10.) Until Jesus does set up His royal throne in the heart of Jerusalem, God's kingdom is established in our hearts. When we seek to bring people to Jesus by sharing the gospel and making disciples, we are actively participating in establishing God's kingdom. We are seeing our prayers answered before our eyes as God's kingdom comes and His will is done. (See Matthew 6:10.)

A. Sharing the Gospel

The gospel message is simply defined as the good news of Jesus Christ, who died to pay the price for our sins, was buried for three days, and rose again to offer us new life in Him. We share the gospel with our words but also with our testimonies: the testimony of how He saved us from our sins and the testimony of our example. As the adage goes, "Actions speak louder than words," so our consistent testimony of a Christ-honoring lifestyle sometimes speaks louder than our words. In fact, Jesus

taught in Matthew 5:14 that people may see our good works first before they glorify our great God.

✓ B. Making Disciples

Everyone who has been born again is called to make disciples of those who are not yet born again. In his book *Follow to Lead*, Stan Gleason writes that we should make strangers friends and friends disciples. It is difficult to disciple someone to Jesus if we do not even know them yet. Make a friend. Go out for coffee, invite them to dinner, ask them if you can pray for anything for them. Be genuinely interested in people. Making disciples often starts with making friends.

Making disciples includes sharing the gospel with others and teaching them how to rightly respond to the gospel according to Acts 2:38: Repent of your sins, be baptized in water in the name of Jesus Christ, and receive the gift of the Holy Ghost with the initial sign of speaking with other tongues. But that is only the beginning. Biological birth is necessary for human life, but parents must nurture and grow their baby to maturity. Similarly, part of the believer's role as a witness in God's kingdom is mentoring, training, and teaching new believers to a mature relationship with Jesus. After someone experiences new birth, the church is responsible for nurturing and training him or her to grow and continually become more like Christ.

DISCUSS: *What does making disciples look like after someone has experienced the new birth?*

C. I will make disciples for Jesus.

Stan Gleason compared making disciples to the first-century relationship between rabbis and disciples. He wrote that rabbis would “spend their lives teaching, training, imparting, and sharing their lives, values, and principles. This is how the Lord Himself lived, and His disciples followed His model during their ministries” (Stan Gleason, *Follow to Lead*). Making disciples is all about relationships.

Just like Jesus and His disciples, we are now commissioned to make disciples. (See Matthew 28:19.) This includes teaching and encouraging fellow believers and training new converts on how to live in covenant relationship with Jesus Christ, even after their initial new-birth experience. The commission to make disciples and to be witnesses go hand in hand. As we bear witness to the saving message of Jesus Christ, we will naturally make disciples. By fulfilling these commissions, we participate in establishing God's kingdom on earth. All of us who are Spirit-filled should continually rededicate ourselves to these great commissions.

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how our true passion should be to witness for Jesus Christ. The following story may be a continuation of the Lesson Connection or a stand-alone story.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Not everyone will have the artistic talent and drive of Bridget, the young lady from the opening story. However, many people can identify with having a deep-rooted passion for a topic or subject matter. For some, their passion may be business related, while others are deeply passionate about education. Some may find their passion in playing an instrument, while others might be passionate about building things with their hands. If you are not sure what your passion is, ask yourself: What subject could I speak on for an hour right now with no preparation? If you can answer this question, you might have found your passion.

Our passions typically consume the majority of our time. This is why our relationship with God must be our highest passion. God may not be calling us to give up our passions of business, construction, education, or art. As Spirit-filled witnesses, our relationship with God must show up in every aspect of our lives. Does the art we create reflect a deep-rooted relationship with God? Does how we treat our employees and do business reflect a pure heart that only comes from being in right relationship with God? Can we find ways to honor God and be Spirit-filled witnesses to our coworkers, regardless

of our profession? Can we be witnesses unto God on the golf course as well as in the sanctuary?

Bridget changed her language after that interaction. She no longer introduced herself as a finance counselor. Instead, she described her profession with a bold proclamation: “I’m an artist.” Her shift in mindset also changed how she spoke about God. She no longer simply told people she went to church as if that were the mundane summary of a boring Christian walk. She told anyone who would listen how much she loved God and how He had changed everything in her life for the better. Her coworkers, students, and art patrons noticed a difference in how she conducted herself as they observed the Holy Spirit radiating through every aspect of her life. Her thoughts and emotions were holier. Her speech was purer.

Her ability to spread the gospel and make disciples was exponentially revolutionized when she realized that, at her core, she was a witness. She was not only a finance counselor or even an artist. She was a blood-bought child of the King of kings, a citizen of God’s kingdom, filled to overflowing with the power-instilling Spirit of Almighty God. And she was living every day so others could have the same encounter with God she had.



THE FIRST
CHURCH



SUMMER

02

JUNE 14, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Acts 2:1-18, 38-39

FOCUS VERSES

Acts 2:37-39

³⁷Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?

³⁸Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

³⁹For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

**TRUTH ABOUT
COVENANT**

Jesus inaugurated the new covenant when He poured out His Spirit.

The Day of Pentecost

I WILL RESPOND
TO THE GOSPEL
BY OBEYING

ACTS 2:38.

COVENANT CONTEXT

After Jesus' promise to empower His people, He took another step closer in His covenant relationship with humanity when He filled His followers with His Holy Spirit. Upon preaching the gospel, a newly Spirit-filled apostle Peter preached to the crowd how they too could be in covenant relationship with Jesus: repentance, baptism in Jesus' name, and the infilling of His Spirit.

SG *TEACHING OUTLINE*

Icebreaker: What is your favorite holiday to celebrate with family and friends?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to the Jews' love for Jewish feasts such as the Feast of Pentecost.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. THE DAY OF PENTECOST

A. Tarrying in Jerusalem **I**

DISCUSS: *Why is unity such an important component of the church? What does unity look like in the daily life of the church body?*

B. The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit **V**

C. I will tarry in prayer to be empowered by the Spirit.

DISCUSS: *If you have you ever "tarried" while waiting for a promise from God, what did that waiting period look like and feel like?*

II. THE GOSPEL AND OUR RESPONSE

DISCUSS: *What elements in Peter's message were so convicting for the listeners that they evoked such a willing response?*

A. What Must We Do?

B. The Generational Promise

DISCUSS: *What are some recent testimonies you have heard of Acts 2:38 experiences around the world?*

C. I will follow the plan of salvation Peter preached in Acts 2:38.

DISCUSS: *If you have responded to the gospel and been born again, what was that experience like for you? If not, why not respond and be born again today?*

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to fill us all with His Holy Spirit as we respond to the gospel through repentance and baptism
- For God to continue to pour out His Holy Spirit in our church and community, just like He did in Acts 2

LESSON CONNECTION

An Apostolic chaplain walked onto the floor of the oncology ward in a suburban Florida hospital for another day of rounds. He loved his profession, visiting people in dire situations and sharing God's comfort and peace with whomever would allow him. As was his custom, he visited the health unit coordinator—affectionately known as “the HUC”—to gather a list of patients and see who could use a visit. The HUC greeted the chaplain with a warm smile and was helpful as always, saying, “Room 12 could use a visit. She's been very emotional and is always reading her Bible and praying.” The chaplain smiled and expressed thanks; he knew where to start.

As a chaplain employed by the hospital, he was not allowed to actively invite patients to church, but he was allowed to share his faith with anyone who would ask him. The chaplain stopped briefly at the door of room 12 to whisper a prayer: “Lord, help me be a witness to this patient today. Let your Holy Spirit guide me to be a witness.”

The patient sat in her bed, hunched over with her Bible in her hands. She greeted the chaplain with a smile and invited him to sit. She told him the tearful story of her battle with cancer and how her treatments had changed and developed over several years as the cancer grew and shrank and eventually bounced to different parts of her body. The road had been long and hard and she confessed to growing weary in the journey. “However,” she said, “since getting cancer, I've been closer to God than ever before. I'm reading my Bible and praying more than ever. I just want to experience more of God.”

Inspired by her faith, the chaplain asked if he could pray and the patient consented. As the chaplain prayed, he felt the Holy Spirit course through His body, just like he felt every Sunday at church. He knew God's presence was there. As he prayed with fervor and emotion, he suddenly heard someone speaking with tongues. *Who is that?* he wondered. After a few seconds, he realized with a shock it was him; he was the one speaking in tongues.

The chaplain quickly wrapped up the prayer. Knowing the hospital's policy on proselytizing, visions of his imminent termination began to dance in his head. He could imagine nothing more than the patient reporting him and him quickly being fired. Little did the chaplain know, but he had nothing to fear—God was indeed leading this interaction.

The patient grabbed the chaplain's hand. “Did you just speak with tongues?” she asked. When the chaplain said yes, tears filled the patient's eyes. “I told you how I've been getting closer to God since being diagnosed with cancer. I've been reading and praying like never before. One day while praying, I suddenly began to speak in a language I did not understand. I wasn't trying to, but it happened anyway. Oh, it felt so good. And ever since then, I've been praying for God to bring someone into my life to teach me about tongues.”

BIBLE LESSON

I. THE DAY OF PENTECOST

According to Deuteronomy 16:16–17, the Jews were expected to attend three major feasts in Jerusalem. The Feast of Passover, also known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, celebrated the Hebrews' deliverance from slavery in Egypt. The institution of the Feast of Passover is described in Exodus 12, Leviticus 23, and Deuteronomy 16. The Feast of Booths, also known as the Feast of Tabernacles, celebrated God's miraculous provision for the Israelites while they wandered through the wilderness after leaving Egypt. The institution of the Feast of Booths is described in Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16.

In between these two feasts was the Feast of Pentecost, also known as the Feast of Weeks, which occurred fifty days after the Feast of Passover. The institution of the Feast of Pentecost is described in Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16. Pentecost celebrated the firstfruits of the harvest. On this particular celebration, Jesus' followers would celebrate a new firstfruit—the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon humanity.

A. Tarrying in Jerusalem

Before His ascension, Jesus instructed His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. (See Acts 1:4–5.) As Hebrews, they were already in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. Because of the crowd, Jesus' followers would have initially blended in with all the others who had made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the feast.

During the waiting period between Jesus' ascension and the Day of Pentecost, the number of those who were willing to wait slowly dwindled. The apostle Paul stated that Jesus had appeared to over 500 individuals after His resurrection (I Corinthians 15:6), yet only 120 were present in the upper room (Acts 1:15). While some of the larger crowd undoubtedly had reasons why they could not wait, they missed out on the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Possibly they were not fully convinced of Jesus' message, even after witnessing Him resurrect and ascend. One might speculate that only after the number had decreased to 120 were they truly able to be “with one accord” (Acts 2:1). 

DISCUSS: *Why is unity such an important component of the church? What does unity look like in the daily life of the church body?*

B. The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit

The miraculous moment the Holy Spirit was poured out on the 120 was a moment none of them would ever forget. By all accounts, their gathering in the upper room seemed to be quite ordinary. They had already conducted the business of replacing Judas with Matthias, and they were continuing in daily, fervent prayer. The time was just past nine o'clock in the morning (Acts 2:15), and those gathered were sitting down (Acts 2:2).

As unremarkable as this moment might have appeared to onlookers, it was filled with such a spirit of unity and focus on God that God chose this moment to bless His followers with the greatest gift they would ever receive: His own indwelling Holy Spirit. A visible sign of fire accompanied this initial outpouring as well as the audible supernatural sign of speaking with other tongues, or languages. While the sign of fire was not repeated, the sign of tongues was, making speaking in tongues the normative sign for receiving the Holy Spirit. (See Acts 8:17; 10:46; 19:6.) The demonstration was so spectacular that thousands of people outside the upper room heard and were amazed.

This outpouring marked the beginning of the new covenant God had always wanted to share with His people. In Peter's sermon, he connected this event to prophecy from Joel 2:28–32, indicating the same God of the prophets was responsible for this event as well. Now, just as David's "tongue was glad" (Acts 2:26) upon witnessing the Lord, those present at Pentecost would experience a gladness like never before as they spoke with other tongues.



C. I will tarry in prayer to be empowered by the Spirit.

As believers who desire to experience God in the same way the New Testament church did, the upper-room experience provides a helpful template for us to follow. Just as those believers gathered together regularly in unified prayer, we can expect God's Spirit to be poured out when we seek Him in the same way. Additionally, we need to purpose within ourselves to be willing to "tarry," which means "to linger in expectation" (*Merriam-Webster*). The 120 had a promise from Jesus that they would receive power when they were baptized with the Holy Ghost (Acts 1:5, 8). Many of the people who witnessed Jesus after His resurrection did not tarry in the upper room; they faltered in their faith, being unwilling to linger. The faithful followers who excitedly awaited the outpouring of God's Spirit likely would have waited longer if the Lord had required it. In following their example, we must continue daily in prayer, gathering together with fellow believers with an unwavering expectation that God will pour out the Holy Spirit upon all who desire Him.

DISCUSS: *If you have ever "tarried" while waiting for a promise from God, what did that waiting period look like and feel like?*

II. THE GOSPEL AND OUR RESPONSE

Some have erroneously argued that the tongues spoken on the Day of Pentecost were just to witness to the diverse crowd gathered for Pentecost. However, this argument is not consistent with the remainder of the Book of Acts. When believers spoke with tongues in Acts 10:46 and 19:6, all who were present had been talking with each other in the same common language. Additionally, while all who were gathered on the Day of Pentecost came from around the known world and spoke many different languages, they were all Jews gathered together for a common Jewish feast. When Peter preached, he did not do so in an unknown language but presumably in Greek or Aramaic; everyone present understood his words, and they were driven to respond.

The content of Peter's sermon demanded a response. Peter demonstrated in certain, convicting terms that Jesus was the promised Messiah, but his audience crucified Him. Three days later the Spirit of God Himself raised Jesus from the grave and Jesus ascended with all power and glory. Peter demonstrated that Jesus' life and ministry and the current outpouring of the Holy Spirit marked a new closeness in God's covenant relationship with humanity, which King David and the prophet Joel foretold. These faithful Jews gathered for the Feast of Pentecost would have been familiar with Hebrew Scripture and were immediately persuaded by Peter's words. They were so convicted at the conclusion of Peter's sermon that they cried out in unity: "What shall we do?" (Acts 2:37).

DISCUSS: *What elements in Peter's message were so convicting for the listeners that they evoked such a willing response?*

A. What Must We Do?

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter stood up and preached what we now refer to as the gospel. The gospel is the story of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The gospel has already been completed. However, the gospel cannot exist in a vacuum, as if it were another mundane page in a history book. The gospel demands our response. We cannot encounter the message of what Jesus has done for us without choosing to embrace or reject the gospel.

The hearers of Peter's sermon felt compelled to respond, which naturally comes from hearing the gospel message. They could not hear the gospel and do nothing. Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit who now dwelt within him, preached the now-famous words: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:38). Peter not only succinctly described the gospel, but also summarized the proper response to the gospel.

B. The Generational Promise

For those of us living in the twenty-first century, we can be comforted knowing that not only was Acts 2:38 recorded in God's Word, but verse 39 was as well. Peter instructed his followers on the proper response to the gospel, and he prophesied that this promise was not for that day only, but for all believers around the world and for generations to come. The phrase "afar off" can refer both to generations in the distant future and also those who were geographically distanced from Jerusalem.

As today's believers, we can read this passage with hope and comfort. No matter how long ago the events of Acts occurred and no matter how far away we may live from Jerusalem, we still have the opportunity to respond. The promise was not just for one day or the early days of the church; the promise is for us as well.

DISCUSS: *What are some recent testimonies you have heard of Acts 2:38 experiences around the world?*

C. I will follow the plan of salvation Peter preached in Acts 2:38.

Now that we have read the events of Acts 1 and 2, we stand alongside the hearers of Peter's sermon and must also decide what our response will be to the gospel message of Jesus Christ. We also are compelled to ask, "What shall we do?" Will we reject Jesus' saving work, or will we respond by repenting, submitting to baptism, and allowing ourselves to be filled with God's Spirit?

If we choose to respond positively to the gospel, we must begin with repentance. We must abandon our sinful lifestyles and make an ongoing and concerted effort to flee from sin. While repentance can occur in a moment, repentance is also a lifestyle. We wake every day and choose to turn away from sin and toward Christ. We must also be baptized by immersion in water with the name of Jesus called over us. This is the only way believers were baptized in the Book of Acts. (See Acts 8:16; 10:48; 19:5.) We are baptized in Jesus' name because His is the only name that can save us (Acts 4:12). When we are baptized, our sins are washed away, and we become new creations in Jesus Christ (Romans 6:3-4).

Finally, we have an assurance that when we respond in faith to the gospel, God will fill us with His Holy Spirit with the sign of speaking in tongues. Some have been filled before they were baptized, such as Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:44-48), showing speaking in tongues as the normative sign of receiving the Holy Spirit seen all throughout the Book of Acts. Speaking in tongues cannot be taught, nor should it be intimidating for a new believer. The Holy Spirit is God's free gift to us and every hungry heart for God should be experiencing the outpouring of His wonderful, life-changing gift.

DISCUSS: *If you have responded to the gospel and been born again, what was that experience like for you? If not, why not respond and be born again today?*

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how God leads us to teach His Word to others who are hungry for Him. The following story may be a continuation of the Lesson Connection or a stand-alone story.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The Apostolic chaplain sat by the cancer patient in the little hospital room, stunned by her revelation. The chaplain had prayed for God to give him an opportunity to witness to her but did not expect for the opportunity to happen like this. God had taken control of his tongue and allowed him to speak with tongues, which served as the answer to the patient's prayer. She had prayed for someone to teach her about tongues, and God had sent the only Apostolic chaplain in the hospital—which employed almost a dozen chaplains—to her hospital room on an otherwise ordinary Tuesday morning. Inspired, the chaplain opened his Bible and turned to the Book of Acts. The remainder of their visit was a Bible study on Acts, showing how the New Testament believers responded to the gospel message of Jesus Christ through repentance from sin, baptism in Jesus' name, and receiving the Holy Spirit with the sign of tongues.

Later, the chaplain reflected on that instance and praised God for demonstrating that He was still filling faithful believers who reached out to Him in faith. In Acts 2, the 120 did not know they would speak with tongues. Instead, they faithfully prayed and sought more of God, ready to receive the Holy Spirit

in whatever manner He chose to give. Similarly, this patient knew nothing about tongues but knew she wanted more of God. In response to her faith, God filled her with His Holy Spirit with the sign of tongues. In further response to her faith, God orchestrated a miraculous encounter with an Apostolic minister who would further expound to her the beautiful blessing of God's Holy Spirit.

True stories like this one remind us that God is unchanging and the promise of Acts 2:38 is still in full effect today. We can be recipients of God's Holy Spirit and fully expect others to receive God's Holy Spirit as He continues to pour out this wonderful blessing upon humanity. Missionaries have told stories of saints in access-challenged nations receiving the Holy Spirit with the sign of tongues even though the Bible was outlawed and Christianity was illegal. Pastors have told stories of hungry souls who came to their church with no knowledge of God or the Bible, knowing only that they felt compelled to enter in and receive what God had for them.

We can now be filled with unwavering confidence, that as it was in the first century, so it can be in our church and our community. Lord, let Your Holy Spirit fall here just like on the Day of Pentecost!



THE FIRST
CHURCH



SUMMER 03

JUNE 21, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Acts 8:1-17

FOCUS VERSES

Acts 8:15-17

¹⁵Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost:

¹⁶(For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.)

¹⁷Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

God calls His church to be His witnesses to everyone.

Revival in Samaria

I WILL
FAITHFULLY
WITNESS
FOR JESUS
EVEN IN
PERSECUTION.

COVENANT CONTEXT

Up until this point in Israel's long history and the church's short history, God's covenant had been primarily to the Jews. However, once persecution spread the Hebrew Christians out of Jerusalem, God led a Greek-speaking Jew named Philip to the city of Samaria where God invited the Samaritans into covenant with Him through the gospel and the born-again response to the gospel.

SG *TEACHING OUTLINE*

Icebreaker: If you could speak any language fluently beside your native language, what would you speak?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to God's deep desire to reach people with the gospel from all cultures and languages.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. POWERED BY PERSECUTION **I**

- A. Persecution in Jerusalem Led to Great Joy in Samaria
- B. I will not allow persecution to prevent me from sharing the gospel.

DISCUSS: *If you have ever experienced rejection or opposition as you attempted to spread the gospel, how did you respond?*

II. THE NECESSITY OF THE SPIRIT

- A. What Was Present
- B. One Sign Absent
- C. I will witness to others about the necessity of receiving the Spirit.

DISCUSS: *Why is receiving the Holy Spirit more important than experiencing physical miracles?*

DISCUSS: *What are some ways you can spread the gospel message to your friends, neighbors, and coworkers and talk with them about the importance of receiving the Holy Spirit?*

III. EXTENDING COVENANT

- A. Jews and Samaritans
- B. Jesus Extended Covenant to the Samaritans **V**

DISCUSS: *If you find it difficult to witness to any particular groups of people, how can you overcome this obstacle to be a faithful witness?*

- C. I will witness to everyone by excluding no one.

DISCUSS: *When you see others the way Jesus sees them, are you more loving and inclusive? If not, how can you be?*

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to give us boldness to witness to everyone
- For God to give us endurance for any persecution that may come our way

LESSON CONNECTION

Pastor John knew this hospital visit would not be easy. He stood in front of the receptionist of the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and felt himself turning red as he attempted to pronounce the name written on the yellow sticky note in his hand. *I should have Googled how to pronounce this name before I came inside*, he thought to himself. The receptionist looked at him with suspicion and then picked up her desk phone and punched in some numbers. She spoke some Spanish into the phone for a few seconds and then set the phone down.

“Mr. Echevarria said you can head back,” she said, subtly correcting Pastor John’s pitiful pronunciation. “Do you speak Spanish? None of the family speaks English.” Pastor John shook his head no and the receptionist sighed. “I’ll come with you then,” she said.

As the receptionist guided the pastor through a labyrinth of locked doors and white hallways, he reflected on how this visit came about. A missionary he had never met sent him a Facebook message asking him to visit this young couple. Their baby daughter was born prematurely and was struggling for life in the NICU. The mother was a backslidden preacher’s daughter and the father had no background in church. This young family had only recently arrived in the country and the rest of their family was still overseas, so they were alone in the United States with no community and no one to visit with them. Pastor John could not deny that God’s hand had ordained this connection; now He prayed for God’s help to minister to this family. Not only was he unsure of how to comfort the parents of a struggling infant, he was unsure how to minister to someone who spoke a different language.

Shortly after the receptionist led Pastor John into the room and facilitated the introductions, her pager sounded and she hurried away. The pastor and the family resorted to using translation apps to communicate back and forth. The conversation was slow and cumbersome, but Pastor John could sense this couple was desperate for a miracle for their baby girl. Finally, he boldly asked (with the help of his smartphone), “¿Puedo orar por ella?” (“May I pray for her?”)

With misty eyes, the mother—who undoubtedly remembered her parents preaching about the power of prayer in the overseas church where she grew up—nodded and moved to the incubator and laid her hands over the clear casing. The child’s father and Pastor John joined her and laid their hands on the glass next to the mother’s. Pastor John knew he could not pray in Spanish, but he hoped the sentiments of his simple country English words would translate. As he prayed for the baby’s healing and the family’s salvation, he watched the tears flow from both parents’ eyes. He knew God truly ordained this opportunity to witness to these parents.

BIBLE LESSON

I. POWERED BY PERSECUTION

The word *power* does not sound like it belongs in the same conversation as persecution. If anything, power evokes thoughts of dominion and conquering. When the disciples were promised power when the Holy Spirit fell upon them, likely few of them imagined the persecution that would fall on them only a few chapters later in the story in Acts. However, the power Jesus promised in Acts 1:8 was not power for dominion, but power to “be witnesses.” The New Testament believers had the power to endure persecution because in doing so, they spread the gospel message around the known world.

The persecution of the early church pushed them to evangelize quicker than they may have done otherwise. In the days following the Day of Pentecost, the believers were still largely clustered together in Jerusalem. However, when the murderous Saul began to seek out Christians to martyr them, the new believers scattered from Jerusalem into the surrounding countryside, including the region of Samaria. The promise of Acts 1:8 was already beginning to take shape. The followers of Jesus had witnessed in the city of Jerusalem and the region of Judea, and now they would witness to people who were not fully Jewish in Samaria. The gospel was beginning to reach all nations. I

A. Persecution in Jerusalem Led to Great Joy in Samaria

Enter the story of Philip, a Greek-speaking deacon appointed in Acts 6 to serve tables in Jerusalem. As the Christians spread out from Jerusalem, God used Philip the deacon as an evangelist. He preached to the Samaritans the saving message of Jesus Christ, and the entire city was compelled by his preaching and miracles. The entire city experienced great joy upon experiencing Philip and his ministry.

The progression of the story in Acts 8 is striking. In verse 1, we read of the beginning of persecution and how believers began to scatter. In verse 2, the early Christians buried their friend Stephen after Saul and his colleagues brutally martyred him. In verse 3, the same hateful Saul was actively arresting and imprisoning Christians. For such a bleak introduction to one chapter, verses 4 through 8 provide a shocking contrast: While the Christians in Jerusalem suffered, the city of Samaria experienced joy.

The writer Luke reflected on these events with inspired understanding. The hardships in Jerusalem prompted the worldwide evangelistic efforts that began in Samaria. But once persecution moved them out of Jerusalem, Philip sought safety in Samaria, and God sought to save the Samaritans. The Christians’ persecution led to even greater joy for Samaria. Only God could work all this together for good.

B. I will not allow persecution to prevent me from sharing the gospel.

Although few in North America have experienced the type of violent persecution the believers in Acts 8:1–3 experienced, persecution still occurs in milder forms, such as mockery, slander, and social rejection. For those outside of North America, especially in countries where Christianity is illegal, such violent persecution may still be a daily

reality. Regardless of our context, the story of Philip and the other believers in Acts 8 provides an example for us to follow: No matter what persecution or opposition may come our way, we must purpose within ourselves not to allow anything to stop us from spreading the gospel.

DISCUSS: *If you have ever experienced rejection or opposition as you attempted to spread the gospel, how did you respond?*

II. THE NECESSITY OF THE SPIRIT

The story of the Samaritan revival in Acts 8 also provides an important lesson for followers of Jesus who want to believe and minister as the early church did, for this passage reminds us of the utmost importance of the indwelling Holy Spirit with the sign of speaking in tongues.

A. What Was Present

On the surface, it would seem Philip's ministry in Samaria was immediately successful. The crowds "with one accord gave heed" (Acts 8:6) to Philip's preaching; any preacher will tell you this is a great start. In addition God worked miracles for the people of Samaria. Many had demons cast out, and others experienced obvious and undeniable physical healings (Acts 8:7). During the revival, a local sensation known as Simon the Magician believed Philip's words and was baptized (Acts 8:13), which demonstrated to the locals that Jesus had more supernatural power than anything Simon could have conjured up. Many others also obeyed Philip's preaching and submitted to water baptism in Jesus' name (Acts 8:16). According to verse 8, the entire city experienced great joy (mega joy). By the metrics already listed, Philip's ministry in Samaria was a resounding success. But Philip looked over the revival and Samaria with concern. He was not satisfied. Philip knew that until the Samaritans had received the Holy Spirit, God's work in Samaria was not finished.

DISCUSS: *Why is receiving the Holy Spirit more important than experiencing physical miracles?*

B. One Sign Absent

Some have tried to argue that it is possible to receive the Holy Spirit without speaking in tongues. Those who make this argument have not studied closely the Samaritan revival in Acts 8. If not tongues, what other sign was absent that proved to Philip the Samaritans had not yet received the Holy Spirit? The believers in Samaria had heard Philip preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and they responded in faith. They experienced miracles, submitted to baptism in Jesus' name, and even experienced mega joy. Might not all of these be signs of the indwelling Holy Spirit? Philip did not think so. He knew definitively that the Samaritans had not yet received the Holy Spirit despite all of these wonderful supernatural signs. The only way they could have known the Samaritans had not received the Holy Spirit was because they had not heard them speak with other tongues.

Philip was so concerned about the absence of the Spirit outpouring that he reported this to the apostles still dwelling in Jerusalem. Peter and John, upon receiving this word, traveled to Samaria despite the constant threat of persecution. Peter and John knew any risk was worth it to make sure the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit.

C. I will witness to others about the necessity of receiving the Spirit.

To be truly Apostolic in the sense that we think and minister like the apostles did, we will have the same outlook about Holy Spirit infilling and the supernatural sign of speaking in tongues. We will not be satisfied with anything less than the same experience as the New Testament church. Even if new believers have experienced healing in their bodies and feel great joy and have been baptized in Jesus' name, if they have not yet spoken with tongues as God gives them the ability, God wants to complete their new-birth experience by filling them with the Holy Spirit.

If you have experienced the indwelling Holy Ghost with the sign of speaking in tongues, you can witness boldly to God's changing and lifesaving power to be witnesses unto Him. Allow God's power to flow through you to witness about the absolute necessity and wonder of receiving the Holy Spirit.

DISCUSS: *What are some ways you can spread the gospel message to your friends, neighbors, and coworkers and talk with them about the importance of receiving the Holy Spirit?*

III. EXTENDING COVENANT

The outpouring of God's Spirit on the Samaritans was yet another sign of God's desire to be in covenant with all of humanity. This new covenant, which Jeremiah prophesied would be written in their hearts, was now being poured out on a notorious foe of the Jews—the Samaritans.

A. Jews and Samaritans

During the era of the New Testament, Jews and Samaritans did not get along with one another. They lived in separate regions with tense and bigoted opinions about each other. The tension dates back to the era of Israel's Divided Kingdom. Second Kings 17:24–29 records how the Assyrian kingdom resettled refugees from several different pagan countries into the region of Samaria. These foreigners began to intermarry with the Israelites and turn their already cold hearts even further from God and toward idols. As time passed, the Samaritans developed their own form of Judaism. One notable difference between their beliefs was the Jews worshiped at the Temple in Jerusalem while the Samaritans worshiped on Mount Gerizim. This difference not only reflected the nuances of their belief systems but also kept the Jews and Samaritans from having to interact with each other.

B. Jesus Extended Covenant to the Samaritans

The Jews viewed the Samaritans as impure half-breeds; the Samaritans viewed the Jews as arrogant elitists. However, Jesus saw both Jews and Samaritans as souls in

need of salvation. Jesus showed no partiality. He wanted to offer His new covenant to both of them. While Peter and John journeyed to Samaria after receiving Philip's call for help, it is possible Peter and John reflected on the times Jesus interacted with Samaritans. They may have remembered Jesus requiring them to pass through Samaria. (See John 4:4.) During that brief trip, Jesus ministered to a woman with a scandalous past; in turn, she witnessed to her neighbors, and many came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. (See John 4:39–42.) Perhaps Peter and John wondered with excitement how many of those same individuals would now experience the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was completing a work in Acts 8 that He had begun in John 4. Just like Jesus needed to go to Samaria in John 4, the Holy Spirit needed to be poured out in Acts 8. Jesus was extending His covenant promise to the Samaritans just like He had to

❑ the Jews.

DISCUSS: *If you find it difficult to witness to any particular groups of people, how can you overcome this obstacle to be a faithful witness?*

C. I will witness to everyone by excluding no one.

Philip was an appropriate choice for God to send as an evangelist to the Samaritans. In Acts 6, he was one of seven men appointed as deacons to help serve the Greek-speaking community of Jews in Jerusalem. The Greek-speakers had been neglected, and Philip—described as a man of good reputation, “full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom” (Acts 6:3)—was chosen to help make sure no bias or bigotry was present as these newly appointed deacons served meals to the widows daily. Philip had a reputation for ministering cross-culturally and making sure no one was excluded. When he became an evangelist to Samaria, Philip's mindset had not changed. Just like he ministered to everyone in Jerusalem, he also spread the gospel to everyone in Samaria.

Just like Philip, we must purpose in our hearts not to exclude anyone as we witness. Every person we interact with is created in God's image, and God deeply wants to be in covenant relationship with that person. This truly means everyone: the people we like and the people we do not like as much, those who speak our language and those who do not, those with different skin tones and cultural norms, and even those whose previous life of sin seems insurmountable. We need to desire to see others as God sees them. Since God loves them and wants to save their souls, we should be willing and eager to witness to them.

DISCUSS: *When you see others the way Jesus sees them, are you more loving and inclusive? If not, how can you be?*

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how God longs to reach for everyone, despite any cultural or language barriers. The following story may be a continuation of the Lesson Connection or a stand-alone story.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

After Pastor John gave the Echevarria family a church card with his cell phone number scribbled on it, he made his way out of the maze of hospital hallways and back to his vehicle. On his drive back to the church, he reflected on all the excuses he could have made not to make that visit. He did not know these people, and he did not speak their language. He was uncomfortable in hospitals and was worried about saying something out of place. However, because he allowed God's Spirit to lead him and did not allow his personal discomfort to get in the way, a divine connection was made.

The pastor quickly went to work preparing the church for this new family's potential visit. He asked around his church and found a lady who knew enough Spanish and was willing to translate. He bought a simple interpretation system with a microphone for the interpreter and headsets for the guests. He prepared his leadership team to be ready to receive this family with warmth and comfort. However, after all his preparation, two months passed and the family had not visited. Pastor John's texts and calls to the family went unanswered. He was disappointed, but he never stopped anticipating and hoping for their visit.

One Sunday, during the preservice prayer, he felt compelled to step outside and pace the covered walkway in front of the church. He remembered the young Spanish-speaking couple and whispered their names in prayer. He reflected on that visit and prayed that something he did or said would stick with them to draw them to the Lord. As he paced in front of the church, he saw an unfamiliar car enter the parking lot. To his welcome surprise, the Echevarrias stepped out of the car. In their arms was a healthy baby girl, fully healed by the power of Jesus' name.

In the following months, this family became faithful members of the church he pastored. God filled the mother with the Holy Ghost, and the father was baptized in Jesus' name and also filled with the Holy Ghost. By the parents' request, Pastor John dedicated their miracle baby girl to the Lord. Every Sunday they walk through the doors of the church, they are a testimony of God's desire to save everyone. They are a living example of what could happen when believers live to share the gospel with everyone, regardless of any perceived barriers that may stand in the way.



THE FIRST
CHURCH



SUMMER

04

JUNE 28, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Acts 9:1-20

FOCUS VERSES

Acts 9:17-18

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

TRUTH ABOUT
COVENANT

God can radically transform His enemies into His covenant people.

Paul's New-Birth Experience

WE WILL

WELCOME

EVERYONE

AS A BROTHER
OR SISTER
WHOM GOD
TRANSFORMS.

COVENANT CONTEXT

In Acts 8, God invited the Samaritans into covenant with Him. Although the Samaritans were partly Gentile, they were also partly Jewish. However, here in Acts 9, God recruited a zealous Pharisee named Saul to preach the gospel to Gentiles, setting up the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 to bless all nations through the Jews.

SG *TEACHING OUTLINE*

Icebreaker: Where would you visit if you could visit any country in the world?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to God extending His covenant to everyone in the world, including the Gentiles.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. SAUL ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS **I**

A. Saul's Plan to Persecute Christians

DISCUSS: *Why do you think Saul thought he was doing a good thing by persecuting Christians?*

B. God's Plan to Recruit Saul

C. I will allow the Lord to redirect my steps.

DISCUSS: *How was your conversion experience similar or dissimilar to Saul's?*

II. FROM THE OLD COVENANT TO THE NEW

A. Saul's Transformation

DISCUSS: *What are some aspects of your old life that you were proud of but are now ashamed—that you now consider "rubbish" but once held in high regard?*

B. I will fully embrace my new life in Christ.

III. PAUL: THE APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES

A. From Enemies and Outcasts to Covenant People Together **V**

DISCUSS: *What relationships do you have that were once marked by hostility or division but have been transformed by the power of Christ?*

B. The Transforming Power of Jesus

C. I will welcome all people as brothers or sisters God transforms.

DISCUSS: *How can you purpose to be radically inclusive in your evangelistic efforts and ensure you spread the gospel to everyone, not writing off anyone as being unworthy of your witness?*

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to restore broken relationships within the body of Christ
- For God to help us see everyone, regardless of how different someone may be, as a potential brother or sister in Christ

LESSON CONNECTION

Harold was raised in a rural town in the northeastern United States. In his tiny town of 1,500 people, his exposure to other languages, ethnicities, and cultures had been extremely limited. Everyone in his town had the same skin tone, verbal tics, and cultural quirks. He had never even considered other ways of thinking and living until he found himself surrounded by a small sampling of the world's diversity packed into a crowded cafeteria at Bible school.

Harold sat at a round table with several students and one of the professors. Lively conversation ebbed and flowed across the room, mostly going unnoticed by Harold and his fellow students. Suddenly, the professor interjected into the conversation, "Do you hear that?" The students looked confused as the professor smiled with his trademark cheeky grin, declaring, "It sounds like Heaven. Revelation 7:9 says every nation and every language will be present before God's throne. This student body looks like a good start."

Prompted by the teacher's words, Harold began listening more intently to nearby conversations he had previously disregarded as background noise. At the table nearest to Harold sat four students attempting to communicate in French—none of the four spoke the same dialect of French. One student hailed from France, another from the French-speaking Canadian province of Quebec, another from Louisiana Cajun country, and the fourth from the French-speaking African country of Cameroon. The four students laughed and joked as they compared pronunciations and cultural differences.

Beyond these, Harold identified distinct Russian, Chinese, Australian, and Jamaican accents. He saw students who had come from every corner of the United States. Harold then considered the sole online class he was taking that semester because of a course scheduling conflict. In that class he was studying alongside distance learners in Fiji, the Dominican Republic, and rural Saskatchewan in central Canada. The professor had noted he previously had taught online students from several countries representing every continent except Antarctica.

Harold and his tablemates began to excitedly verbalize this diversity to one another and to the professor. With a smile, knowing he had seized upon a teachable moment, the professor asked the table of eager students, "Why do you suppose everyone here at this school gets along so well? There are some in this room whose countries are at war with each other. There are some in this room whose ancestors enslaved the ancestors of others in this room. By the world's standard, they should hate each other, don't you think?"

The students were silent. They had not considered such a perspective, yet at the same time, the answer to the professor's question felt obvious to these students who were intensely engaged in the study of God's Word. Harold piped up, "Only Jesus could do such a thing. The world will always have division and disunity, which is why the end times will be full of wars and violence. Only Christ will be able to unify what the world is trying to tear apart."

BIBLE LESSON

I. SAUL ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

One of the most iconic conversion stories in the Bible is the apostle Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. At that time, the Bible still refers to him as *Saul*. In fact, it is a common misunderstanding that Saul's name was changed on the road to Damascus (when in actuality the two names are Roman and Hebrew variations of the same word). He spent three years with Jesus in Arabia, and then he returned to Damascus, later went to Jerusalem, and then traveled to Tarsus by way of Caesarea. (See Galatians 1:17; Acts 9:26–30.) Saul eventually ended up in Antioch, where he was a faithful part of a ministerial team for many years, possibly over a decade, before he was commissioned as a missionary during a prayer service (Acts 13:1–3).



During this entire time, it would appear he was still known as Saul. He was not referred to as Paul until he began his missionary travels. (See Acts 13:9.) While he is most widely known for his missionary journeys and letters he wrote to various churches, many years passed between his conversion and his travels and letters. Before he was a missionary, before he wrote a single epistle, and before he became one of the most influential Christian ministers in the New Testament church, he was simply Saul, a zealous Pharisee en route to Damascus to persecute Christians. During this trip to Damascus, Saul had an unexpected and life-changing encounter.

A. Saul's Plan to Persecute Christians

By his own description, Saul was a “Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless” (Philippians 3:5–6, NKJV). He was extremely knowledgeable of Hebrew law and prophecy. He sincerely believed he was doing God's good work as he zealously persecuted Christians. Saul had already consented to Stephen's brutal execution and had broken into houses all around Jerusalem looking for Christians to persecute and imprison (Acts 8:3). However, his murderous intent could not be contained in Jerusalem. He received intel and permission from the high priest to travel to Damascus to find even more Christians to imprison.

DISCUSS: *Why do you think Saul thought he was doing a good thing by persecuting Christians?*

B. God's Plan to Recruit Saul

While Saul had a plan to persecute Christians, God had a plan of His own. God knew that someone as zealous as Saul would make an excellent warrior for His cause. God also knew that someone as educated and thoughtful as Saul would require an experience he would never be able to deny. God blinded Saul with a bright light and spoke to him with a booming voice from Heaven. Saul knew such an experience could only happen by the power of the God he knew as Jehovah. When the voice identified Himself as

Jesus, Saul finally realized that Jehovah and Jesus were one and the same—Jesus was Jehovah who came in flesh.

C. I will allow the Lord to redirect my steps.

Saul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus is an inspiring example of God's great mercy. Just as Saul was willing to be transformed when he had an undeniable experience with Jesus Christ, so we must allow the Lord to redirect our steps when we are going down a wrong path. While hopefully we will not be errantly jailing and murdering Christians like Saul was, any path that leads us away from God is a wrong path. We must be willing to allow God to guide our path in every juncture of our lives.

DISCUSS: *How was your conversion experience similar or dissimilar to Saul's?*

II. FROM THE OLD COVENANT TO THE NEW

Saul was a Pharisee trained “at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law” (Acts 22:3, NKJV). Consequently, few in Saul's day were more qualified to articulate and argue the intricacies of Jewish law. Yet, when confronted with the reality of Jesus' identity, Saul's outlook completely changed. He so completely embraced Jesus Christ that he would later describe the old covenant of the Law as “the ministry of death” and considered himself to be one of the “ministers of the new covenant” (II Corinthians 3:6–7, NKJV).

A. Saul's Transformation

Saul transitioned away from understanding his relationship with God in terms of legalistic obedience to the Old Testament law. Such a mindset only led to death, but the new covenant—which emphasizes a personal relationship with God through the indwelling Holy Spirit—brought life. Such a shift in mindset meant Saul would not be able to rely on his own personal accolades and accomplishments anymore. Under the old covenant, his training and pedigree were points of pride. Indeed, Saul was later able to easily recite his heritage, education, and personal qualifications in Philippians 3:5–6. However, under the new covenant, Saul would count these credentials as “rubbish” (Philippians 3:8, NKJV). A personal relationship with Jesus Christ was of more value and a greater qualification than anything he could attain by his own power or merit.

DISCUSS: *What are some aspects of your old life that you were proud of but are now ashamed—that you now consider “rubbish” but once held in high regard?*

B. I will fully embrace my new life in Christ.

Saul's mindset completely changed when he embraced his new life in Jesus Christ. Similarly, we must choose to abandon our former prideful, sinful way of thinking and allow ourselves to be transformed through the Holy Spirit dwelling inside of us. Maybe none of us will experience a blinding light and booming voice like Saul did, but all of us have an opportunity like Saul to embrace Jesus Christ when we hear the gospel. Saul

could have chosen to reject the gospel and continue in blindness, both physically and spiritually. We, too, can choose to reject the gospel of Christ, or better yet, we could join with Paul and allow the truth of God's Word and His Holy Spirit to change our hearts and minds.

III. PAUL: THE APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES

Multiple theories exist surrounding the reason for Saul going by Paul, but it is worth noting that Saul is a Hebrew name and Paul is a Greek name. Since Paul would later be known as an "apostle of the Gentiles" (Romans 11:13) and Greek was the common language of the Roman world, the name change was likely pragmatic. His missionary efforts would be readily accepted by non-Jews if he used a Greek and Roman name rather than a distinctly Hebrew name.

This theory is further supported by the context in which Saul's name change is recorded (Acts 13:4–12). While witnessing in Cyprus, Saul and Barnabas had an opportunity to witness to the Roman proconsul of the region, Sergius Paulus, a Gentile. During this evangelistic effort, a Jewish false prophet opposed Saul and Barnabas, hoping to dissuade Sergius Paulus from converting to Christianity. This false prophet was called *Bar-jesus* in Hebrew and *Elymas* in Arabic, which literally meant "sorcerer or magician." Saul, filled with the Holy Ghost, rebuked Elymas, who was immediately struck with blindness. This miracle so profoundly impacted Sergius Paulus that he was converted.

In the middle of this story of Saul opposing a Jewish false prophet while witnessing to a Gentile, Luke recorded that Saul was also known as Paul (Acts 13:9). By listing Paul's name change here and subsequently never using the name Saul again, Luke signaled to the reader that Paul's role was moving forward in the Book of Acts. Paul's ministry did include Jews, but Paul was primarily an apostle to Gentiles.

A. From Enemies and Outcasts to Covenant People Together

The hostility between Jews and Gentiles is well-documented throughout the entire Bible. Paul was knowledgeable not only of Jewish doctrine but also Jewish history and would have been keenly aware of this deep-seated hatred. However, Paul recognized God's desire was to bring both Jews and Gentiles into covenant relationship with Him.

Paul described this new relationship in his epistle to the church at Ephesus. He recorded that Jews and Gentiles had previously been separated by the old covenant of circumcision. Under the old covenant, Gentiles were regarded as "aliens," "strangers," and "foreigners," without any hope of salvation (Ephesians 2:12, 19). However, under the new covenant, Jews and Gentiles are now "fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19). The old covenant of circumcision no longer divided humanity, and the new covenant of Jesus Christ now unified humanity. V

DISCUSS: *What relationships do you have that were once marked by hostility or division but have been transformed by the power of Christ?*

B. The Transforming Power of Jesus

Paul understood unequivocally that Jesus was the solitary force of transformation that allowed this new covenant relationship to exist. Paul wrote that Jesus was the one who made those who were separated to be reunited, broke down walls of division, abolished the former covenant of the Law, and reconciled all of humanity to Himself (Ephesians 2:13–16).

Now, instead of circumcision, Jesus had implemented a new covenant signified by the indwelling Holy Spirit, which would only be accessible through Jesus. It was a fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy that the new covenant would be one written on the heart, rather than on tables of stone. Elsewhere, Paul summed up this new covenant relationship in this manner: "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

C. I will welcome all people as brothers or sisters God transforms.

Paul's commitment to radical evangelistic inclusion provides the template for present-day Christians to follow. Paul refused to be deterred by any human dividing line. Throughout his ministry he witnessed to everyone, regardless of skin color, ethnicity, language, or nationality because there is no more inclusive message than the gospel.

Perhaps Paul's time as a minister at Antioch (where he was still known as Saul) helped guide his radical inclusion. As recorded in Acts 13:1, Saul the converted Pharisee, ministered alongside a rather diverse group of ministers. This group included Barnabas, a Levitical Jew from Cyprus; Simeon, a man whose skin was so dark it was part of his nickname; Lucius, an African from Cyrene, which is in present-day Libya; and Manaen, described by his relationship with Herod the tetrarch, likely indicating Manaen had been a wealthy, upper-class Gentile.

If Paul welcomed all believers as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, present-day believers are without excuse. Every person, regardless of how different each one may seem from us, is still a child of God, made in His image, whom God is wanting to transform by the power of His indwelling Holy Spirit. He is just waiting on us to tell them all about Him.

DISCUSS: *How can you purpose to be radically inclusive in your evangelistic efforts and ensure you spread the gospel to everyone, not writing off anyone as being unworthy of your witness?*

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how God wants to use us to reach people much different from us. The following story may be a continuation of the Lesson Connection or a stand-alone story.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

As Harold left the school cafeteria that day, he reflected on his own upbringing in the small town where he grew up. He cringed as he remembered his unsaved family members who commonly made degrading jokes about other races, skin tones, and nationalities. Harold cringed again as he remembered how he used to laugh at these jokes without having ever met someone from the group of people being mocked.

While it might have been easy to dismiss these jokes as harmless banter, now that he attended Bible school with many of the groups he once joked about, he saw how hurtful these jokes could be. If he would not have dared to say the joke in front of someone from this group, why would he say it when they were not around? Embarrassed and ashamed by this part of his past, he got alone in his dorm room and bowed his head to repent and ask forgiveness of the Lord.

Studying his Bible, Harold resolved to endeavor to daily live out Paul's charge to the Ephesians: "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers" (Ephesians 4:29). Harold also resolved to

live out the prayer of the psalmist: "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer" (Psalms 19:14).

Harold had recently learned a quote from the late Bishop T. F. Tenney: "I do not ever want to have fewer brothers and sisters than God has sons and daughters." If Jesus loved the world so much that He died for each of them to adopt them into His family, Harold felt he could do no less than accept every believer as his brother or sister in Christ.

If God is no respecter of persons and shows no partiality, Harold decided he could not make blanket judgments about entire groups of people whom He had never met. If God offered salvation to every person, regardless of race, class, or gender, Harold wanted to witness to everyone, no matter how different each one was from him. He was grateful from that day forward for his professor who took an otherwise normal lunch period to engage his students in an unforgettable teachable moment.

The next time he was in the cafeteria, he stopped to listen. And he smiled: It really did sound like Heaven.



THE FIRST
CHURCH



SUMMER

05

JULY 05, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Acts 10:1-8, 21-23,
44-48

FOCUS VERSES

Acts 10:45-47

⁴⁵And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost.

⁴⁶For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter,

⁴⁷Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?

TRUTH ABOUT
COVENANT

God extended the same covenant to the Gentiles as to the Jews.

The Gentile Revival

I WILL
PARTICIPATE
IN GOD'S PLAN
FOR EVERY

KINDRED,

TONGUE,

PEOPLE,

AND NATION.

COVENANT CONTEXT

This story completes the pattern Jesus prophesied to take the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the end of the earth. Against cultural prejudices and biases, God called the Jewish preacher named Peter to preach the gospel to a Gentile household, and God invited the rest of the world into covenant with Him.

SG *TEACHING OUTLINE*

Icebreaker: What has been the biggest surprise in your life?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to the surprise of God sending a Jewish preacher to preach the gospel to the Gentile household of Cornelius.

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

I. TWO VISIONS

- A. Cornelius's Vision
- B. Peter's Vision
- C. I will recognize that God speaks to people from different cultures.

DISCUSS: *Who are the people like Cornelius in your life? What is God calling you to do to reach out to them?*

II. CONFIRMATION OF THE VISIONS

- A. Peter's Journey
- B. I will be an integral part of spreading the gospel to everyone. **V**

DISCUSS: *If you think there are people not worthy of you investing your time, what passages in the Bible teach you that we are called to reach everyone with the gospel?*

III. PETER'S SERMON

- A. Extending Covenant to the Gentiles

DISCUSS: *What keeps you from bringing up Jesus to people you don't know?*

- B. The Same New Birth as the Jews

DISCUSS: *In what place can you step out in obedient faith and share the gospel with someone?*

- C. I will witness to others about the plan of salvation.

DISCUSS: *In what scenario would you need to have great courage to share the gospel?*

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to give us a vision of the people of the world who need the gospel
- For God to bring to light any prejudices we might unknowingly harbor in our hearts

LESSON CONNECTION

In his autobiography, the famous lawyer and leader from India, Mahatma Gandhi, wrote about his student days in South Africa. He read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus, he could find the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of his beloved India. Surely there was a religion out there somewhere that would free his people from the cruel system that kept dividing his nation deeper. One Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby Christian church in Calcutta and talk to the minister about what it looked like to become a Christian.

However, when he entered the sanctuary, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested he go worship with “his own people.” That service was only for people of high caste status or for Whites; Gandhi was neither. He left that church and never returned to it. “If Christians have caste differences also,” he said, “I might as well remain a Hindu.” Although he was not able to find those differences and prejudices in the Gospels, sadly they were present in a church (and usher) who called themselves Christian.

That usher’s prejudice not only betrayed Jesus but also turned a person away from finding salvation through the gospel. The attitude Gandhi encountered influenced him to permanently turn from Christianity and dedicate himself to spreading Hinduism to India’s millions, despite the rigors of the caste system. How different might India’s history have been if the usher had displayed Christlikeness that seemingly insignificant Sunday morning.

We would do well to learn from Jesus compassionately reaching out to Jews, Gentiles, and Samaritans. And we would do well to learn from the unnamed usher who turned away a seeking soul from Christianity due to prejudice. Today many teams of greeters and ushers gladly welcome people to our churches, but we would be naive to think there are not examples of indifference, condescension, or simply unconcern in our sanctuaries. These attitudes can do great damage to guests’ perceptions of the body of Christ and of Jesus Christ Himself. Let us seek the Lord in showing His love to everyone.

BIBLE LESSON

I. TWO VISIONS

A. Cornelius's Vision

When the church was first formed on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, only the Jews were included, but God had more for more people than just the Jews. Jesus' command to His disciples to take the gospel to the uttermost part of the earth was getting ready to unfold. God was about to use an unlikely candidate to kick open the door of salvation to the Gentiles. It began with a vision sent to a Roman centurion named Cornelius in the city of Caesarea. The fact that the gospel to the Gentiles began there and with that man is truly remarkable. Cornelius was an officer of the Roman army. Caesarea was the seat of the Roman government, the epicenter of the world's power. Jews hated Rome, their government, and their armies.

Being of the Italian band, Cornelius was Roman to the core, and all his soldiers would have been much like him. They would have been raised and schooled in Roman arrogance and pride. It would have been normal for them to feel superior to the Jewish people, and they would have treated the Jews as such. Meanwhile, throughout Israel were calls to overthrow the Roman domination. Some believe Judas betrayed Jesus because he felt if Jesus was the Messiah, He was not working fast enough to overthrow Rome. How sad that Judas did not trust God to work out His plan in His own way. God was getting ready to "overthrow" the powerful Roman Empire in Acts 10, but He was going to do it with the gospel.

Cornelius feared God, prayed always, and gave generously to bless others. One mid-afternoon Cornelius had a vision of an angel who honored him for his generosity and faithfulness toward God. What a marvelous reminder that God notices every effort we make to draw closer to Him. This otherwise unknown centurion got God's attention because he stepped out of his pagan upbringing and reached up to God in faith.

The angel instructed Cornelius to send men to a preacher named Peter who would tell Cornelius what to do. This preacher had the keys to the Kingdom and would open the door for Gentiles to become part of the church of Jesus Christ and enter into covenant with God. God was offering salvation to the whole world, and He was using supernatural visions to do it.

B. Peter's Vision

While God was laying his right hand on Cornelius, His left hand was on Simon Peter in Joppa. As Cornelius's men journeyed to Joppa, God gave Peter his own vision. The Lord was pulling these two worlds together. Peter's vision took place in Joppa in the house of Simon the tanner. This man Simon and his occupation as a tanner are mentioned three times in the Book of Acts. These repeated references definitely call us to notice where the preacher of Pentecost was staying: in the house of a tanner, a person at the furthest edge of acceptable society for a Jew.

Jews typically shunned tanners because they handled carcasses of animals, so they were considered unclean by the Levitical law. (See Leviticus 11:39–40.) Those who made their living handling dead animals, especially tanners, had to live a certain distance from the city. The home of this ostracized Jew was the launching pad for the church to go to the “off-limits” Gentile world. It was no accident God placed Peter there for the vision. Peter was on the rooftop where he would see the Mediterranean Sea stretching out to the nations of the known world, even those the Jews wanted nothing to do with.

In his vision Peter saw a great sheet coming down from heaven. God had an emphatic message for Peter. The sheet had four corners and was filled with all kinds of creatures, indicating that God’s church was to accept all peoples of the earth from the north, south, east, and west. The voice told Peter to eat, but Peter refused, arguing it was something he had never done. Just as Jesus said to Peter three times, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17), when He called Peter to the work of God, again He commanded Peter three times to take the next step in spreading the gospel.

This great message of inclusion was in the context of Jewish dietary law. Jews were very particular about their eating. Jesus was clearly saying to Peter that a new day had dawned and everyone had a seat at the table with Jesus Christ. The gospel was to be preached to all of humanity, and the Jewish church must go forward into all the world—even into the Gentile world.

C. I will recognize that God speaks to people from different cultures.

We live in a very exciting time in spreading the gospel to everyone on the earth. Thanks to translation apps and social media, communication with other cultures and languages is possible in ways never thought possible in previous generations. These possibilities are endless as long as we keep our ears tuned to God’s voice. He is calling everyone around the world to repentance. (See Acts 17:30.) God will work to bring those with the gospel together with those who hunger for the gospel. As Christians, we must keep God’s vision of outreach foremost in our minds.

DISCUSS: *Who are the people like Cornelius in your life? What is God calling you to do to reach out to them?*

II. CONFIRMATION OF THE VISIONS

A. Peter’s Journey

When Peter had the vision of eating unclean animals, his first reaction was total rejection. It was against everything he had been taught. The Spirit kept speaking to him, and thankfully Peter kept listening. God was not only revealing to him that righteousness is not through keeping Jewish law, but God was also telling Peter that He was declaring the Gentiles worthy to hear the gospel and be born again. In the midst of Peter’s uncertainty and questions, clear direction from God was knocking on Simon’s front door. God had perfectly orchestrated the timing of the arrival of Cornelius’s men and Peter’s vision that it was impossible to ignore what God was saying: “Go to the Gentile centurion’s house. The old barriers are torn down.” This preacher of Pentecost

was learning to walk in the Spirit. God had spoken, and Peter was now willing to step out in faith into a world of uncertainty.

Often God will call us out of where we are comfortable and familiar. It is human nature to prefer the known, but our walk of faith requires us to step out into the unknown and obey God's voice. The Christian life was never meant to be a cozy, settled-in lifestyle. It is boldly trusting God and sometimes walking into uncomfortable settings to carry the gospel to all people.

B. I will be an integral part of spreading the gospel to everyone.

"Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel" is the clarion call to the church. It is the reason we exist—to spread the gospel. However, we must not make the mistake of only focusing on the work of global missions. Jesus made this clear when He told His disciples to start in Jerusalem, right where they were. It is sometimes easier to have a burden for people across the sea than for people across the street or across town. Conflict with and even prejudice against our neighbors will often be a challenge, but we need to pray about those and work hard to reconcile with our neighbors if our relationships are broken. It would be good for all of us to examine our feelings about the people close to us.

Like Peter, we need to pay attention to what God is speaking to us. If it makes us uncomfortable and we would like to avoid dealing with people we are uncomfortable with, there is a possibility God is calling us to take the gospel especially to them. Perhaps the Holy Spirit would give us a vision or a fresh word from His Word if we just took the time to open our hearts and ears to hear His voice. v

DISCUSS: *If you think there are people not worthy of you investing your time, what passages in the Bible teach you that we are called to reach everyone with the gospel?*

III. PETER'S SERMON

A. Extending Covenant to the Gentiles

When Peter entered Cornelius's home, he was unsure of what God had in store. However, he walked in boldness and confidence that God was with him. Cornelius fell down and tried to worship Peter, but Peter immediately spoke up: "Stand up; I myself also am a man" (Acts 10:26). Peter understood that the gospel makes everyone equal. The centurion was no better or worse than the disciple.

Both Peter and Cornelius were somewhat uncertain of how it would all work out, but Peter did what he knew to do: he preached the gospel. Cornelius did what he knew to do and opened his home. With a full house of hungry people for a closer relationship with God, Peter preached Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. It was the same message he had preached to the Jews in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost.

DISCUSS: *What keeps you from bringing up Jesus to people you don't know?*

B. The Same New Birth as the Jews

Peter honored Cornelius by going to his home; Cornelius honored Peter by calling his entire household to hear the sermon. “While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word” (Acts 10:44). Power comes when the Word of God is preached. The Holy Ghost fell on the entire household of Cornelius, and just like on the Day of Pentecost, everyone there began to speak with tongues. It was a miraculous move of God. All the Jews who had traveled with Peter from Joppa were astonished that the Holy Ghost had been poured out on the Gentiles. God waited only for Peter’s obedience, and God showed up and poured out the Holy Ghost. When we step out in faith to the call of God, we can be confident God will reward our obedient faith in ways we thought impossible.

Once they were all Spirit filled, Peter realized God had welcomed the Gentiles into covenant, so he baptized them in the name of Jesus Christ as well. Their new birth was complete: They had repented of their sins, been Spirit filled, and were then baptized in water by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. The pattern Jesus prophesied had come to pass: from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and finally to the end of the earth.

DISCUSS: *In what place can you step out in obedient faith and share the gospel with someone?*

C. I will witness to others about the plan of salvation.

God has called each of us to be like Simon Peter to people who need to hear the gospel. Though Peter had been too weak to stand for Jesus before the Cross, he now had great courage and bravery to declare the truth to everyone. We all must decide not to be afraid. Fear will always be a challenge when we take the message of salvation to those we know and those we do not know. As Peter walked toward Cornelius’s house, his faith and courage grew. God will reward that kind of bravery when we exhibit it in our lives.

DISCUSS: *In what scenario would you need to have great courage to share the gospel?*

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how God has called us to be fishers of men, no matter who they are or where they're from.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Leonard Destin arrived on the Gulf of Mexico in 1835. Florida was ten years from becoming a state, and many Native Americans still lived in the area. Leonard arrived in a schooner in the midst of a hurricane that had mercilessly claimed the lives of his father and his older brother. Leonard and the remaining crew grabbed a hold of debris as they swam for their lives to shore on a deserted barrier island. They lived there for two months as they endured thirst and exposure.

Thankfully another watercraft was passing by when the soon-to-be rescuers and Destin and his crew found each other. Destin later made his way to Key West, Florida. In time Leonard acquired his own fishing craft and settled on the east end of Santa Rosa Island, close to present-day Destin, Florida. His life was one of hardship and trial as he eked out a living on the Gulf Coast. Through the years Leonard began to discover the rich world of seafood in the Gulf. He fished for oysters, crabs, and shrimp.

Then one day, twelve miles out into the Gulf, Leonard and other fishers from Alabama and Mississippi discovered the one-hundred-fathom curve—a six-hundred-foot

plunge in the ocean depths—where they could catch grouper, mackerel, and snapper in abundance. The Gulf became a miracle of supply in the world's seafood market. Because of his impact on the area, Leonard Destin has a city and tourist destination named after him in the state of Florida. His diligent and undying commitment to the art of finding seafood, catching it, and making it available to the world has cemented him in history.

For us who are called to be “fishers of men,” we need the same diligence and commitment to reach people with the gospel. It is not always easy work, and many days there are no great catches, but the refusal to quit brings big rewards. God has promised we will reap if we faint not. As long as there is one more hungry soul searching for a closer relationship with God, we must follow the leading of God's Spirit and share with them the same gospel that has changed our lives. God will do for them what He has done for us if we will preach the gospel to them as someone preached it to us.



THE FIRST
CHURCH



SUMMER

06

JULY 12, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Acts 15:1-17, 28-29

FOCUS VERSES

Acts 15:28-29

²⁸For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things;

²⁹That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.

TRUTH ABOUT
COVENANT

Covenant with God calls us to be in covenant with other people.

The Council in Jerusalem

WE WILL KEEP
BIBLICAL
PRINCIPLES
AND PROMOTE
UNITY
EVEN AMID
DIFFERENT VIEWS.

COVENANT CONTEXT

As the church continued to grow into Gentile nations, a major point of discussion arose concerning how to treat Gentile Christians. The New Testament church leaders met in Jerusalem for the first church council, which threatened unity and could have divided the church into two groups. Nevertheless, the apostles followed the Spirit, maintained unity, and preserved the new covenant for all people—an example to us still today.

SG *TEACHING OUTLINE*

Icebreaker: What is the most successful conflict resolution you have witnessed or been a part of?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to the conflict resolution seen in the church council in Acts 15.

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

I. THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

- A. The Requirements of the Law
- B. The Power of the Spirit

DISCUSS: *What can we learn about the disciples' quest for unity without compromising the truth of the gospel?*

- C. I will seek solutions that promote unity in the body of Christ. **V**

DISCUSS: *What elements are always necessary in resolving an issue at work, in your family, and in the church?*

II. PETER'S TESTIMONY

- A. The Purity of Faith
- B. I will witness to people of all cultures.

DISCUSS: *How can you reach out to someone from a different culture?*

III. REQUIREMENTS FOR THE GENTILES

- A. Four Necessary Things

DISCUSS: *What do we learn from the list of four prohibitions the apostles agreed on in Acts 15? How does this decision apply to us?*

- B. The Holy Ghost and Us
- C. I will seek the Spirit to keep covenant with others in difficult situations.

DISCUSS: *Name some ways you individually can help maintain unity within the local church.*

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to send a spirit of unity among members of the body of Christ in our church
- For God to send a spirit of unity between local churches nearby us

LESSON CONNECTION

The building of the Panama Canal is considered one of the greatest achievements of human engineering. Mariners had long viewed the Isthmus of Panama as the perfect place to make a shortcut between the two great oceans of the earth: the Atlantic and the Pacific. While the French started the work of building the canal, the United States ultimately took over and completed the work. It took ten years of hard labor on the part of everyone involved between 1904 and 1914.

When asked about the reason for the Americans' success, George Washington Goethals, the principal engineer for the project is reputed for saying: "The pride everyone feels in the work." The former president of Sears and Roebuck, Robert Wood said, "Men reported to work early and stayed late, without overtime. Every American employed would have worked that year without pay, if only to see the first ship pass through the completed Canal. That spirit went down to all the laborers."

That is an amazing summary of the work because when the French started in 1881, they had to quit the project due to so many labor problems. Tragically the Chinese workers who had been brought over to Panama to do the work committed suicide en masse. What happened? Since the engineers did not appropriately share the vision with the Chinese that their work was changing the world, the Chinese workers never felt valued and appreciated by those in charge of the project. They dealt with harsh conditions, disease, accidents, and mistreatment. The workers basically lost all hope that anything would get better.

- ❑ In 1904 the United States took over to finish the project. Under the leadership of John Frank Stevens and George Washington Goethals, the workers faced significantly better conditions by improving sanitation and public health measures. Ten years later the Panama Canal was finally finished and the first ship, the USS *Ancon*, sailed successfully through the canal. The canal reduced shipping times between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, making sea travel much more efficient.

Men and women can accomplish so much when they come together for a common cause. This is the vision Jesus Christ has for the church, and it is imperative we keep our eyes focused on what can be accomplished if we all work together in unity. As we arrive at Acts 15, growing questions between the Jews and Gentiles threatened to destroy that unity.

BIBLE LESSON

I. THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

A. The Requirements of the Law

The law of God given to Israel at Mount Sinai was absolutely necessary to establish them as the people of God. They had been slaves for four hundred years, so laws were necessary for them to work together to become a nation. The Sinai law of God dealt with sin. The sins of the people had to be covered lest judgment fall on them. Blood was the only substance that could make an atonement for sin (Leviticus 17:11). All the laws God gave to Moses were “types and shadows” of things to come: the blood of Jesus, as well as many aspects of the Christian life. The laws given at Sinai were the building blocks of redemption Jesus Christ would carry out on the cross.

B. The Power of the Spirit

In Acts 15 the church was at a strategic junction. The gospel had jumped the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, but the leaders of the newly born-again church were uncertain of how to move forward. All had experienced the baptism of the Holy Ghost, and they were working to walk in the Spirit, which produced an atmosphere in which the Spirit of God could work.

As the gospel continued to spread to the ends of the earth, the Jewish Christians were concerned that the Gentiles were not fully in covenant with God because they had not obeyed Jewish law. The early church needed God’s Spirit to lead them in whether or not to require the new Gentile converts to adhere to the old Law. This decision was extremely controversial and divisive. Yet when the leaders of the church walked in the Spirit and were led by the Spirit, even these difficult doctrinal issues could be resolved and worked out.

The first church council was held in Jerusalem, bringing together different opinions. Some strongly held to the Mosaic law and felt it absolutely necessary to require the Gentiles who were entering the church to fully obey it. Others regarded the same laws, yet they had witnessed the power of the Holy Ghost working among the Gentiles who did not have the same background in the Mosaic law.

One ingredient these early church leaders had, which made all the difference, was their respect for one another. Their respect is apparent in the event of Acts 15. These Jewish leaders wanted to give the Gentile members of the church every opportunity to succeed. The apostles were so in tune with the Spirit that they would do nothing to endanger the unity of the body of Christ. Their Hebrew background was not going to put new converts at risk because their desire to carry out the Great Commission was linked with Jesus’ call to be in unity.

DISCUSS: *What can we learn about the disciples’ quest for unity without compromising the truth of the gospel?*

C. I will seek solutions that promote unity in the body of Christ.

Jesus taught a parable in John 10:12–13 about the hireling fleeing when he sees the wolf coming. The hireling isn't like the shepherd; the hireling doesn't care about the sheep. When trouble comes, he takes off. He will not fight against the threat and hold the flock together. He lets the flock scatter and be destroyed. Every saint of God needs to decide never to flee when problems and difficulties come to the church. It is easy to be a hireling and flee when trouble comes. It is taxing to stand with the flock and fight off attacks of the enemy. But if everyone decides to stand with the local church and hold together through difficulties, no matter what, we will see stronger and more effective churches doing greater things for God.

When disagreements come to any group, there is always the human tendency to dig in one's heels and refuse to budge once we take a side. It takes a strong person to make concessions and work to see the other viewpoint. Fleeing the church when trouble comes or digging in one's heels and refusing to work with others will not bring the blessings of God on the church. Both decisions bring irreparable harm and division.

When truth is at stake, it takes much prayer and thought to carefully work through the issues. Truth will always require a defense. If an issue of truth is at stake, the solution will require much study, prayer, and discussion. The Acts 15 council is a masterclass on how to deal with controversial developments and still maintain unity in the body of Christ.



DISCUSS: *What elements are always necessary in resolving an issue at work, in your family, and in the church?*

II. PETER'S TESTIMONY

A. The Purity of Faith

An amazing event happened in the Jerusalem Council decision: Division between Gentiles and Jews was addressed and resolved. This occurred because Peter and the other apostles knew the mind of Christ. Jesus had taught them the heart was what really mattered. Outward differences, such as the old covenant sign of circumcision, should not divide us as long as we have hearts full of the Holy Ghost and faith to please God.

Peter and the apostles understood that God had invited the entire world into a new covenant through the gospel. Not only did they need to be in covenant with God, but they needed to be in covenant with one another and with new members who were being added to the church. This remarkable decision propelled the people of God into even greater revival. The gospel spread like wildfire. It was evident God blessed their efforts to fight for the rights of all humanity to be saved.

What a beautiful way Peter explained his decision-making process. Peter shared his testimony about God reaching the Gentiles, "purifying their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:9). Further, Peter even made the Gentiles the template when he said, "But we believe that through the grace of the LORD Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they" (Acts 15:11). It was risky for him to say the Jews could be saved just like the Gentiles were, but it was

true. It was also true that the Gentiles would be saved just like the Jews were because everyone stands on level ground, thanks to the gospel.

B. I will witness to people of all cultures.

Humans have always had the tendency to look down on others. There are many reasons for this fallacy, but in the church of Jesus Christ, it must not be allowed to fester and grow. Herein lies the great challenge for every generation of believers: Will we stand against divisions in the church? Examining ourselves regularly is an important function in our walk with God. We must ask God to show us and root out our prejudices or pride so we can help keep the church united and bless the world around us.

Just because someone is different from us does not negate our ability to connect with them and lead them to Jesus Christ. It would be good practice for every child of God to work hard at meeting new people and interacting with different people groups and cultures. Jesus' last message to His disciples was to go into all the world and preach the gospel. This reveals the heart of God—He wants all of humanity to have the message of salvation.

DISCUSS: *How can you reach out to someone from a different culture?*

III. REQUIREMENTS FOR THE GENTILES

A. Four Necessary Things

God will do great things for everyone in covenant with Him, but we must bring things to the table too. There are some requirements we do for God in this covenant relationship. Since the Protestant Reformation, there have been ebbs and flows of faith and works. At times the church would get carried away with works, believing we can earn our salvation through works. Then the pendulum would swing in the opposite direction, and faith became the only criteria: There is nothing to do but believe.

While faith is always the primary ingredient to pleasing God, the apostles made it clear in Acts 15 that we must do things to maintain order and unity within the church. Peter, the man with the keys to the Kingdom, again rose up. He declared the Jewish church was not going to put a yoke on the Gentile church that God did not require. Peter's remarks did not inflame people nor set off angry arguments; rather, they maintained a spirit of unity. What a beautiful example this is to future generations. Leadership committed to unity can do remarkable things. Peter laid out some parameters for the Gentiles that would help them maintain order and purity:

1. Abstain from meats offered to idols.
2. Abstain from blood.
3. Abstain from things strangled.
4. Abstain from fornication.

The first three of these prohibitions were tied to the Jewish law in order to keep from offending the Jewish Christians. However, abstaining from fornication is a moral law that applies to all people for all generations. No matter where we are born or live, our

human nature will always seek to run wild. Those in leadership must have the freedom to give parameters to the people of God in areas where our flesh (human nature) wants to dominate. Of course the first three prohibitions are not part of being born again, but they were necessary to keep God's church from splintering into a Jewish Christian church and a Gentile Christian church. According to Ephesians 2:14, Jesus tore down the wall that divided the Jews and the Gentiles.

DISCUSS: *What do we learn from the list of four prohibitions the apostles agreed on in Acts 15? How does this decision apply to us?*

B. The Holy Ghost and Us

Paul and Barnabas seemed to help seal the decision when they mentioned the two voices we should be hearing: the Holy Ghost and us. It was necessary that God lead His church and necessary that His church agree with Him in order to maintain unity between two major different groups of people and backgrounds. The Holy Ghost was at work in this council. The leaders walked in the Spirit. They made decisions with open hearts to the Spirit of God. This council was a conflict-resolution seminar for the ages: God was working with leadership to make decisions that would build up His great church.

The final decision appeared to rest in the hands of the pastor of the Jerusalem church, James. When he spoke, everyone listened because they wanted to know what James thought of the decision. He pastored in the largest Jewish city in the known world, so if anyone would side with the Jews clamoring for Gentiles to obey Jewish law, it was James. But he courageously and obediently took a stand for the gospel, not just to please people.

We must allow God's Spirit to lead us in all areas of our lives, especially in areas of faith. We should develop a deeper relationship with God and seek Him for direction when we are faced with difficulties in life. If we will read His Word, listen for His voice, and seek for unity without compromising truth, we will please God and see His church continue to reach the world with the gospel.

C. I will seek the Spirit to keep covenant with others in difficult situations.

Human organizations, even the church, will always have unity challenges. People have different backgrounds and ways of thinking that tend toward division and separation. The Spirit of God that fell on the Day of Pentecost was the great unifier. When we commit to be in covenant with every member of our local church and daily seek to commune with God's Spirit, we can overcome any obstacle that presents itself.

DISCUSS: *Name some ways you individually can help maintain unity within the local church.*

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how amazing things can happen when we follow God and fight for unity.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The First Great Awakening of the eighteenth century was a move of God that swept across England as well as the American colonies. The revival changed the hearts and minds of many people. Benjamin Franklin wrote of walking in the streets of Philadelphia and hearing singing and prayer everywhere he walked.

One of the most amazing developments of that great revival was the anti-slavery movement. For thousands of years, slavery was an accepted norm the nations of the world lived with. However, in the middle of the eighteenth century, people like John Adams and Benjamin Franklin began speaking out against the evils of slavery. Something about the Spirit of God moving in people's hearts caused a change in social norms. People began to rethink the widespread practice of slavery (Eddie L. Hyatt, *Abolitionist Founding Fathers*).

When people are striving to walk in the Spirit, new and better ideas begin to

take shape. The creative power of God is unleashed in the earth when people keep their ears attuned to the voice of God. The Holy Spirit was working when the United States of America was born in 1776. America was birthed with a high regard for God and His laws. The Declaration of Independence makes this powerful, world-changing statement: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Bringing people together and establishing new norms that are better for all humanity have their roots in the power of God working on earth. So much could be accomplished if everyone in the church would commit to working together, hearing from God, and letting God lead us into new frontiers. When it seems good to the Holy Ghost and to us, let us follow the Holy Ghost and be part of all God will do through all of us.



SUMMER
07

JULY 19, 2026

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LESSON TEXT
Acts 16:16-40

FOCUS VERSES
Acts 16:25;
Philippians 4:4
²⁵And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them.
.....
⁴Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT
Recognizing our covenant with Jesus allows the Spirit to produce joy.

*Paul and Silas
in Philippi*

.....

I WILL
EMBRACE
THE SPIRIT'S
BECKONING TO
JOY.

.....

COVENANT CONTEXT

On Paul's second missionary journey, which is recorded in the Book of Acts, God led him to Europe, a new continent to hear the gospel. He and his companion Silas were persecuted, but God worked a miracle that led to the salvation of a jailor and his household. Even through difficulty, God was opening up a new church and inviting new people into covenant relationship with Him. Paul later wrote a letter to this same church known as the Epistle to the Philippians.

SG *TEACHING OUTLINE*

Icebreaker: What is your favorite song to sing when times are tough?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to Paul and Silas singing when they were in prison.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. CHURCH PLANTING IN PHILIPPI

A. Paul in the Will of God

DISCUSS: *If God has given you a dream or vision of something to come to pass, has it already happened? If not, what Bible passages encourage you as you look for God to perform what He promised?*

B. Paul Addressed the Girl Possessed by a Demon

C. I will follow God's will, knowing He will make a way.

DISCUSS: *How has God provided direction or redirection in your life through your spiritual disciplines?*

II. PAUL AND SILAS ARRESTED

A. The Philippians' Unexpected Response

B. The Shatter Zone **V**

DISCUSS: *How do we deal with resistance to the gospel in today's culture?*

C. Paul and Silas's Unexpected Response

D. I will praise God even when my situation seems bleak.

DISCUSS: *What are the benefits of having joy in negative situations?*

III. THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

A. Paul in Prison Again

B. A Message Worth Repeating

DISCUSS: *What intentional reminders to rejoice can you incorporate into your life?*

C. I will embrace the Spirit's beckoning to joy.

Internalizing the Message **I**

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to give joy to those in limiting situations
- For God to use our trials to bring hope to others

LESSON CONNECTION

From stories around a campfire to tense page-turning novels, jailbreaks are a topic of fascination. In 1924 John Dillinger and his accomplice attempted to rob a grocer, and Dillinger was sentenced to serve ten to twenty years in Indiana State Prison where he learned the craft of bank robbery from his fellow inmates. Perhaps in return for their impromptu education, Dillinger assisted in planning the escape of eight inmates. After his parole, he put his newfound skills to work, robbing five banks in four months.

In 1933 John Dillinger was apprehended and jailed again, only to be broken free one month later by the inmates he had previously assisted. Dillinger was recaptured and moved to Crown Point Jail, which had been described by authorities as “escape proof.” At Crown Point, Dillinger carved a piece of wood into a fake pistol, blackened it with shoe polish, and forced his way out of the jail, driving the Sheriff’s car out of the state.

In the infamous 1962 Alcatraz escape, Frank Morris and brothers John and Clarence Anglin collaborated on their crafty mission. After approximately six months of preparation, they set their plan in motion. Morning guards first noted the men’s absence upon discovering in the prisoners’ beds three heads made of toilet paper, cardboard, cement chips, and human hair from the barbershop floor. Using spoons, a drill made out of a broken vacuum cleaner motor, a homemade periscope, a raft and life preservers made of more than fifty stolen raincoats, and a raft inflator made from a musical instrument, the trio of inmates fled the maximum-security island prison. Their remains or whereabouts were never discovered.

Cartel leader Joaquin “*El Chapo*” Guzman made headlines for two escapes from maximum-security federal prisons. In 2001 Guzman allegedly hid in a laundry cart and was wheeled out the prison doors. Some believe that Guzman simply walked out of the prison, undisturbed by corrupt guards and prison officials. In 2015 Guzman made a second grand exit, convincing his associates to buy land near the prison for an escape route. After climbing down through a hole in the shower floor and riding a motorcycle through a well-lit, ventilated one-mile tunnel, he flew to a hideout in the mountains of his home state.

Jailbreakers capture our imaginations and demonstrate desperate and creative measures people will use to escape to freedom. While we may not be wily, hardened criminals, we all have experienced situations that feel dire, invoking our innate urge to fight or flee. Like prisoners, we may exhaust ourselves, our relationships, and our resources searching for a way out of inescapable problems. In Acts 16 Paul and Silas showed an unexpected response to imprisonment, reminding us that in God’s plan, limiting situations can be transformed into great opportunities and prison walls can become open doors.

BIBLE LESSON

I. CHURCH PLANTING IN PHILIPPI

A. Paul in the Will of God

After the Spirit-led decision of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, Paul determined to revisit cities where he had preached to encourage the churches and leaders. Along the way, the Spirit prevented Paul and his ministry partners from entering Asia or Bithynia. During the night Paul received a vision in which a Macedonian man beckoned him to come and help. Paul and his companions journeyed, willing to receive direction from God, even if that meant changing their course. Upon arriving in Philippi, a leading city of Macedonia, the team was surprised by their welcoming committee. They were greeted not by a Macedonian man, but by women who prayed along the riverside on the Sabbath. Among this small Jewish gathering was Lydia, a God-fearing businesswoman, whose heart God had opened to Paul's message about Jesus. Lydia and her household were baptized, and her home became a central location for the Philippian believers.

Normally Paul would have gone first to the synagogue, but it is likely there were not even ten Jewish men there to warrant a synagogue. Yet there in that Macedonian city, God established a church in the home of a prayerful, worshiping woman. The vision of the Macedonian man led Paul and his team to a new ministry environment, but its fulfillment was different than they imagined. Often God gives us just enough direction to move forward into His purpose without giving all the details of what we will experience as we go. Obeying God's will involves acting in faith on the information we have and seizing surprising opportunities to minister.

DISCUSS: *If God has given you a dream or vision of something to come to pass, has it already happened? If not, what Bible passages encourage you as you look for God to perform what He promised?*

B. Paul Addressed the Girl Possessed by a Demon

Lydia was a devout and reputable woman, known for selling purple dye, a luxury product. She was affluent enough to open her home to Paul and his companions and influential enough to lead her household to Jesus Christ. In sharp contrast to this free woman, Paul confronted a girl who was socially and spiritually bound. As Paul and his companions went to prayer, this slave girl who was possessed by a demon met them. From her age to her gender to her enslaved status, this girl stood at the bottom rungs of the social strata. The dark spirit that bound her and the masters who profited from her fortune-telling abilities had taken advantage of her.

She followed Paul for many days, crying out, "These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation" (Acts 16:17). Although her message was true—Paul and Silas did show the way of salvation—it may have been motivated by a desire to affiliate herself with the miracle-working ministers to gain

more business. Troubled by her persistent disruptions, Paul commanded the spirit to leave. When Paul spoke the name of Jesus, the power dynamics were reversed and God set the girl free from her oppressive lifestyle.

C. I will follow God's will, knowing He will make a way.

Paul and his ministry partners followed God's will as they responded to the Spirit's leading. The Lord opened Lydia's heart to receive the gospel message. They were faithful to their devotion because they were on their way to prayer when they met the young girl in need of a miracle.

Like these Book of Acts travelers, we follow the will of God in decisive moments of our calling and in our daily commitment to spiritual disciplines. As we follow, God prepares and positions others in our path so we can reach them. We anticipate that His Spirit will empower our work and confirm our witness.

DISCUSS: *How has God provided direction or redirection in your life through your spiritual disciplines?*

II. PAUL AND SILAS ARRESTED

A. The Philippians' Unexpected Response

Everyone should have been happy for this newly freed young lady, but her deliverance was a disruption and disappointment to the Philippians. Her masters were enraged that they had lost their source of income. Instead of showing gratitude, they dragged Paul and Silas into the marketplace before the local rulers and accused them of introducing illegal customs for the Romans. The crowd rallied against Paul and Silas in a mass rage where the magistrates stripped them, beat them with "many stripes," and imprisoned them (Acts 16:23). Paul would later recall to the church at Thessalonica how they were shamefully treated in Philippi, highlighting how they were treated brutally and humiliated publicly (1 Thessalonians 2:2).

B. The Shatter Zone

Conflict erupted whenever Paul and Silas ministered in the Philippians' shatter zone: an unstable place created when contrasting cultures collide. When opposing ideas, traditions, and values meet, harmony between groups shatters, and relationships become volatile and even violent. The journey into Philippi pulled Paul and Silas beyond where they were familiar because it was their first venture into a true Roman colony and their first venture into Europe. Anyone looking from the outside would say it wasn't going so well, but God had bigger plans than anyone could see.

Whenever the gospel is pioneered in new territory, we can expect spiritual and social resistance. In addition to charges that Paul and Silas were against Rome, they were also accused of causing trouble in Philippi (Acts 16:20–21). The accusations were unfair and untrue; they were not there to cause trouble but to bring the gospel and the power of God that comes with it. They preached a message of peace but were accused of inciting an uprising. Meanwhile their adversaries commanded a mob. The double standard is glaring.

Although Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were rashly punished without a fair trial. From their prison perspective, it would have been easy to be discouraged by the injustice of it all and the apparent failure of their mission. God led them to Macedonia, so why were they in prison? But we learn from these two faithful missionaries that when we carry the revolutionary message of Jesus into new and difficult environments, trouble is not necessarily a sign of failure. V

DISCUSS: *How do we deal with resistance to the gospel in today's culture?*

C. Paul and Silas's Unexpected Response

Around midnight, in a dark prison in an unfamiliar city, Paul and Silas did not sink into despair. Paul looked over to Silas, nodded, and Silas knew what to do. He hummed in the key of E flat, and Paul and Silas began singing. The prison guards had heard a lot of prisoners cursing and some even praying, but singing was a first. The other prisoners listened and God responded. A great earthquake shook the city of Philippi, especially the prison, creating a literal shatter zone as foundations shook, doors opened, and chains were loosed.

When the guard awoke, he could not believe his bleary eyes. All the doors were opened, all the chains were loosed, and the prisoners must have surely escaped. He drew his sword to kill himself, but Paul saved his life when he assured him they were all there. Not even one prisoner had escaped—a miracle all by itself. The jailor fell in front of Paul and Silas and asked the pivotal question: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). The missionaries shared the message of salvation through Jesus. The jailor took them to his home and Paul preached to him and his household. The same hour, the jailor and his household were baptized, the jailor washed his former prisoners’ wounds, and he fed Paul and Silas. God freed the missionaries from their natural bondage and the jailor and his household from their spiritual bondage. And it all started with a song in prison.

D. I will praise God even when my situation seems bleak.

As we minister to others, it may seem our witness is poorly received, producing conflict rather than success. However, from a prison cell Paul and Silas’s praises resound to remind us we can choose to praise God even when we are misunderstood, insulted, shamed, or abused. Our praise is a witness to everyone who hears us. God will open prison doors and closed hearts, working out our worst moments for our good and His glory.

DISCUSS: *What are the benefits of having joy in negative situations?*

III. THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

A. Paul in Prison Again

Years later Paul wrote a letter to the Philippian church, encouraging them amid their persecution and the news of his imprisonment for preaching. The saints at Philippi were familiar with resistance to the gospel, as persecution had marked the church’s founding days. Despite writing under such dark days, the letter to the Philippians bears a hopeful tone. Imprisonment, which appeared to be a setback, had actually

resulted in “the furtherance of the gospel” (Philippians 1:12). Paul’s trial commanded attention within the palace and beyond, and other Christians were emboldened to preach because of his unwavering faith. Paul did not promote a message of false positivity that ignored suffering; instead, Paul accepted his suffering as an opportunity to imitate and bear witness to Jesus Christ. The Philippians knew as well as anyone that salvation can come from suffering.

Facing two possibilities, release from prison or a martyr’s death, Paul expected that Jesus Christ would be glorified through him. Though Paul had confidence in his deliverance, he recognized that neither imprisonment nor death would be a total loss. Paul considered the benefits of either outcome: the church’s joy in his release and return, or the joy of being with Christ in the resurrection. Paul’s praise was not conditional on another escape because he kept Jesus’ mission and eternal impact in perspective.

B. A Message Worth Repeating

Throughout his letter, Paul repeatedly wrote about rejoicing. He personally found present and future joy in the Philippians’ participation with him in the gospel, in preaching Jesus Christ, in the church’s unity, in Jesus’ return, and in the church itself. (See Philippians 1:4–5, 18; 2:2, 16; 4:1.) Paul commanded them time and time again to rejoice in the Lord—in their covenantal relationship with Jesus and because of His saving work on Calvary.

The theme of rejoicing culminated in one of the final exhortations of his epistle: “Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice” (Philippians 4:4). Even from another prison cell, Paul’s call to joy was persistent, repetitive, and not dependent on all his prayers being answered. Like the steady rhythm of a song, joy continued to set the pace for the Philippians’ faith and witness in their city.

DISCUSS: *What intentional reminders to rejoice can you incorporate into your life?*

C. I will embrace the Spirit’s beckoning to joy.

We often need repeated reminders to rejoice. Joy is often thought of as a mental and emotional state, but rejoicing is an active choice. No matter how we feel, we can choose joy by expressing our gratitude to the Lord and focusing on praiseworthy things. As we make the choice to rejoice, the Holy Spirit transforms our hearts, producing the sweet fruit of joy. Biblical joy is not a shallow optimism that comes from our understanding or pleasant situations. We rejoice not in ourselves but in the Lord. As people of God, we celebrate the story of salvation and communion with our Savior. Like Paul and the church at Philippi, we can also rejoice in the body of Christ. Appreciating the church community, working toward unity, and celebrating those who serve and sacrifice give us bountiful reasons to rejoice.

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate the value of responsibilities in covenant relationship.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

In 2014 a nine-year-old boy named Willie Myrick was kidnapped from his driveway in Atlanta, Georgia. Willie was terrified, but he remembered a song from church. For three hours the kidnapper drove him around the city while Willie sang a gospel favorite, “Every Praise.” The kidnapper cursed at Willie and told him to “shut up,” growing progressively more annoyed. In an amusing understatement to reporters, Willie acknowledged, “He was probably irritated of me singing.” Seemingly unafraid even as a kidnapped nine-year-old in the backseat, Willie repeatedly sang the hook: “God my deliverer, yes He is.” Finally, unable to endure any more of the private gospel concert, the kidnapper shoved Willie out the door and told him not to tell anyone what had happened. Willie was rescued and his story naturally went viral, reaching numerous news outlets and even leading to a meeting between Willie and the gospel artist who sang “Every Praise,” Hezekiah Walker (fox4kc.com, “Boy sings gospel song until kidnapper can’t stand it anymore, tells him to get out of car”).

Willie Myrick’s deliverance anthem was written by David Bratton. Inspired by a Sunday sermon about praise, Bratton penned the chorus. He stated, “After I wrote ‘Every Praise,’ I thought it was too

simple and that nobody would think it was a real song, because it only had a few lines.” Three years after writing the chorus, he added a short bridge and the song was eventually recorded. “Every Praise” became a soaring success; it was number one on gospel radio for twenty-six weeks and dubbed the Gospel Song of the Decade by *Billboard* magazine in 2019. Astonished at the song’s popularity, Bratton reflected on its simplicity, stating, “It can be sung by the most talented or the least talented. Just about every musician can play it. I’ve heard it sung with just a guitar and a washboard. I’ve heard it sung with orchestras” (journalof-gospelmusic.com, “Genesis of a Gospel Song: ‘Every Praise’”). Though the writer initially thought it was barely a song, the few memorable lines helped save a young man’s life.

Rejoicing is something we all can do, whether we are young or old, musically apt or tone-deaf. Our song may be simple, but the message is profound; every praise belongs to God, and we offer it to Him in every situation. Like Willie, our choice to rejoice can increase our faith even when we are afraid. Our rejoicing frustrates our enemy and encourages everyone who hears. Ultimately, our rejoicing results in deliverance, for us or through us.



NEW
COVENANT
LIFE



SUMMER
08

JULY 26, 2026

LESSON TEXT
Acts 20

FOCUS VERSES
Acts 20:28-31

²⁸Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

²⁹For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.
³⁰Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.

³¹Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.

TRUTH ABOUT
COVENANT
Covenant calls us to follow the example of our Spirit-led, Spirit-filled leaders.

Reminders from Ephesians

I WILL BE
FAITHFUL
TO MY SPIRITUAL
DISCIPLINES
AND CHURCH
ATTENDANCE.

COVENANT CONTEXT

We have journeyed through the Bible to arrive at this place where we are in covenant relationship with Jesus through the gospel. Our journey is not over; it has just begun. Now that we are in covenant, Paul taught throughout the letters he wrote, such as the letter to the Ephesians, how to live in covenant with God and with each other.

SG *TEACHING OUTLINE*

Icebreaker: What leaders or teachers have made a profound impact in your life? What made their impact so lasting?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to Paul's impact on the church at Ephesus and the leaders there.

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

I. PAUL'S CALL FOR THE EPHESIAN LEADERS

- A. Paul's Godly Example
- B. Paul's Godly Teaching **V**

DISCUSS: *What role does teaching play in the discipleship of believers?*

- C. I will endeavor to leave a legacy of living the gospel before others.

DISCUSS: *How are you continuing the spiritual legacy of those before you?*

II. PAUL'S FIRMLY-WORDED REMINDER

- A. An Established Church

DISCUSS: *Once you have been saved, in what ways are you established and strengthened in your faith?*

- B. A Persistent Problem
- C. As part of the body of Christ, I will remember I have a covenant responsibility to every member.

DISCUSS: *How do you communicate to others that they belong?*

III. THE POWER AND PRIVILEGE OF BEING IN COVENANT

- A. A Prayer for Human Strength
- B. A Celebration of God's Strength

DISCUSS: *How does God work through the church community to strengthen our faith?*

- C. I will not live below my privilege as a child of God.

Internalizing the Message **I**

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to establish our lives on a strong foundation of truth
- For God to help us lead others by our godly example

LESSON CONNECTION

The last known words of certain dying individuals have been memorialized for their wit, thoughtfulness, or tragedy. Before his death, French Grammarian Dominique Bouhours said, “I am about to—or I am going to—die: either expression is correct.” Former Prime Minister Winston Churchill, a man renowned for his war-time leadership and inspirational rhetoric, punctuated his passing by saying, “I’m bored with it all.” The death of Leonardo Da Vinci, painter of the *Mona Lisa* and the *Last Supper*, was recorded by the biographer Giorgio Vasari. While his exact wording is not known, Da Vinci is said to have died shortly after professing, “I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have.” Thomas J. Grasso, a murderer on death row, concluded his life with a public complaint, stating, “I did not get my Spaghetti-O’s; I got spaghetti. I want the press to know this” (mentalfloss.com, “65 People and Their Famous Last Words”).

Of the many famous last words recorded or fabricated, one story in particular stands out of a man famous for his alleged last words. Nathan Hale was a Yale alumnus and a schoolmaster living in Connecticut during the American Revolution. In 1775 Hale joined the militia and, soon after, was moved to Manhattan to defend New York City from the British loyalists. In August of 1776 the American patriots were rapidly losing control of the city. While Hale waited in Manhattan, willing to be of use to his new nation, patriot forces lost the battle of Long Island. Just over a week later Hale volunteered to go behind enemy lines as a spy to collect information for strategic attacks. He disguised himself as a teacher and investigated enemy movements on Long Island where patriot forces had recently been defeated and expelled. As an eager twenty-one-year-old without any training in undercover surveillance, he drew attention and was captured by the British after only nine days.

Condemned as a spy, Hale was executed without a trial and buried in an unmarked grave. According to tradition, Nathan Hale’s last words were a final statement of patriotism: “I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country.” His last words were a paraphrase from the 1713 play *Cato*, which praised the death of the virtuous youth and inspired many patriots of the era. While his mission was cut short, Nathan Hale succeeded at inspiring future generations of soldiers and leaders to greet challenges with the same sacrificial spirit (www.frauncestavernmuseum.org, “Nathan Hale’s Letter to His Brother, Enoch Hale”).

When Paul called for the Ephesian leaders on his way to Jerusalem, he knew he had to make his final face-to-face statements count. Paul reflected on his history with them and provided instruction and inspiration for the future. From some of Paul’s “famous last words,” we can gain insight into our own process of spiritual formation.

BIBLE LESSON

I. PAUL'S CALL FOR THE EPHESIAN LEADERS

A. Paul's Godly Example

The Christian community in Ephesus was established when Paul came and found some disciples of John the Baptist in Acts 19. After Paul shared the gospel, those disciples were baptized and received the Spirit. Paul preached and taught in Ephesus for three years, converting both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 20:31). While he was in Ephesus, Paul felt God was leading him to continue to travel: first through Macedonia and Greece, onward to Jerusalem, and eventually to Rome (Acts 19:21). On the way back from Macedonia, Paul was in a hurry to make it to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. He called for the Ephesian leaders to meet him so he could bid them farewell and offer some reminders and final face-to-face instructions.

Paul reminded the Ephesian leaders that from the first day he came and in all seasons, he had set an example for them of humble service (Acts 20:18–19). Even though the Jews rejected him, Paul labored long each day teaching God's Word—sometimes fostering success and sometimes fomenting a riot. But through it all Paul's character and message were consistent. Rather than ask for payment from the Ephesians for preaching the gospel to them, Paul worked with his hands, providing for himself and those with him. As a leader Paul could confidently state that his sacrificial lifestyle reinforced the message he proclaimed.

B. Paul's Godly Teaching

Although we do not have a service schedule from Paul's years with the Ephesian church, we see here a pattern for our preaching and teaching today. Much of the Book of Acts was the church preaching to sinners to teach them how to be right with God. But here we see Paul preaching to the church, teaching them how to live now that they had been made right with God. To be fully mature disciples of Jesus, we must have both: preaching to saints and to sinners. After we are born again, God's preached and taught Word will continue to call us to covenant faithfulness.

Paul warned the Ephesian leaders that false teachers would come from within and without, making false disciples. For about three months Paul preached to Jews and debated in the synagogue until many rejected his message and began publicly ridiculing the gospel. Paul moved on to the school of Tyrannus where he taught daily for two years. He also taught "from house to house" in Ephesus (Acts 20:20). Because of Paul's consistent teaching in public halls and in private homes, "all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 19:10). Paul exemplified the need for corporate and private worship: Discipleship combines worship in God's house and in our house. A fully formed disciple cannot have one without the other.

Paul tackled tough topics as he declared to the Ephesians "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:26–27). He preached and taught all he believed God wanted His church to

know. We should do the same. Part of his teaching called the leaders to watch out, not only for themselves, but also for the church. Preserving the doctrinal integrity of the church involved keeping an eye out for “wolves” who taught lies as the Ephesian leaders fed God’s flock the true Word of God. Though their missionary was leaving, the discipleship of the church would continue as the Ephesians’ leadership committed to protecting the church and preserving the truth.

DISCUSS: *What role does teaching play in the discipleship of believers?*

C. I will endeavor to leave a legacy of living the gospel before others.

A prophet named Agabus warned Paul that he was facing imprisonment if he traveled to Jerusalem. Paul realized he would never see the Ephesians again after his journey. This statement grieved the leaders who wept and embraced their beloved pastor one last time before seeing him off to his ship. Christian disciples have teachers and leaders who have made a profound impact on our lives. While these exemplary individuals may not all be present with us the rest of our lives, their influence is felt in the beliefs we cherish, our approach to ministry, and the confidence they give us to live for the Lord.

Paul finished his farewell by reminding the leaders of Jesus’ words: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Godly leaders connect others back to the gospel message, and in their absence, those believers can be anchored to the words and actions of Jesus, the ultimate giver. Let us follow Jesus’ and Paul’s instructions to give of our finance, time, and talents to help disciple other new believers.

DISCUSS: *How are you continuing the spiritual legacy of those before you?*

II. PAUL’S FIRMLY-WORDED REMINDER

A. An Established Church

After Paul left, he wrote his letter to the Ephesian church, referring to himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. This letter is known as the Book of Ephesians, which Paul addressed to “the saints . . . at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus,” and he reminded them of their new-birth experience (Ephesians 1:1). The Ephesians had heard the gospel, responded through repentance and water baptism in Jesus’ name, and God sealed them with His Holy Spirit, which was the earnest (down payment) of their heavenly inheritance (Ephesians 1:13–14). Like a wax seal that marked official ownership, their receiving the Spirit signaled they belonged to Jesus.

Although their initial salvation experience had radically changed their lives and given them a brand-new status as children of God, Paul knew the Ephesians had more potential for spiritual growth. While he commended their faith in Christ and love for others, he also prayed for wisdom, revelation, understanding, and knowledge for them (Ephesians 1:17–18). The Ephesians had heard, experienced, and obeyed the gospel; it was time for them to grow in their understanding of how far and wide the gospel impacted their lives.

DISCUSS: *Once you have been saved, in what ways are you established and strengthened in your faith?*

B. A Persistent Problem

Paul reminded the Ephesians that they were without God, without hope, and far away but now have been brought near through the blood of Jesus Christ. They once were separated by a wall of division, but God has brought Jews and Gentiles together into one church. Before Jesus, the lines were clearly drawn around “us” versus “them,” but not anymore because the Cross eliminated those divisions. Whenever the first Gentiles were converted, Peter, his companions, and the church council at Jerusalem were convinced the Gentiles could be saved simply because the Gentiles had been born again like the disciples had at the beginning (Acts 10:45–46; 11:17–18).

The Holy Spirit was more than just a “get-into-Heaven-free” pass. Defying social norms, the gospel made a unified community of Jewish and Gentile believers possible. Paul gladly affirmed the Gentile believers and celebrated their invitation into God’s family. When the epistle was read in the hearing of the whole church, Paul’s message would have surely been overheard loud and clear by any skeptical Jewish believers: “Everyone belongs here.” Jewish believers needed to accept their Gentile brothers and sisters, and Gentile believers needed to recognize they belonged.

C. As part of the body of Christ, I will remember I have a covenant responsibility to every member.

In Ephesians Paul called the church to oneness. He reminded them that “There is one body, and one Spirit, . . . one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Ephesians 4:4–6). The oneness of God is a theological reality we celebrate, but the oneness of the church is something we must actively live. Various personal and cultural boundary markers can fracture our oneness, whether it be race, social status, gender, age, or simply differing personalities. But since God has allowed us to be part of His people, we must also cheerfully receive others in the name of Jesus.

DISCUSS: *How do you communicate to others that they belong?*

III. THE POWER AND PRIVILEGE OF BEING IN COVENANT

A. A Prayer for Human Strength

Paul prayed that the church would be strengthened by the Spirit in their inner being. Worldly examples of strength in ancient Rome were found in politicians who commanded god-like obedience, exercising domination and sometimes cruelty over the people they ruled. Similarly, athletes committed themselves to regimented exercise, sacrificing basic pleasures for a show of strength and a moment of honor. However, Christian strength is more than a show because it works within us, enabling us to endure in the faith and faithfully witness despite difficulties.

Upon his departure, Paul had committed the Ephesian leaders to the word of God's grace, which could and would build them up (Acts 20:32). Paul envisioned a growing and strengthening church in Ephesus. Spiritual strength is only produced when we abide in the Spirit, obey God's Word, and live in harmony with God's church. Paul recommended the gifts of spiritual leaders that prepare the church for ministry and build up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-12). Present-day believers are strengthened through spiritual disciplines, examples of leaders who live and teach the gospel, and examples of leaders scribed in Scripture.

B. A Celebration of God's Strength

Paul prayed for the church's strength while celebrating God's strength. Listen to Paul's fascination with God's excelling ability: "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us" (Ephesians 3:20). Exceeding, abundantly, above all—God is greater than we can imagine, and He chooses to work through us. The greatest privilege in the world is being in covenant relationship with Jesus.

God continues to sanctify us (make us holy) through His Holy Spirit, cleansing us from sin and helping us to accurately mirror His nature. God also empowers us to serve others, strengthening us for ministry and confirming His word with signs and wonders. Paul envisioned the way the church will function like one mature body, not contending for our own views that divide the body (Ephesians 4:13-14). Yes God works in me, but the work of God is exponentially marvelous in us. When we strengthen and cooperate with one another, we are not easily swayed by deception. Instead of children who are easily tricked by false messages, we will grow up with the right family resemblance, acting just like our Father, Jesus Christ.

DISCUSS: *How does God work through the church community to strengthen our faith?*

C. I will not live below my privilege as a child of God.

Sometimes we all need to be reminded who we really are. When a child misbehaves, a parent might remind the child, "That is not how we act in this family." Likewise, when giving a generous gift, parents may explain by stating, "It's because you are my child." The same is true in the family of God; we sometimes need to remember the relationship.

Living in restored relationship with God means we are called to live holy and above the dregs of sin. Paul told the Ephesians not to walk "as other Gentiles walk," pursuing vanity and uncleanness (Ephesians 4:17-19). Instead, they were to "put off . . . the old man" and "put on the new man," which is to take off the old identity as children of darkness and put on the new identity as children of God (Ephesians 4:22-24). Family privileges include direct access to God and strength through His Spirit, a growing knowledge of His love, a new purpose for living, and communion and connection within the body.

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how the gospel tears down all the dividing walls and unifies us in one body in Christ Jesus.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

1 One of history's most iconic moments started off as a miscommunication. On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall still stood to divide the free, prosperous West Germany from the oppressed, communist East Germany. The wall had stood for nearly thirty years, but on that November night, freedom was in the air. One of the East German officials, Günter Schabowski, held a press conference after the pressure and protests mounted for East Germans to travel to the west. Schabowski was not quite ready for the presser, but he knew he needed to do something.

He read an announcement he had just received that promised East Germany would loosen travel restrictions. Without giving much detail into how much or when, one of the journalists asked the German official when these travel restrictions would be loosened, and Schabowski replied, "As far as I know, effective immediately, without delay." That was a miscommunication—the officials were working on processes and delays to keep from releasing too much power—but his announcement was broadcast live.

When the East Germans heard his promise, they believed the border was open and they were free to cross over into West Germany. That was all they needed to hear. Within hours—after being divided for nearly three decades from their neighbors to the west—thousands of East Berliners overwhelmed the wall's security checkpoints. The border guards were also unprepared for such a flood of freedom-hungry humanity. The guards radioed for instructions but they heard little

in return. It became obvious that they could not hold back the growing crowd.

At one particular border crossing, the senior officer in charge, Harald Jäger, kept calling his superiors, but they were no help. Just one-half hour before midnight that night, Jäger changed history: He simply opened the gates. Hundreds and thousands of East Berliners streamed through the open gates into the bright lights and celebrations of West Berliners. They hugged each other and celebrated freedom's win that Thursday night in 1989. Families and friends who had been separated by a 12-foot high, 87-mile long concrete and barbed wire wall held each other again, thankful that the wall was finally coming down.

That was part of Paul's message in Ephesians and still God's message today: The wall has come down. The wall that separated the Jews from the Gentiles in the Temple in Jerusalem has come down. The 4-inch-thick, 60-foot-tall veil that separated all humanity from our holy God has come down. The wall between Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, bond and free, male and female has come down because of the gospel, and everyone is invited into covenant relationship with Jesus Christ.

As God's church, let us live faithful to our covenant relationship with God. Let us be faithful to our spiritual disciplines, to worshiping with our brothers and sisters, and to looking for people like us and not like us because everyone is welcome in the kingdom of God.



SUMMER
09

AUGUST 02, 2026

LESSON TEXT
Acts 26:11-29

FOCUS VERSES

Acts 26:16-18

¹⁶But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee;
¹⁷Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee,
¹⁸To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

Being in covenant with God gives us a testimony to share with our world.

Paul's Testimony



COVENANT CONTEXT

Near the end of the apostle Paul's teaching and preaching, he was arrested on false charges and put on trial. During the trial, he appealed to have his case heard in Rome, giving him an opportunity to share his testimony with Caesar himself. Paul believed the gospel was powerful enough to invite the most powerful man in the world into covenant with God. No one is beyond His reach.

SG *TEACHING OUTLINE*

Icebreaker: Describe a time when someone changed your mind on an issue and how they persuaded you.

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to Paul's testimony attempting to persuade his questioners while he was on trial for preaching the gospel.

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

I. PAUL'S TESTIMONY

A. Paul and Festus

DISCUSS: *If you have been falsely accused, how do you maintain your innocence and Christian witness at the same time?*

B. Paul's Message to Agrippa and Festus

C. I will fulfill my part of God's covenant by testifying to others.

DISCUSS: *Why do you think Luke recorded Paul's testimony before Agrippa even though Agrippa was not fully persuaded?*

II. FROM PAUL'S OLD LIFE TO THE NEW COVENANT

A. Paul's Transformation

DISCUSS: *In what specific ways has Jesus Christ transformed your life?*

B. I will share how Jesus transformed my life. **V**

DISCUSS: *What strategies have you found to be most effective for sharing the gospel with others?*

III. THE MESSAGE OF SALVATION

A. Forgiveness of Sin

B. Repentance

C. I will teach Bible studies about the new birth.

DISCUSS: *How can you develop confidence to share your testimony and teach Bible studies?*

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to give us opportunities to witness to others
- For God to give us boldness to share our story

LESSON CONNECTION

1 “This product gives relief from asthma, cough, bronchitis, hay fever, influenza, and shortness of breath. It treats head colds, canker sores, and even bad breath. A product as pure as the water you drink, it is recommended by a medical doctor to those who are interested in keeping or regaining physical fitness.” These advertisements aren’t for cold medicine, cough drops, or the fountain of youth. Instead, they are all slogans from cigarette ads between 1881 and 1931. It may come as a surprise to many that for years, cigarettes were promoted as a health product and recommended by many paid physicians (cbsnews.com, “Outrageous vintage cigarette ads”).

Today virtually all adult Americans are aware of the health hazards associated with tobacco use. However, a decrease in cigarette use and a general turn in public opinion were not the consequence of a single exposing moment. The change was a slow trickle, about fifty years in the making. Beginning in the 1950s, some medical experts asserted that smoking led to health conditions such as cancer. Tobacco companies won most of the lawsuits that followed these claims and largely held their ground until the 1990s. Over the years, more medical studies accumulated and documents were leaked indicating that tobacco companies were aware of the dangerous and addictive nature of their products.

Several groundbreaking trials pushed the case forward. In 1998 attorney generals from forty-six states alleged that tobacco companies promoted hazardous products with deceptive marketing tactics, leading to a massive settlement and the outlawing of false advertising. The next year the US Department of Justice sued several major tobacco companies for fraudulent practices and deceptive marketing techniques that minimized the health risks for users. The case took six years of litigation and nine months of trial, but the companies were eventually found liable. The research and trials against big tobacco have continued to advance, and change has been the collaborative work of a multitude of witnesses (expertinstitute.com, “Expert Witnesses in High-Profile Litigation”).

We often associate the word *trial* with difficult seasons and circumstances, like loss, sickness, or grief. In Acts 26 we will witness Paul on trial for his preaching. In that case a trial denotes being questioned about an accusation. In both cases a trial is an opportunity to bear witness. When we are tested by troubles, troublesome people, or tense situations, it often feels as if our faith is being interrogated.

At times our testimony can seem insignificant or ineffective, almost persuading others instead of fully persuading them. However, our testimony contributes to the slow, progressive work of calling and transformation in the lives of others. Our voice joins in harmony with the voice of the Spirit and a host of believers to call others to a new life in Christ. Like the apostle Paul, our sermon will not always succeed, but the reach of our trial and our testimony is far beyond the moment.

BIBLE LESSON

I. PAUL'S TESTIMONY

A. Paul and Festus

The high priests and Jewish leaders brought Paul before Festus, the governor of Judea, hoping he would send Paul to Jerusalem so they could ambush and kill him. Instead, Festus kept Paul at Caesarea and gave him a fair hearing, calling for the Jewish leaders to meet him and make their case there. The Jewish leaders and their lawyer, Tertullus, came from Jerusalem and made many serious false accusations against Paul, which they were unable to prove. Paul responded that he had not committed any offense against the Law, the Temple, or Caesar. He maintained he was innocent of all their charges.

Festus was hoping to secure favor with the Jews, so he asked if Paul wished to be tried in Jerusalem (Acts 25:9). Instead, Paul appealed to Caesar, restating what Festus already knew: Paul had not done anything wrong to the Jews. Rather than facing the biased council at Jerusalem, Paul chose to face the Roman legal system as a Roman citizen, possibly believing that a Gentile court would be neutral in a matter of a religious disagreement. Through his appeal Paul was spared from the murderous plot of the Jewish leaders and granted the opportunity to testify before high-ranking Roman officials. Soon afterward, the Jewish king named Herod Agrippa II visited Festus and, hearing about Paul's situation, requested to hear Paul's defense.

DISCUSS: *If you have been falsely accused, how do you maintain your innocence and Christian witness at the same time?*

B. Paul's Message to Agrippa and Festus

In Acts 26 we read about Agrippa's interaction with Paul. Paul was happy to share his testimony with Agrippa, a man informed about Jewish customs and traditions. Paul began by establishing his background as a reputable and devout Jew. Not only was he part of the strictest sect of Judaism, the Pharisees, but he was zealous in persecuting Christians, operating under the authority of the chief priests. As someone with an "insider perspective," Paul emphasized that the resurrection of Jesus was the natural conclusion of the Jewish Scriptures, not a contradiction to them. Instead of being judged for real crimes against the Jews, Paul stated, "I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers" (Acts 26:6). Paul's gospel message was biblically-grounded, not self-invented.

Though Paul was defending his innocence, he did not miss an opportunity to shift the focus from himself to Jesus. After sharing his miraculous conversion experience, he proclaimed Christ's crucifixion and resurrection as the fulfillment of God's covenantal promises. Paul then directly invited Agrippa to profess faith, saying, "Believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest" (Acts 26:27). Paul gave an altar call to Herod

Agrippa II, hoping he would put all his faith in Jesus Christ. However, Agrippa hesitated and sadly confessed: “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” (Acts 26:28).

C. I will fulfill my part of God’s covenant by testifying to others.

Because God has brought us into covenant with Himself through His sacrifice on Calvary, we are His covenant people. He has called us to proclaim the praises of the one who brought us “out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9). Terms like *holy*, *unique*, *special*, and *chosen* are no longer exclusive to the children of Israel; these terms now apply to all the children of God. We are saved from sin and for the purpose of bearing witness to God’s work in our lives. Like Paul seized the moment, shared his story, and called Agrippa by name, we must take advantage of opportunities to witness and personally connect with others as we share our testimony with them.

DISCUSS: *Why do you think Luke recorded Paul’s testimony before Agrippa even though Agrippa was not fully persuaded?*

II. FROM PAUL’S OLD LIFE TO THE NEW COVENANT

A. Paul’s Transformation

From the devoted to the defiant, our testimony is as unique as we are. Paul witnessed to self-righteous Jews and wild Gentiles. Both came from different perspectives and both needed to encounter the power of Jesus. As a promising young Pharisee, Paul was exceedingly zealous for his religious tradition and adamantly opposed to the message of Jesus (Galatians 1:14). He was sincere and persuaded, but he was still wrong.

One day Jesus supernaturally visited Paul on the road to Damascus, with beaming light, a voice from heaven, and sudden blindness. Jesus even called Paul by name (Saul, at the time), so he knew Almighty God knew exactly where he was and what he was doing. In his letter to the churches in the region of Galatia, Paul confessed that the extent of his persecution against the church was “beyond measure” (Galatians 1:13). Though Paul once “made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women . . . to prison,” he eventually testified of the gospel “both to small and great” (Acts 8:3; 26:22).

Paul asserted that God had called him from his mother’s womb to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Though Paul’s lifestyle was completely opposed to his calling, his encounter with Jesus brought him into alignment with God’s purpose. Convinced of the calling on his life, Paul did not seek out human opinions or affirmation from other apostles. Rather, he developed his ministry away from the Jerusalem spotlight. Paul’s authority to preach the gospel did not come from his personal connections; it came from a genuine transformational encounter with Jesus. He could not change his past, but he could and did surrender his past to God’s great mercy.

After his encounter with Jesus, Paul was able to testify from a place of integrity. Paul did not try to avenge himself of the persecution he faced from his Jewish brothers and former Temple associates. Throughout the trial, Paul maintained that he was innocent and had lived above their false accusations. The best charge they could lay against

him was a lie. Paul's friends and foes had to acknowledge a change in his life. When the churches of Judea heard that the former persecutor now preached the faith he once destroyed, they glorified God because of Paul (Galatians 1:23–24). Likewise, our testimony is most effective when our character is consistent with our message.

DISCUSS: *In what specific ways has Jesus Christ transformed your life?*

B. I will share how Jesus transformed my life.

Evangelism techniques and formats are abundant—ranging from street preaching, to door knocking, to social media posts, to the classic church card handout, to inviting your Sunday server at lunch. We can engage the lost using diverse methods to reach different people in different communities. While there is value in the simple act of inviting others to church, our personal testimony has the greatest impact on others. Often the best way to share our story and make a disciple is to practice hospitality and make friends. When we invite people into our lives, sharing God's goodness and genuinely caring for them, we can see the long-term impact of our testimony at work. V

DISCUSS: *What strategies have you found to be most effective for sharing the gospel with others?*

III. THE MESSAGE OF SALVATION

A. Forgiveness of Sin

As Paul stood before Agrippa, Paul testified of God's power to forgive sin. Paul stated that God had sent him to the Gentiles to "open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins" (Acts 26:18). God delivered Paul to bring deliverance to others.

Sin is the failure to align with God's intended purpose for us. We sin when we transgress God's high moral standard. It is a universal problem, for Paul stated: "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). When we testify about God's forgiveness, we do so with humility, acknowledging we need God's grace. Sin destroys our relationship with God, but because Jesus died for our sins, that broken relationship can be restored. We receive God's forgiveness by responding to His mercy in repentance.

B. Repentance

Like Jesus, Paul preached repentance as the only fitting response to God's grace. Repentance involves confessing our sins, but it does not end with a verbal acknowledgment of sin or simply saying "I'm sorry." Repentance is more than an apology; it is a revolution of the heart. When we repent, we turn to God and away from behaviors that are offensive to Him. Paul declared the Gentiles should "repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance" (Acts 26:20). Our repentance is made evident by behavior that says we have been changed. Without true repentance, we have no testimony of transformation to share, and our witness can come across as false advertising.

When we repent and are baptized in the covenantal name of Jesus, the Lord Himself cleanses us from sin and gives us a clear conscience (1 Peter 3:21). The Holy Spirit enables us to bear the fruit of repentance, the characteristics of a new lifestyle. Those who have entered into the new covenant are not under the condemnation of the Law, but are led by the Spirit to produce “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, [and] temperance” (Galatians 5:22–23). Just as fruit is the natural product of a tree that is well tended, spiritual fruit is not the result of sheer willpower and human effort but is the natural product of abiding in the Spirit.

C. I will teach Bible studies about the new birth.

Sharing our testimony does not have to be intimidating or complicated. Like Paul before Festus and Agrippa, we can tell our own story of transformation and direct others to the Bible to see how it is applied and fulfilled. Paul received help from God to persevere as a witness, despite the resistance he faced for preaching about Jesus. Before ascending into Heaven, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would give the disciples power, and they would be witnesses around the world (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit still empowers and sustains our witness. Alone, we are just another voice in a world of noise, but with the Spirit’s help, our witness will resound.

After sharing our personal testimony, we can call others to repentance and guide them to respond by teaching them a Bible study about the new birth. In repentance, we turn away from sin and to God, who is willing to forgive us. In baptism, our sins are washed away and the name of Jesus is called over us, giving us a new identity. The Holy Spirit is a promise for everyone, allowing us to experience the indwelling presence of God working in and through us (Acts 2:38–39).

DISCUSS: *How can you develop confidence to share your testimony and teach Bible studies?*

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how all of us have the ability to share our testimony with others, much like the apostle Paul did.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

James Earl Jones was a renowned actor known for his deep, rich voice. But his strength as a performer was once his greatest weakness. For nearly eight years of his childhood, Jones suffered from a severe stutter and was almost completely mute. Embarrassed to be heard, he limited most of his communication to family members and the cows, chickens, and hogs on the family farm.

Jones recalled his humiliation as a child in Sunday school when he would try to read his lessons, only to be met by roars of laughter from the other children. His fear of speaking in public grew, and he virtually gave up trying to speak by the time he was school age. However, a high school teacher motivated Jones to face his fears. Jones recalled: "I had started writing poetry in high school and he said of one of them, 'Jim, this is a good poem. In fact, it is so good I don't think you wrote it. I think you plagiarized it. If you want to prove you wrote it, you must stand in front of the class and recite it by memory.'"

Because the words were his own, Jones survived his personal poetry recitation and began to develop more confidence in speaking as well as an interest in literary

arts. With time and practice, Jones learned to control his stutter. During an interview, he stated, "I don't say I was 'cured.' I just work with it" (stutteringhelp.org, "James Earl Jones").

Many people are afraid to share their testimony, silencing themselves because they aren't sure how their words will be received. We do not have to be cured of our nervousness to be an effective witness. Like Jones's first poetry recitation, it becomes easier to speak when we share stories and words that belong to us rather than leaning on someone else's formula. No one else can replicate your voice, and no one else can tell your story of God's grace like you can. With the help of the Holy Spirit, the meekest and weakest among us can be the greatest proclaimers.

Testifying about God's grace starts with sharing our story of transformation. Although we once knew shame, now we see God's glory. Our new lifestyle of holiness confirms what we have witnessed. We then connect our stories to the story of Scripture, pointing to the fulfillment of God's Word in our lives, and we invite others to obey the gospel by teaching them about the new birth.



SUMMER
10

AUGUST 09, 2026

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LESSON TEXT
Galatians 5:16-24

FOCUS VERSES
Galatians 5:24-25
24And they that are
Christ's have crucified
the flesh with the
affections and lusts.
25If we live in the
Spirit, let us also walk
in the Spirit.

**TRUTH ABOUT
COVENANT**
Living in covenant
is the best life we
could live.

*The Fruit
of the Spirit*

.....

I WILL ALLOW
GOD'S SPIRIT
TO
BEAR FRUIT
IN MY LIFE.

.....

COVENANT CONTEXT

Living for God is the most fruitful, fulfilling life possible, but it does not always come naturally to us. That is why Paul wrote nine letters to churches to teach them how to live once they were in covenant with God. This new covenant life will bear the fruit of the Spirit. Otherwise, we will find in our own lives the weeds of the works of the flesh.

SG *TEACHING OUTLINE*

Icebreaker: If you could only plant one fruit tree, what would it be?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to the blessing God gives us through the fruit of the Spirit.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. WORKS VERSUS FRUIT

A. Work Versus Growth

DISCUSS: *Why does it sometimes feel like our relationship with God is more “work” than God intended?*

B. The Contrast

DISCUSS: *Although we steer clear of certain works of the flesh, like adultery and murder, when was the last time you checked your life against hatred, strife, and envy?*

C. I will crucify my flesh so the fruit of the Spirit will grow.

II. A CLOSER LOOK AT FRUIT

A. The Fruit Makes Us Fruitful **V**

DISCUSS: *When you take inventory, what works of the flesh do you see? What fruit of the Spirit do you see in your life?*

B. Facets of Fruit

C. I will learn to recognize fruit when I see it and when I bear it.

III. A PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. Society's Knockoff

DISCUSS: *How do you tell the difference between the fruit of the Spirit and the counterfeit the enemy offers?*

B. The Process of Fruitfulness

DISCUSS: *When the fruit of the Spirit is not growing in your life, what will you do to allow it to grow again?*

C. I will keep in step with the Spirit.

Internalizing the Message **I**

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to help us daily choose to walk with the Spirit
- For God to give us wisdom to recognize what fruit our lives are bearing

LESSON CONNECTION

When avid golfers hear the name Scottie Scheffler, they may think first of his two Masters championships or his 2024 Olympic gold medal or even his 122 weeks in the coveted number one rank. It might have never come up that he also enjoys cooking—that is until the Christmas ravioli incident.

If it sounds dramatic, well, it sure seemed so to golf fans when Scheffler missed two tournaments with scant details about a personal injury. When he finally met the press, he detailed the uncanny accident: Scheffler had endeavored to make homemade ravioli for his family for Christmas dinner. His impromptu culinary adventure in a rental house without the requisite tools went awry. Needing to cut the pasta dough, Scheffler selected a nondescript glass to roll and separate the strands for ravioli. When he bore down on the glass, it subsequently shattered and punctured his hand. The multimillion-dollar athlete immediately felt a wave of frustration, realizing he had just jeopardized his career all because he didn't have the right tool.

Thanks to a premier surgeon, Scheffler bounced back in time to play the prestigious January Pebble Beach tournament. What could have been much worse is now merely a quirky story among golf enthusiasts. Yet the point remains that tools serve specific purposes, and the lack of an adequate tool can have dire consequences.

In trying to explain the difference between the Law and the fruit of the Spirit, Evangelist Fred Brown compared the Law to the following tools:

The dentist's mirror: The Law is like the little mirror the dentist uses to check your teeth. With this mirror, the dentist can detect cavities and abnormalities. However, this mirror is no good to pull a tooth, drill a cavity, or replace with good dental material. It can show the dentist the abnormality, but it has no solutions to solve the problems.

A flashlight: Suddenly all the lights go out. The curious homeowner picks up the flashlight and walks down the stairs to the basement to find the problem. Arriving at the electrical box, he realizes a breaker has blown. The flashlight reveals the problem, but it cannot solve the problem. He needs the correct tool and a new part to restore the light.

A plumb line: A builder wants to check his work, so he uses a plumb line, a weighted string, to see if his wall is truly vertical. He realizes he has made an error and the wall is crooked, but a plumb line cannot correct the problem. He needs to get out a hammer and saw to correct the issue.

The issue with the Law is it only revealed the problem but could not provide a permanent solution. However, Jesus Christ's fulfillment of the Law and outpouring of His Spirit upon humanity gave us not only the ability to identify the problem but also the solution. When we receive and walk in the Spirit, we are using the tools Jesus Christ provided to begin to fix the problems we find in our lives. Our hatred can be smothered by producing the fruit of love. Unhappiness will be reorganized by the joy of the Spirit reigning in our lives. Chaos will be canceled when we release the peace that passes understanding through His Spirit in our lives. The fruit of the Spirit includes the tools to fix the problem, not just to identify it.

BIBLE LESSON

I. WORKS VERSUS FRUIT

A. Work Versus Growth

The churches in Galatia were trying to attain spiritual perfection through obeying the Jewish law. The problem with the Law was the amount of work needed to achieve just the required minimum. Paul revealed the answer was not in striving to keep the Law, but in learning to live and walk in the Spirit. When believers live by the Spirit, we will not “fulfil the lust of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16). In verse eighteen Paul let them know they would need to choose the Spirit or the Law; they could not rely on both. If we are led by the Spirit, we are not under the Law. In fact, in trying to live by the Law, we deny the power of the Spirit.

The Law was about works, while the Spirit is about growth. The Law was a mechanical, tedious, methodical checklist of matching actions to the commands and living in fear of being caught in disobedience. It only pointed out when a person was wrong. It is similar to seeing a speed-limit sign and looking down at your dashboard to make sure you are in line with the law; all the work to stay in line is your job. However, the Spirit is like setting your cruise control on your car; the Spirit governs your life and keeps you in line without the effort necessary under the Law. When we are born again, we speak in tongues as the initial sign that we have been Spirit filled. When we live filled with the Spirit, God’s Spirit naturally produces fruit as ongoing evidence of the Spirit’s power working in our lives.

DISCUSS: *Why does it sometimes feel like our relationship with God is more “work” than God intended?*

B. The Contrast

In the culture Paul grew up around, teachers would give a list of vices versus virtues to help people define the direction of their lives. Paul utilized this tool to help the Galatians understand whether they were working in the flesh (selfish human nature) or walking in the Spirit. Paul’s list of the seventeen works of the flesh is not a comprehensive list as he ends this section of Scripture by saying, “and such like,” indicating there are more (Galatians 5:21).

The first four are sins of sexual immorality: “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness” (Galatians 5:19). Paul declared these are acts people commit against their own bodies. (See I Corinthians 6:18–20.) When our lives are not led by the Spirit, the works of the flesh manifest in breaking vows of purity in marriage (adultery) and with our own bodies (fornication). Continuing that path leads to complete moral corruption (uncleanness) and unbridled sin (lasciviousness) in these areas of life.

The final thirteen works are actions committed against God and others. Paul warned of excessive devotion to anything other than God (idolatry), any action in service to the opposite of the kingdom of God (witchcraft), along with Satan’s first sin in desiring

to be like God (emulation), rebellion (sedition), and false doctrine (heresies). These actions place our lives in opposition to God's kingdom and reveal we are being led by our flesh, not by God's Spirit. The additional works mentioned here reveal lack of respect for others through hatred, love for conflict (variance), wrath, strife, envying, murder, drunkenness, and being foolish to the point of destruction (reveling). We must take inventory, and if our lives are filled with these works, we are being led by our flesh and not by His Spirit.

DISCUSS: *Although we steer clear of certain works of the flesh, like adultery and murder, when was the last time you checked your life against hatred, strife, and envy?*

C. I will crucify my flesh so the fruit of the Spirit will grow.

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus taught that if we are going to follow Him, we must choose to take up our cross and die daily. To walk in the Spirit, we must continually crucify our flesh. In the Book of Romans, Paul declared this crucifying act destroyed our flesh; therefore, we should not serve sin or our sinful nature any longer. (See Romans 6:6.) According to John 12:24, a seed can only bring fruit after it is buried (or dies).

The fruit of the Spirit will only grow in our lives when we crucify our sinful nature. The resurrection the Spirit provides then causes that seed to burst to life, grow, and mature until it produces much fruit. Choose today to crucify the attitudes of your sinful nature and allow the Spirit to reign in your life. Then watch the Spirit grow daily, producing a harvest of abundant fruit to bless others.

II. A CLOSER LOOK AT FRUIT

A. The Fruit Makes Us Fruitful

At Creation God established a natural law that everything produced because the seed was within itself. (See Genesis 1:11-12.) When we study the Creation story, we see God spoke into existence most of what He created, although He formed creatures and humanity out of the dust of the earth. (See Genesis 1:1-2:9.) However, when He spoke to the grass, trees, and flowers, He commanded the earth to do the work because the power was already in the seed.

- ❑ When we live filled with God's Spirit, we will find God has planted a powerful seed in our lives. Within that seed of the Spirit is much fruit that will grow if nurtured. Living in covenant with God mirrors the same process as all seed (death, burial, and resurrection). When we daily choose to walk in the Spirit, our lives will produce fruit because the power in the seed of the Spirit is the same creative power God spoke in the beginning. He desires to create good things in our lives, so allow the Spirit to produce all the fruit it has for you.

DISCUSS: *When you take inventory, what works of the flesh do you see? What fruit of the Spirit do you see in your life?*

B. Facets of Fruit

Paul did not want to leave the Galatians with only the bitter taste of works of the flesh, so he contrasted these with the sweet fruit of the Spirit, which is produced when we allow God to lead our lives. Paul used the singular of the word *fruit* rather than the plural, as the seed of *all* these are planted when we allow the Spirit to be the root of our lives. This fruit is a package deal, not a roadside market to choose from. When we receive and allow the Spirit to reign in our lives, it continually produces all this fruit daily. We produce love, joy, peace, longsuffering (bearing the faults of others because we are not faultless), gentleness, faith, meekness, and temperance (self-control). (See Galatians 5:22–23.)

C. I will learn to recognize fruit when I see it and when I bear it.

If we can love despite being treated unkindly, we are bearing the fruit of the Spirit. Learning to live in joy and not in the temporary state of happiness shows we are nurturing the Spirit in our lives. When the world is in chaos and confusion, and even our own lives are experiencing the same, but we still have peace, the fruit of the Spirit is active in us. Recognizing we need to bear the flaws of others because we also have flaws models the longsuffering God has with us. Learning to be gentle in response to anger and accusation leads to self-control and forgiveness for others. These are the fruit of the Spirit, and when they are growing in our lives, they are evidence we are walking in covenant.

III. A PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. Society's Knockoff

The enemy often counterfeits God's good gifts. The counterfeit fruit of love is lust. Love is selfless but lust is selfish. Love is patient but lust will not wait. People often make wrong decisions based on what will make them happy (which is temporary) versus what will bring them joy (which is lasting). We must be careful not to buy into the false concept of peace as an absence of conflict when the Spirit defines peace as *shalom*: wholeness or completeness.

No one needs to cultivate the counterfeit; it is simply there. Anyone who has raised children will confirm that you do not have to teach them to lie. They will figure that one out on their own. Anger, selfishness, and even violence are parts of our nature. Certainly, these traits can be highlighted by the environment in which we live, but the seeds of the works of the flesh are already present in our flesh. This appetite for evil in fallen humanity is described in the condition of those who lived just before the Flood: "Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). Let us learn to recognize the false from the fruit and weed them out of our lives, replacing them with true fruit of the Spirit.

DISCUSS: *How do you tell the difference between the fruit of the Spirit and the counterfeit the enemy offers?*

B. The Process of Fruitfulness

The goal in this process is not seeking specific fruit but keeping our lives in covenant with Jesus. You do not need to show an apple tree a YouTube tutorial video on growing fruit; it just grows fruit when it is rooted and open to rain and sunshine. Daily crucifying the flesh (asking God to help us control our sinful desires) and walking consistently in the Spirit allow the right seed to be planted, to be watered, and to begin to grow. Then when we arrive at the moment we need the proper fruit, it is available.

The work of God's Spirit is both in us and on us. He works in unseen areas inside our minds, and He works on the visible facets of our bodies. He impacts our attitudes and our actions. He shapes our thinking and our appearance. The transformative work of the baptism of the Holy Spirit is not intended to be limited to either arena without the other. Nor should we seek to limit it in such a way. We can begin the process today of walking in covenant with Jesus and watching our lives burst with the fruit of the Spirit.

DISCUSS: *When the fruit of the Spirit is not growing in your life, what will you do to allow it to grow again?*

C. I will keep in step with the Spirit.

Walking is an excellent exercise, or so doctors say. The biblical command is to walk in the Spirit. This means a daily conscious determination to get up and put one foot in front of the other spiritually. It takes active determination to follow the direction of the Spirit, resisting our sinful nature. However, each time we step in the direction of the Spirit and away from our old sinful nature, the positive effects begin to blossom in our lives.

Daily choose to walk in step with the Spirit and allow Him to produce the fruit of His Spirit in your life. This whole section of Galatians started because Paul wanted these believers to realize the power of God's Spirit would always triumph over the Law. Therefore, it is unique that Paul left them with this thought regarding the fruit of the Spirit: "Against such there is no law" (Galatians 5:23). The Law caused humanity to work hard to get it right, but if we allow the Spirit to lead our lives, there is no law against the fruit. We can enjoy as much of the fruit as we want without harm; eat up. Enjoy as much as you want. This is the freedom God desires for His people—to walk in step with His Spirit and enjoy His blessings released in the fruit of the Spirit.

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how being connected to God will automatically bear fruit in our lives.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

I A famous mango tree is growing in a small village in Andhra Pradesh, India. A farmer named Ramanna planted the tree over seventy years ago in hopes it would produce mangoes for him, his family, and his neighbors. This tree started just like any other tree, as just a sapling. For years it was just like any other tree, offering just enough fruit to feed him, his family, and a few neighbors. So far, it had lived up to Ramanna's expectations, but something amazing happened in the 1980s.

A severe drought ravaged the region where Ramanna lived, and he feared that his trees would fall prey to it, but this mango tree survived. In fact the following season the tree produced ten times as much fruit as it had in previous years. Villagers were pleasantly surprised to learn that one tree was yielding one thousand mangoes or more every year. That was nearly double the average of many of the other trees. What was this tree's secret?

Soon the miracle mango tree became a treasure, allowing villagers to feed the poor, share with others, sell in the markets, and even support events in their small community. Other farmers believed the secret was in the seed, so they tried to plant the seeds themselves in hopes of

having another miracle tree. Eventually they nicknamed the tree "The Giving Tree." People traveled from nearby villages, amazed at its generosity, especially following such a devastating drought.

Word of The Giving Tree made it to botanical experts who came to see it for themselves. After their examination, they discovered this singular tree had dug its roots into a hidden underground water source, which allowed it to survive such harsh weather conditions. No matter its secret, the villagers in Andhra Pradesh, India, are thankful to have the miracle mango tree in their village to remind them to have hope, be resilient, and be generous with the blessings in their lives.

When we are walking in the Spirit, connected to the source of God's bountiful blessings, the fruit of the Spirit will be produced in our lives. When people are around us, they too will be amazed that we can be joyful when others are sad; peaceful when others are in chaos; temperate when others lose control; meek when others are proud and brash. The fruit of the Spirit simply depends on us digging our roots deep into our covenant relationship with God and watching God take care of the rest.



NEW
COVENANT
LIFE



SUMMER

11

AUGUST 16, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Ephesians 6:10-18

FOCUS VERSE

Ephesians 6:13

Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

Although life in covenant involves spiritual opposition, God's Spirit works in our lives like armor to give us victory.

The Armor of God

I WILL
WIELD THE

ARMOR
OF GOD

AGAINST
SPIRITUAL
ENEMIES.

COVENANT CONTEXT

Living in covenant with God pits us against our spiritual enemy. However, God graciously provides us with the armor we need to defend ourselves and attack the enemy spiritually. Here in Ephesians 6, Paul listed the whole armor of God and the ways we use it to win our wars.

SG *TEACHING OUTLINE*

Icebreaker: What is the most fascinating battle in history to you?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to the reality that we are engaged in spiritual warfare.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. THE THREAT AGAINST US

A. Our Enemy

DISCUSS: *When you think of the enemy of your soul, what do you picture? What is your depiction based on?*

B. Our Battle Plan

C. I will follow God's battle plan in spiritual warfare.

II. THE ARMOR

A. Weapons for a Purpose

DISCUSS: *Which of these attributes of God's Spirit is at work in your life right now? What part seems to be lacking?*

B. Spiritual Power

DISCUSS: *What spiritual disciplines help you to be full and stay full of God's Spirit?*

C. I will put on the whole armor of God every day. **V**

III. THE PROTECTION OF COVENANT

A. The Evil Day

DISCUSS: *In what areas do you see the enemy's plans to destroy what God is building up? How will you fight the battle spiritually?*

B. Watch and Pray **I**

C. I will stand in the power of God's provided protection.

DISCUSS: *How does putting on the whole armor of God change the way you see the world around you?*

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to strengthen us through His Spirit to enter this battle
- For God to clothe us in the whole armor, not leaving one piece off

LESSON CONNECTION

Wilmer McLean was a forty-six-year-old retired Virginia militia officer when the United States Civil War erupted. McLean and his wife ran a wholesale and retail grocery as well as a small plantation near Manassas Junction, Virginia, which had a small meandering creek named Bull Run running through it. At Bull Run, in McLean's "backyard," the first major battle between the Union and Confederate forces occurred. After the battle, Confederate General P. G. T. Beauregard took over McLean's house and barn as his headquarters and a hospital.

While McLean was supportive of the South, he wanted no part in what was about to take place. He moved his family 120 miles southwest to a quiet little place known as Appomattox Court House on the other side of Virginia. Just a few years after he moved, the war knocked on the door of Wilmer McLean's house once more. One of the last battles of the Civil War was fought near his home. It was the final battle the Confederate States Army General-in-Chief Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia would participate in.

In McLean's house, General Robert E. Lee of the Confederate army and General Ulysses S. Grant of the Union army met and discussed terms of surrender for the South. McLean's homes became like a pair of bookends to the Civil War. Despite his best efforts, he could not escape the war. It found him wherever he went. For McLean the war was an unavoidable reality.

There is a war that we as believers cannot avoid, no matter how much we may try. It is a conflict we cannot ignore. The apostle Paul understood that the battle every believer enters calls for armor so we are protected. God has designed such armor to protect us from every attack of the enemy. Covenanted people can find strength through the armor of God, but it is our responsibility to put it on.

BIBLE LESSON

I. THE THREAT AGAINST US

A. Our Enemy

The moment the serpent approached Eve in the Garden and convinced her to disobey God, he established himself as humanity's enemy with clear goals. In John 10:10 Jesus clearly explained the enemy's sinister goals are to kill, steal, and destroy. The Bible declares repeatedly this is a *spiritual* battle, and Paul clarified the enemy is not flesh and blood. (See Ephesians 6:12.) Every human is fighting the same enemy, but the enemy is not human. We may have personality problems with people, but they are not our soul's enemy.

Much like we cannot see our enemy, we cannot see the battlefield because it is all spiritual. The battle takes place in a spiritual realm of darkness ruled by our enemy, who is known as the prince of the air (Ephesians 2:2). When we enter into covenant with Jesus Christ, we change our allegiance from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light, declaring ourselves in direct conflict with Satan, who rules this realm. (See Colossians 1:12-13.) We are responsible to learn who our true enemy is and how we can fight the threat he poses to all of us.

DISCUSS: *When you think of the enemy of your soul, what do you picture? What is your depiction based on?*

B. Our Battle Plan

Ours is the most unique battle plan in history. Paul called us to get up, get dressed, and then stand. "Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Ephesians 6:13). The word *stand* paints the picture of a person being set or fixed. The key to winning this battle is to arise, put on the armor because we know the enemy is coming, and then *stand* in the face of the attack. Rise up today, put on the whole armor of God, stand your ground, and you will find this the easiest battle plan to fulfill.

C. I will follow God's battle plan in spiritual warfare.

God commands us with urgency to "put on the whole armour of God," indicating there is no time to waste (Ephesians 6:11). Daily we must immediately begin dressing ourselves in God's spiritual armor so we can face the enemy of our souls who is plotting against us. Once we are dressed, the action plan is to stand in faith that God is fighting for us. Stand in submission to God and resistance to the tactics of Satan. God promises deliverance and complete victory through our obedience to His battle plan.

II. THE ARMOR

A. Weapons for a Purpose

Paul wrote Ephesians during his imprisonment in Rome around AD 60; therefore, it makes perfect sense the Roman soldier's uniform was used as the model for armor. The Roman soldiers' armor gave them identity, protection during battle, and an offensive ability to win the war and go home. Each piece of armor illustrates a spiritual connection Paul wanted the church to understand and apply.

Paul began with the belt of truth. History suggests the Roman soldier wore a belt, a leather strap wrapped around his waist with metal or leather pieces hanging down to the knees to protect his legs. The soldier hung his offensive weapons on the belt. Truth is the express character of God, and the illustration reminds us that donning this metaphorical belt of truth identifies us as belonging to Him. Being faithful and committed to truth is vital for any offensive action necessary to defeat the enemy.

The breastplate protected the heart and lungs of the Roman soldier. In a similar way, the righteousness of God imputed to believers through faith becomes the sanctification we daily put on, which protects from the enemy's blows destroying our lives. He may try but He cannot successfully accuse us before God when God has forgiven us and declared us righteous.

The metaphor of shoes of peace may seem to be an oxymoron considering soldiers wore their shoes into violent battles, not peaceful pastures. The Roman soldier's shoes had sharp metal spikes used to provide stability and balance as well as becoming an additional weapon against fallen enemies. The Romans would march through a place with violence, killing all their opposition; but on the other side, they aimed to bring order and a peaceful governance. Jesus Himself reminded us the kingdom of God suffers violence, and only the violent (spiritually speaking) bring peace to the chaotic world of darkness. (See Matthew 11:12.)

A Roman soldier's shield was as much an offensive weapon as a defensive one. It was used in hand-to-hand combat, and when combined with the other shields in their platoon, was used to break through the enemy's lines. They usually coated the shield in olive oil, which burned slower; therefore, they were able to repel or remove a fiery arrow before it did too much damage. The shield of faith is more than just a defensive weapon of belief in God, but Jesus taught us to use faith as an offensive weapon to move mountains or receive a healing. (See Mark 11:23-24; Matthew 17:20.) Paul instructed believers to use their faith by rejecting the fiery arrows and pressing forward into enemy territory.

The helmet covered the soldier's head to protect vital organs such as the soldier's eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and brain. One interpretation of the metaphor is to remember salvation is not a one-time event, but a continual sanctification process we fulfill by renewing our minds daily as we put on the helmet of salvation. What we hear, see, and say all need to be in submission to Jesus, our Commander.

The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. God's Word is our most powerful offensive tool to defeat and destroy the enemy. Jesus exemplified the proper use of this weapon in His confrontation with Satan in Matthew 4. Paul used the Roman soldier's uniform to identify and encourage every believer going into battle that with the whole armor of God, we will be victorious and will one day get to go home.

DISCUSS: Which of these attributes of God's Spirit is at work in your life right now? What part seems to be lacking?

B. Spiritual Power

Paul began this entire section cautioning the believer to "be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might" (Ephesians 6:10). Earlier in this letter, Paul clarified that God's strength came from the Holy Spirit's power in our lives. (See Ephesians 3:16.) Paul used this metaphor of a soldier's armor to illustrate different ways the Holy Ghost works in our lives. We apply this passage of Scripture by staying full of the Holy Ghost. The idea of putting on the whole armor of God means first being filled with His Spirit according to Acts 2:38 and then walking daily in the Spirit, which will then work through our lives as weapons against the kingdom of darkness.

DISCUSS: What spiritual disciplines help you to be full and stay full of God's Spirit?

C. I will put on the whole armor of God every day.

This is a good time to check that the Spirit is working in your life. If we are not full of the Spirit, it would be like being partially clothed before entering battle. As we pray to be full of the Spirit, do not just ask God to cover you completely but ask Him to fill you fully with His Spirit. Review these verses of Scripture daily and pray for God's Spirit to work in your life like each piece of the armor in a soldier's life. Declare today you will put on the *whole* armor of God by submitting and being filled completely with His Spirit. V

III. THE PROTECTION OF COVENANT

A. The Evil Day

The armor of God is powerful because our enemy does not engage in open warfare. He plots, plans, and deals in wiles and schemes, which require us to be watchful and prepared. When we put on the *whole* armor of God, we are protected no matter what devious plan the enemy brings against us. However, according to Ephesians 6:13, the armor also covers us in the evil day. We see the plans of Satan in our world daily through his ideologies and agendas. We see it in the lack of sanctity for life and godly living. We hear and see it in the daily attacks against God, His Word, and His people. The agenda of Hell is on display, and the devil's army is pushing it everywhere: in schools, through entertainment, in politics, everywhere.

We are in the middle of a great battle for the hearts and minds of humanity. It is imperative we get up daily and put on the whole armor so we can stand and have a move of God even in this evil day. God's armor provides authority and protection

against wily attacks of the enemy and all his evil plans. We must put on the whole armor and set our faces against the enemy and his schemes to destroy the world.

DISCUSS: *In what areas do you see the enemy's plans to destroy what God is building up? How will you fight the battle spiritually?*

B. Watch and Pray

Paul continued in verse 18 to list two additional pieces of armor: The first is prayer in the Spirit. An army without a war cry is like a team without a fight song. When we pray until the Spirit begins to pray through us, we are doing warfare in the heavenly realm. (See Romans 8:26.) This is spiritual warfare, not human against human; it is a spiritual battle between the righteous and the evil spirits ruling in our world. Praying in the Spirit is our war cry, releasing God and His army of angels to fight for us.

- ❑ Throughout this description of armor, we find one place that could be considered unprotected—our backs. Paul did not finish his letter without adding what might be viewed as a final piece of armor: “And watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints” (Ephesians 6:18). It could be said that we become the last piece of armor for our fellow believers when we watch out for them. One of the most famous Roman battle tactics was called the *testudo* (meaning tortoise) in which soldiers would form a circle or rectangle with everyone on the outside holding their shield in front of them and everyone on the inside holding their shield above them. This formation formed a 360-degree barrier against the enemy, protecting each other and repelling any attack of the enemy from any direction. When covenant believers watch with perseverance and in prayer for all saints, we function like armor for our fellow Christians.

C. I will stand in the power of God's provided protection.

The armor of God is a must in our spiritual life. It is not a question whether we will be in battle; the enemy is plotting and planning attacks each day. We must put on the *whole* armor of God daily so we can withstand the enemy's wily maneuvers and be protected against his false doctrine and agenda in this evil day. When we daily pray the armor of God over our lives, we can confidently stand and set our faces toward the enemy, knowing we are protected by Almighty God.

DISCUSS: *How does putting on the whole armor of God change the way you see the world around you?*

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how the armor of God is a must for every child of God.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

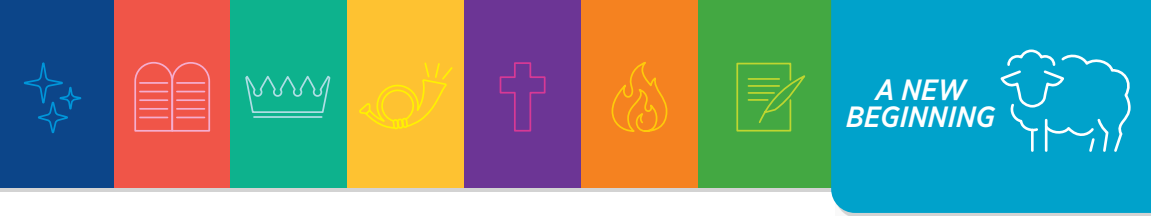
On October 9, 1934, King Alexander of Yugoslavia traveled to France on a diplomatic mission. Just before 4 PM that afternoon, the Royal Yugoslavian Navy destroyer sailed under Marseille's Old Port Bridge. French aircraft flew overhead to welcome and possibly watch out for the visiting head of state. As the king disembarked from his warship, a band played the national anthems for France and for Yugoslavia.

The king dressed in the full uniform of a Navy admiral, but he discovered the uniform's tunic would not fit over his bulletproof vest. He decided to remove his vest and only wear the Navy uniform tunic. The crowd roared their welcome and a little girl gave the king a bouquet of flowers. The mayor of Marseilles escorted his royal guest in a convertible driven by a police officer chauffeur. Just a few blocks away, an assassin lay in wait, bound by a blood oath to kill the Yugoslavian king.

Minutes into the ride, the assassin ran through the crowd, jumped on the running board of the car, and cried, "Long live the king!" Holding onto the car's

rear door with one hand, he brandished a pistol with the other and fired nine shots toward King Alexander. Two of them hit their mark, leaving the king mortally wounded. One of the bullets hit him right below his heart, right where his bulletproof vest would have been. His death was tragic but preventable, but the king valued the way he looked in a military uniform over ensuring his heart was protected.

Believers understand the powerful protection the armor of God offers. However, it does not work unless we daily pray to be full of the Spirit. Because we are distracted by our daily cares, we often forget that each day we are walking into a war. If we have answered the call to be Jesus' followers, we were drafted into His spiritual army. We cannot get complacent about putting on this armor or we may be caught by the enemy, much like the king of Yugoslavia was that fateful October day. Get up every day and put on the armor designed by God for your power and protection. Then no matter what the enemy sends your way, you will be protected and you will be victorious.



SUMMER
12

AUGUST 23, 2026

LESSON TEXT
Revelation 4-5

FOCUS VERSE
Revelation 5:5
And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT
Being in covenant gives us peace that God is in control and has a plan to redeem His creation.

The Throne Room

BY GOD'S SPIRIT, I WILL
PROMOTE
PEACE
AMID A WORLD OF CHAOS.

COVENANT CONTEXT

We come to the last book of the Bible and to the breathtaking revelation of Jesus Christ. In the first few chapters, we are awed to see Jesus as the Lion and the Lamb. Revelation 5 gives us a visual image of God's covenant plan to redeem humanity through His shed blood on Calvary. Although chaos will soon overwhelm the earth, peace reigns in Heaven because God is on the throne in Heaven.

SG *TEACHING OUTLINE*

Icebreaker: God promises us the kind of peace that “passes all understanding.” What do you think that means?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group’s answers to the peace we see in the Book of Revelation, even amid chaos on the earth.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection.

I. THE MAJESTY OF JEHOVAH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

- A. Holy, Holy, Holy
- B. Thou Art Worthy

DISCUSS: *When you worship God, what titles or attributes do you worship Him for?*

- C. I will honor God as the center of my life and purpose, and I will serve no other gods.

DISCUSS: *When you are in awe of God, how do you respond? How should we respond?*

II. THE LAMB IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

- A. The Scroll and the Seals
- B. The Lion and the Lamb
- C. Breaking the Seals
- D. I will find hope in the Book of Revelation for I know Jesus is in charge. **V**

DISCUSS: *Why are people often fearful of the Book of Revelation? What should our response be instead?*

III. A NEW SONG

- A. We Sing with the Elders

DISCUSS: *If you were writing a song to worship God, what would you include in it?*

- B. All Creation Sings

DISCUSS: *What do you feel when you realize that even Hell must join in the song of praise to the Lamb?*

- C. I will give God my past, live for Him in my present, and trust Him with my future.

Internalizing the Message **I**

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God to fill our hearts with peace despite the chaos in our world
- For God to fill us with the wonder of His presence that causes us to fall to our knees in worship, just like those in His throne room

LESSON CONNECTION

Years ago after preaching a message about the Lamb, while the pastor was greeting people after the service, one of the men shared something with him he never forgot. A close friend was between careers and desperate for work so he took a job in a slaughterhouse. It was not a pleasant job, obviously, and it was made worse because his role included killing the cattle before the actual butchering process began. Initially he hated the job, but over time he became accustomed to all the sights, sounds, and smells that were part of the process of subduing an animal and ending its life.

But after a time the slaughterhouse made the decision to process sheep along with cattle. The day arrived when this man had to butcher his first lamb. *Ah well*, he thought, *just another animal*. He slit the throat of the lamb, but rather than thrashing and fighting death, the lamb stayed calm. Some of its blood had gotten onto the man's hands. As its own life ebbed away, the lamb gently licked the blood off the man's hands. The lamb's last act was serving the man who had ended its life.

Something broke within this man and he quit his job on the spot. He had fought with many powerful animals as he ended their lives, their bellows of protest in his ears, but something about the calm acceptance and sweet kindness of the lamb in death impacted him in a way no violent struggle ever had. Isaiah wrote of the Messiah: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7). This description would seem to depict an act of weakness, the Messiah meekly submitting to the dominance of humanity, but a much deeper power was being released in Jesus' obedience to death on the cross. In fact Isaiah concluded the chapter with these prophetic words: "Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12). Sometimes a loving act of submission unleashes far greater power than any show of strength, as Revelation 4-5 will reveal.

BIBLE LESSON

I. THE MAJESTY OF JEHOVAH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A. Holy, Holy, Holy

Revelation 4 is a beautiful chapter that shifts our vision from the chaos on earth to the glory in Heaven. John's vision of Heaven opened on a single throne and one who sits upon it. Every other description of the throne room of God—the swirl of colors, the priceless gems, the angelic living creatures, and the twenty-four elders all wearing crowns of gold—are simply window dressing to the central figure on the throne. John took it all in, attempting to physically describe the profound spiritual sights he was seeing.

Then he wrote what he heard. A soaring round of continual praise erupted from the angelic living creatures around the throne: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come” (Revelation 4:8). The voice of one does not stop before another takes its place. God is literally surrounded by praise. He does inhabit praise. Those closest to Him know He is so worthy that they never rest praising Him. Their praise is infectious and inspires twenty-four elders who fall down before the throne, casting their own crowns as they add their voices. Those who encounter the Creator face-to-face will always feel the need to worship Him.

B. Thou Art Worthy

John described four beasts, or living creatures, as having faces resembling some of the most notable creatures in creation: lions, mighty oxen, flying eagles, and even the face of man (Revelation 4:6–7). The lion is called “the king of beasts,” the ox is the strongest of all domesticated animals, the eagle is called “the king of the air,” while humanity represents the pinnacle of God's creation. All creation knows they must worship the one who is greatest—the Creator.

Scholars have long debated who the twenty-four elders are, but an interesting parallel is that the priesthood was organized into twenty-four shifts. Those who were on duty at any given moment represented the whole priestly body. (See I Chronicles 24.) These elders are first shown wearing golden crowns, but when they see the Almighty, they cast their crowns at His feet and fall down to worship Him. The highest purpose of all God's creation is to praise its Creator, but since humans are created in His image, we have the unique opportunity to *choose* to worship Him. That makes our praise special.

DISCUSS: *When you worship God, what titles or attributes do you worship Him for?*

C. I will honor God as the center of my life and purpose, and I will serve no other gods.

The idea of covenant relationship with God goes all the way back to the beginning. God could have created us as robots to wind us up and hear us repeat, “Holy, holy, holy,” but God was looking for something more profound. He chose to create us in His image with the power of choice. James lamented: “The tongue can no man tame”

(James 3:8). In our day many people have waxed very bold in their defiance against God and His values, using their words to reveal the corruption and rebellion against God within them. That makes our voluntary choice to love God even more beautiful and fulfilling. When we *choose* to cast the crowns of our own pride and worth at His feet, it makes our praise especially sweet. Coercion does not force the twenty-four elders to fall to their knees in worship; adoration and awe do.

DISCUSS: *When you are in awe of God, how do you respond? How should we respond?*

II. THE LAMB IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

A. The Scroll and the Seals

The note of celebration turns to tension as Revelation 5 opens. Our attention is directed to a scroll in Jehovah's hand. That scroll is rolled shut, and along its edge are seven seals that must be opened before the scroll can be read and its commands executed. A strong angel issued a loud challenge that boomed across Heaven, the earth, and even Hell itself: "Who is worthy to open the books, and to loose the seals thereof?" (Revelation 5:2).

Silence followed and John began to weep because no man was found worthy to open the scroll. It was more than just a document, a curiosity; it represented the stalemate that exists without a Savior. Fallen humanity needs redemption, but no human, save for the Savior, could redeem us. God chose to bind Himself by His own covenant, for Hebrews 9:22 states: "Without shedding of blood is no remission." Hebrews 10:4 also declares: "It is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins." God required blood for atonement, but since Spirit has no blood to shed, the stalemate continued. John wept over the hopelessness of a world without Jesus.

B. The Lion and the Lamb

But John's sorrow was short lived as one of the elders called to him: "Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof" (Revelation 5:5). That makes sense. A lion is fierce and powerful, the king of beasts. Its roar can be heard up to five miles away. A lion can run up to forty-six miles per hour. Its bite is strong enough to kill large prey in a single bite. John turned to see this great lion, but in the middle of the throne, he saw a lamb: a lamb "as it had been slain" (Revelation 5:6).

Some Bible translations use the harsher word *slaughtered*. A lion we could understand, but a lamb? Redemption was more an act of selfless submission than sheer domination. Jesus' life could not be taken; He chose to give it. Jesus said of His life: "No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" (John 10:18). How interesting that Jesus used the word *power* to describe laying down His life.

This visual imagery of the Lion and the Lamb reveals the beauty of God's covenant plan. Jesus was not a surrogate, or just one sent by God, for He came from the very

middle of the throne. Second Corinthians 5:19 reads: “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself.” As the Lion, God chose not to open the scroll, but as the Lamb—God manifest in human flesh—He is able and worthy.

The final book of the Bible is called *Revelation* but not for mystical end-time prophecy. This throne room scene is the critical moment of the book, the revelation of Jesus Christ—the moment we see that all of God’s eternal plan hinged on the crucified Lamb. The scroll cannot be opened, the judgment of the wicked cannot proceed, wrongs cannot be righted, and the righteous cannot be rewarded without the Lamb’s ultimate sacrifice and victory.

C. Breaking the Seals

Jesus stepped forward and took the scroll as Heaven again erupted in worship. Immediately the living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down to worship the Lamb. This moment confirmed exactly who Jesus is, as Jehovah does not share His glory with anyone. Yet before the throne, the angels, the living creatures, and four and twenty elders worshiped Jesus because He is worthy—worthy to take the scroll, worthy to unlock God’s plan of redemption, worthy to judge, worthy to reward, and worthy of worship.

In Revelation 4 Heaven erupted to worship God as our Creator, but in Revelation 5 Heaven worshiped Him as God our Redeemer. Paul’s beautiful hymn in Philippians 2 celebrated Jesus because of His humble sacrifice and sings: “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10–11).

D. I will find hope in Revelation, for I know Jesus is in charge.

Far too often people have treated the Book of Revelation with fear and uncertainty, but we should find deep and abiding hope in this book. In fact Revelation 1:3 promises a blessing on those who hear and keep what’s written in it. The Book of Revelation is not the revelation of the mark of the beast or the Antichrist; it is the ultimate revelation of Jesus and His sacrifice. It reveals how Jesus’ sacrifice saves us from sin on an individual level and unlocks the whole of eternity.

In subsequent chapters, we see spiritual darkness at unprecedented levels, death on a scale previously unknown, and even the collapse of our planet into a broken, unrecognizable form. But Heaven understands the end is already determined, Jesus is already victorious, and the reward of the righteous is certain. How can we know this? The elders sang in triumph: “We shall reign on the earth” (Revelation 5:10). They not only celebrated what Jesus *had* done, but they also rejoiced in the surety of their future reward in His eternal kingdom. We too have hope because of the Cross. Our Lord is in control, and He has already won the victory. V

DISCUSS: *Why are people often fearful of the Book of Revelation? What should our response be instead?*

III. A NEW SONG

A. We Sing with the Elders

At the unveiling of Jesus as our Redeemer, Heaven erupted into a new song. The elders and living creatures sang to praise Jesus for His redemption, and they declared that Jesus' church will be made up of people from every kindred, tongue, people, and nation. God's church is truly a global church. The song celebrated our redemption from sin, and our victorious future as He makes us kings and priests to reign with Him on earth in days to come.

DISCUSS: *If you were writing a song to worship God, what would you include in it?*

B. All Creation Sings

The song was taken up by an angelic host that numbered over one hundred million strong. They sang, "Worthy is the Lamb" (Revelation 5:12) and they never tire of singing their song. Then their song spread further. Eventually every creature must join in the song: "Every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them" (Revelation 5:13). Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess Jesus is Lord, even the sulfur-stained knees in the demonic realm (under the earth). This shows the scale of Jesus' victory on the cross. The impact of Calvary reverberates across all the created world, both physical and spiritual. The cross and the empty tomb display the greatest victory of all time.

DISCUSS: *What do you feel when you realize that even Hell must join in the song of praise to the Lamb?*

C. I will give God my past, live for Him in my present, and trust Him with my future.

Jesus is still the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. There is no other way to the Spirit of God but through the gospel. There is no ultimate victory, no redemption, without Him. He is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). People put their trust in many things, but anything except Jesus is destined to failure. As Edward Mote penned in his hymn, "On Christ the solid Rock, I stand: all other ground is sinking sand." The song of the redeemed rejoices over redemption from their past, the pleasure of serving God in the present, and the glorious promise of their future all because of the Lamb. So, give God your past, live for Him in the present, and trust Him with your future.

Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how we can have peace even while the world is in chaos.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

I A man told of an art competition where the challenge was to depict a scene of peace. The various paintings were mostly what one would expect: idyllic scenes of still waters, scenic landscapes, sunsets, and more. But one painting stood out.

Artist Jack Dawson had painted a scene that at first glance looked nothing like peace. It was a dark and moody canvas of violent waterfalls gushing over jagged cliffs and plunging into a violent whirlpool below. Lightning forked through the dark sky and wind and rain lashed the scene. As the man looked at the painting, he initially wondered whether the artist understood the theme at all. But then his eye was drawn to a cleft in the rock face, where a dove rested safely and securely in her nest. Yes, the storm was raging all around her, but she was secure in her place of safety. It could not reach her, so she was at peace.

This description is like the peace Jesus promises us. He said, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not

as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27). The world cannot understand this kind of peace because it defines peace as the absence of conflict or the absence of threat. But peace is closer connected to the presence of purity than the absence of conflict. The Book of Revelation shows us that one simply cannot expect the absence of conflict in the last days. We certainly have ample evidence of that all around us.

Jesus made it clear this world would be full of troubles and tribulations, but He also promised we can have peace despite it all. How? “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; *I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33, emphasis added). Revelation 4 and 5 show us that Heaven is full of praise, worship, joy, and peace, even as the storms of the last days batter the earth. We can have peace even in these tumultuous last days in our world because Jesus, the Lamb, has already overcome the world.



A NEW
BEGINNING



SUMMER 13

AUGUST 30, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Revelation 21:1-9,
23-27

FOCUS VERSES

Revelation 21:5-7

⁵And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.

⁶And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. ⁷He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

Jesus makes all things new and restores creation through His eternal plan.

The Covenant Fulfilled

I WILL
PREPARE
MYSELF
TO LIVE IN
COVENANT
WITH
JESUS.

COVENANT CONTEXT

As we come to the end of the Bible, we see God restore all creation to better than it was in the Garden of Eden. Heaven and earth will be filled with redeemed humanity who chose to live in covenant relationship with God, and His covenant people will reign and rule with Him, never to be separated from Him again. The end will be better than the beginning.

SG *TEACHING OUTLINE*

Icebreaker: After seeing Jesus Himself, what are you looking forward to most in Heaven?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to the beauty and promise God has made His people for the end time.

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

I. THE NEW JERUSALEM

A. The Tabernacle of God

DISCUSS: Both *Genesis* and *Revelation* describe a beautiful, intimate relationship with God. What can you do today to grow that relationship?

B. The Restoration of Creation

DISCUSS: What should we do to be good stewards of what God has given us? What is out of our control?

C. I will prepare myself for God's ultimate fulfillment of His covenant in Heaven. **V**

DISCUSS: How important is repentance in your daily devotion?

II. IN THAT CITY WHERE THE LAMB IS THE LIGHT

A. The Light of Salvation

B. The Light to the Gentiles

DISCUSS: When Paul described Gentiles as being grafted into the root of the nation of Israel, what do you think he meant by that?

C. I will walk in the light of God's covenant.

DISCUSS: If you are not yet ready for Heaven, are you ready to pray for God to save you today? If you are ready, whom can you help be ready for Heaven as well?

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

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

- For God's kingdom to come and His will to be done—only through His intervention can our world be restored
- For God to help us to fully embrace the light of salvation and look with hope to eternity

LESSON CONNECTION

I Ubud is a city in the Indonesian province of Bali. It's home to about seventy-five thousand people and is quite the tourist magnet. Many of the visitors take a tour through Ubud's brightly colored markets for local arts, crafts, and cuisine. Throughout the day the markets are fairly crowded, so two night markets are open from 6 PM–11 PM for the more nocturnal shoppers. Since Ubud was founded in the eighth century AD, it's rich with heritage, including two Balinese palaces.

For the more outdoorsy visitors, the Campuhan Ridge walk boasts some beautiful views of Bali. The walk is a paved 1.2-mile trail that starts in downtown and weaves through the rice paddies and forests. The rice terraces are dotted with palm trees, reaching up to the sky, as the locals work the fields in tropical temperatures. But on days when the temperature crests eighty-five degrees, tourists cool off and go white water rafting or ride ATVs through the jungle and around the waterfalls.

Ubud is beautiful, but beware the monkeys. The Sacred Monkey Forest is home to over a thousand long-tailed macaques. They look adorable, but they'll steal your stuff in a second with no remorse. Over the years, they have honed their kleptomaniac craft and have learned what people value: sunglasses, watches, and especially our phones. They have even learned how to unzip backpacks to purloin whatever they want from tourists, and then they stand with their stolen goods in their hands, ready to ransom your belongings for food. They are known as bartering monkeys.

They can sour a peaceful vacation in Bali to an insurance claim and a tough trip home as you wait for a replacement phone. It seems like every vacation destination here on earth has at least one downside. Perhaps it's too hot, too crowded, too expensive, or too many menacing monkeys stealing your stuff. But as we close out the Book of Revelation and glimpse that celestial city the Lord is preparing for us, we see only perfection.

John saw it and recorded what he saw. It was as a bride on her wedding day looking as beautiful as she could for her bridegroom. That is what Heaven will be like. There will be no fine print on the brochure or website you will wish you had read closer. There will be no need to flag down the wait staff to ask them to turn the temperature up and the music down. Best of all there will be no need to lock up your belongings in a locker because no one will steal or lie or cheat there. Heaven is perfect because God is Heaven's architect and Heaven's builder.

God created everything perfect in the Garden of Eden, but the enemy tempted humanity and we gave away our innocence. Yet God was already fighting for us to redeem us from our sin. In the end, God will make all things new, bring justice to all injustice, and restore creation to a better than Edenic state. God's covenant people will reign and rule with Him, fulfilling His covenant plan He has been working since before Creation.

BIBLE LESSON

I. THE NEW JERUSALEM

A. The Tabernacle of God

One of the most extraordinary things about our God is He wants to share eternity with us. Revelation 21:3 declares: “And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.” This closeness, this eternal intimacy, brings us full circle to the point when God visited Adam and Eve just to walk and talk with them. The language of Scripture is simple, unadorned, and comforting, like the rare and special privilege of being a personal friend with a king. This kind of friend could casually spend time with the king in shared pleasures, without ceremony, and could even call the king by his name rather than his title.

The word *tabernacle* in Revelation 21:3 has a few important meanings. When we hear the word, we naturally think of the Old Testament Tabernacle, which was essentially a mobile church. It was a place where the priesthood went through their ceremonial duties, but more importantly, where God promised He would meet with humanity. Hebrews 8:5 declares the earthly Tabernacle was patterned after a heavenly one. In that sense the Tabernacle was representative of God’s presence, thus God was promising to spend eternity close to His people, the heavenly Tabernacle come to earth.

But the concept of the Tabernacle is also present in John 1:14: “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt (tabernacled) among us.” The glory of God was “tabernacled” in Jesus and dwelt among us. Revelation 21 promises that the incarnate God—tabernacled in flesh as Jesus Christ—will be with us for all eternity. This promise points to a restored covenant relationship like Adam and Eve initially enjoyed with God in the Garden, except without a serpent lurking in the undergrowth.

DISCUSS: *Both Genesis and Revelation describe a beautiful, intimate relationship with God. What can you do today to grow that relationship?*

B. The Restoration of Creation

God created a perfect world, but sin marred His paradise and brought with it sickness, death, and erosion of every kind. Our culture continually warns us about the perils of the planet. Certainly, we are called to be good stewards of the gifts God has given us (including our world), but God has a plan to restore all creation in the end of time. But before He restores, He will demolish much of the earth through plagues and pestilence.

The seven-year period of the Great Tribulation will be the greatest climate crisis since the Flood of Noah’s day. The ecosystems of this planet will all be severely crippled (even destroyed), and the Book of Revelation documents how the topography of the earth will change through seismic shifts that flatten mountains and cause islands to disappear (Revelation 6:14). All the bodies of water will be tainted, and wildlife will be devastated in water and on land. However, when Jesus returns to earth, He will bring

healing for our planet. Ezekiel and Zechariah prophesied of healing waters that will flow from Jerusalem and bring divine restoration. The solution for the “climate crisis” turns out to be the same solution for everything: Jesus. The millennial reign upon earth will be a time and place more beautiful than the Garden of Eden, a return to God’s original design of paradise and peace.

But even that is not the ultimate promise, for John described seeing “a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea” (Revelation 21:1). God’s final creation will be His ultimate creative act, and it will never be tainted by sin or corrupted to deviate from His perfect design. Here are some of the things Revelation 21 says will be missing from God’s new creation: unwiped tears, death, sorrow, crying, pain, unredeemed sinners, a temple, sun or moon, shut gates, and the curse of sin. In essence, all the negative aspects of our human existence will be eliminated.

In an interesting observation, John noted there was also no more sea in the new creation. The word *sea* is used in interesting ways in Revelation. It can refer to wicked humanity (the beast arises from “the sea”), one of the holding places of the dead, and of course, the natural reference to large bodies of water like oceans. Throughout the vast majority of human history, oceans have served as impassible barriers that separated people. Sin and wickedness separated man from God. Death separated us from life. Likely the reference to “no more seas” refers to the reality that nothing will separate us from God or each other in the new creation.

DISCUSS: *What should we do to be good stewards of what God has given us? What is out of our control?*

C. I will prepare myself for God’s ultimate fulfillment of His covenant in Heaven.

- ▼ In Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus addressed the seven churches of Asia Minor. His remarks to each church included praise for their strengths, rebuke for areas where they had slipped, and ultimately a unique promise of eternal reward to the overcomers of each church. We learn much from what each of these seven churches did right and what they did wrong. For the five churches for whom Jesus leveled rebukes, the remedy to each one was the same: Repent. The same instruction applies to us. Once we have entered into covenant with God through the gospel, if we find ourselves wavering in our faith or in keeping part of the covenant, we need to repent so we can be right with God again. We will find His mercy there for us just as it was for the seven churches in Asia Minor.

DISCUSS: *How important is repentance in your daily devotion?*

II. IN THAT CITY WHERE THE LAMB IS THE LIGHT

A. The Light of Salvation

Revelation 21 is a chapter filled with references to light. Scripture often uses the word *light* to symbolically represent good, or the decision to be in fellowship with God, and *dark* as a representation of evil or a decision to reject God’s presence. Truly darkness

does not exist on its own; it is the absence of light. We cannot install a “dark switch” in our living room. If we want dark, we have to block or eliminate the sources of light. We were created in the light of God’s presence, and only when sin began to separate us from God did darkness become present in the world. When talking with Nicodemus, Jesus lamented that many love darkness because it hides their evil deeds. None of us enjoy it when our private sin becomes public.

But we cannot be saved until we reach a place of such desperation that we want the light Jesus brings more than we want darkness to obscure our sin. We must realize our need of a Savior, and “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). His light does reveal our sins, but it isn’t the spotlight of a performer on stage illuminating our sin so an audience can mock us, but rather the bright light of a surgeon who uses the light to successfully operate and heal.

The New Jerusalem will be flooded with light because there is nothing to hide. The redeemed have been thoroughly washed and cleansed in the blood of the Lamb and have no need to hide in shadows. Revelation 21 and 22 reveal there is no need in the New Jerusalem for either natural light (like the sun) or artificial light (like a candle), for the Lamb is the light of that city. We will literally walk in His light. The logical outcome of walking in the light of salvation now is to live eternally in the perfect light of our Savior.

B. The Light to the Gentiles

The references to the New Jerusalem are thoroughly rooted in the Jewish origins of our faith. Jerusalem means “the dwelling of peace,” and it has been the capital of Israel since the time of King David. The twelve gates into the eternal city each bear the name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The twelve ascending foundations are named after the twelve apostles, all Jewish men. We who are Gentiles (non-Jews) should be forever thankful God extended His covenant invitation to us.

But make no mistake, the New Jerusalem is a city for the redeemed of *all* nations. Right in the middle of John’s description of the holy city is this verse: “And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it” (Revelation 21:24). The saved include people of all nations. The song of the elders in Revelation 5:9 rejoiced over the fact that humanity was redeemed to God “out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation.”

Even the Old Testament hints that God’s plan exceeded just the Jewish nation. The prophets wrote of a “light to the Gentiles,” and Simeon held the infant Jesus and rejoiced over the Messiah who would be “a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel” (Luke 2:32). God’s plan has always been for people of every nation to have a part in His eternal reward. He told Abraham from the beginning: “In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 22:18). This salvation is for “whosoever will,” and God loves the world. The New Jerusalem is not just for Jews; it is for the redeemed of every ethnicity.

DISCUSS: When Paul described Gentiles as being grafted into the root of the nation of Israel, what do you think he meant by that?

C. I will walk in the light of God's covenant.

The Book of Revelation is frightening to some because it pulls no punches. It graphically describes great spiritual and physical conflicts, the rage of evil and vengeful men, the wrath of God, and the punishment of the wicked. But without the Book of Revelation, we also would lose some of the most vivid descriptions of our heavenly reward. Many of our greatest hopes are firmly rooted in the message of this last book of the Bible.

The Book of Revelation clearly delineates our eternal choice. We have only two choices. One leads to eternal torment, sorrow, and separation from God. The other leads to eternal life and eternal reward in the presence of our Lord. Our culture tries to obscure the simplicity of this choice and to create endless doubts and questions, but God gave us the Book of Revelation to allow us to look past the shades of gray in our present to the black and white outcomes of the future. When we choose God's covenant through the gospel, we will one day live and reign and rule with God. If we choose to reject the gospel, we will one day be separated from Him. Choose life. Choose to live in the light of God's covenant invitation and follow Him from here to Heaven and an eternity bathed in the brilliant light of His glory and grace.

DISCUSS: *If you are not yet ready for Heaven, are you ready to pray for God to save you today? If you are ready, whom can you help be ready for Heaven as well?*



Teacher Option: Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how walking in the light of God's covenant relationship is the best way to live.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

As his eyes opened in a darkened room, he was trapped somewhere between sleep and wakefulness. His brain was still overlaying the reality of what his eyes saw in the dim light with the confusion of his dreams. He could not tell how many times the slowly blinking red lights of the smoke alarm had taken on far more sinister intent as his brain rewrote their normal harmless function as some monster or weapon from his dreams.

That night was not his best night. In fact, it would later be described as his least popular night as the husband and father to his household. You see, when he opened his eyes to look around the dark room, his attention fixated on those blinking red lights on the smoke detector. As he rose for a closer look, his sleep-confused brain led him to cover those blinking lights with his hand. Yep, you may have guessed it: he set off the interconnected smoke alarms all throughout the house. Strobing lights burst against the dark walls in everyone's rooms, sirens blared, and a robotic voice announced over and over, "Fire, fire, fire." He was a little chagrined as he tried to explain to everyone there was no fire; he just needed a lot more sleep.

The shadows have a way of obscuring reality. This dad never once took a nap in the middle of the day, half-awakened, and then wandered over to the smoke alarm because he was confused over why it was blinking. Even though he might have been groggy from sleep, the natural light streaming through the windows eliminates that kind of confusion.

Satan has lulled our culture into embracing the shadows, and in the shadows, he is far more effective at creating confusion. He can try to redefine reality, influencing our generation to call evil "good" and good "evil" (Isaiah 5:20). The only way to truly clear the confusion from our age is to fully embrace the light of God's presence and Word. Jesus' light makes things rather simple and uncomplicated. We can clearly see what is beneficial and what is destructive when we are in the light. We can make much clearer choices. Let's walk in the light of covenant relationship with our God, and we can look to eternity with clear-eyed anticipation as we look to that holy city where the Lamb forever is the light.



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